

Seven Prerequisites of Transformation

(How does your practice rate?)

BY MICHELLE COLUSSI

*F*or me, maybe for most of us, work is about effecting big changes – about increasing the presence of social, economic, and ecological justice in the places where we live. It's about "transformation," in other words.

That's what recently led me to wonder about systemic leverage points, or the parts of a system where an intervention can facilitate profound and positive change. I also wanted to understand more about how to enhance people's capacity for adaptation and how my practice might do more to support community transformation.

I decided to return to some books that I had picked up and put down in the past. Perhaps I hadn't been ready to understand the depth of their content the first time. I did this time, and that led me to some other, more recent books. Here's the complete list ...

- *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler, 2008) by Peter Block
- *Getting to Maybe: How The World is Changed* (Random House, 2006) by Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Patton
- *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (Doubleday, 2005) by Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers
- *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (Oxford, 2004) by David Bornstein
- *Community Conversations: Mobilizing the Ideas, Skills, and Passion of Community Organizations, Governments, Businesses, and People* (BPS, 2008) by Paul Born

All these authors have been writing about communities and change for a very long time. What they have to say is often very complex and they sometimes differ in the language they use. Still, it is remarkable just how much they have in common. Together they drew my attention to what might be termed seven "prerequisites of social or community transformation."

If they are indeed prerequisites, it has powerful implications for my practice, and perhaps for yours. If, as the authors contend, transformation can't occur in the absence of these seven attitudes and behaviours, perhaps we all need to pay them more attention.

Together these authors drew my attention to what might be termed seven "prerequisites of social or community transformation." If transformation can't occur in the absence of these seven attitudes & behaviours, perhaps we all need to pay them more attention.

1. Engage others & develop coalitions

The literature about community change treats concepts like social capital, relatedness, and associational life as fundamental to any effort to transform our communities. The focus is always on the collective or the group. They carefully distinguish this from the organization. Evidently, transformation is not so much about organizations as it is about citizens coming together to share their vision, to learn, and to create.

Organizations and individual activists do have a role to play, however. In *Community Conversations*, Born talks about the need to engage across sectors, to be aware of power. John McKnight (*Building Communities from the Inside Out*, 1993) talks about focussing on the gifts people bring and building from there. In essence, we need to ensure we are putting coalition building at the forefront of our work. This also implies that we are able to let go.

2. Collaboration

The significance of collaboration among individuals and across organizations is

not new to any of us. Like building coalitions, it is part of the community development air we breathe. In spite of this, I appreciate Born's efforts to break collaboration down into its constituents, and to elevate its skills and knowledge to an art form deserving of our close attention. We need to walk the talk more often, in more meetings, and in more projects in order to instil the skills of listening, creativity, non-judgment, visioning, and collaborative leadership (and "follower-ship") at every level of community life.

These tips or approaches are not news for most of us, but I know I have not applied them as proactively or intentionally as I could. Those kindergarten rules about sharing, holding hands, and sticking together are sometimes easier said than done. If coalition building is a structured activity with an outcome, collaboration is an attitude and set of behaviours we bring to our very existence.

3. Systematically focus on learning

Westley et al talk about learning as a practice, or way of being. They also refer to it as experimentation. Action is a form of reflection and reflection is a form of action. They also note the need to let go of the outcome when we start and to expect to get it wrong two or three times before we get it right.

Born talks about how the stage for collective learning is set by listening and moving people into a “space of unknowing” together: by designing conversations in which they can let go of their assumptions, learn from others, and create something new together. I vow to keep “designs for learning” at the forefront of my work this year.

4. Acknowledge & get comfortable with complexity

A factor underlying successful social change is the ability to understand the whole, the related parts, and how they interact. Born calls it “seeing both the forest and the trees.” Senge’s book talks about encouraging deeper levels of learning. Westley et al explain how developmental evaluation and good questions are key skills for social change. These are all ways for us to better understand the complex environments and interrelationships around us.

We need to have methods to help groups see the whole, but still go ahead and work with the parts. Successful community leaders need the ability to focus on one (small) part of a problem, but to be aware of the fit and implications from the bigger picture. We need to get

out of our own silos before we can help communities do that work.

5. Establish & work with a vision

One of the prerequisites for transformation most frequently mentioned by these authors was a positive vision that people can use to carry themselves forward despite difficult times. There aren’t many positive, stewardship visions for community life in our media. We see the techno, consumption, and Mad Max versions, but if we have a different, solidarity version, we must create it ourselves. Block talks about a “bias toward the future” that forms the basis for some of the large group methodologies. Perhaps our focus on data, which tells stories of the past, has built an over-reliance on that past. Is this the time to look ahead, to be envisioning a new kind of future?

Block goes on to say that “a possibility, when declared publicly, heard and witnessed by others with whom we have a common interest, at a moment when something is at stake, is a critical element of communal transformation.” A possibility, a vision, an intention ... whatever name you choose to give it, we need more tools and methods for supporting groups in building alternative visions for their future as the basis of change.

6. Transformation is emergent

This prerequisite is not something we do. It is an attitude. Many of the authors I have listed talk about a sense of faith in letting things flow, building on what’s working, and trusting that there will be signs (things that don’t work, for example) when we wander off course. This prerequisite is linked to our ability to experiment and to remain open to the unknown. It is also linked to what we think of as replication or scaling up. In his examination of social entrepreneurs, David Bornstein found that change happens locally, that it’s small, and that many years pass before it can be



Precambrian

Social Enterprise & Not-for-Profit Business Development

David Jackson CEO
Suite 202
234 Guthrie Drive
Kingston Ontario
Canada K7K 6K8

613-541-1099
Fax 613-541-1371
e-mail dj@precambrian.ca

Résumé : Sept prérequis à la transformation

Le travail de Michelle Colussi (comme le vôtre, probablement) concerne l’appui au changement profond et positif dans les communautés, et l’identification des actions qui offrent le plus d’effet de transformation pour chaque unité de temps et d’effort. C’est un sujet complexe. Mais quand il est question des prérequis à la transformation, un nombre surprenant de livres identifient les mêmes sept éléments.

1) La transformation est principalement le travail de coalitions de citoyens, et non d’organisations en tant que tel. 2) La culture et l’art de la collaboration sont essentiels à la coalition et nous devons tenter d’inclure ces habitudes et compétences partout dans la vie communautaire. 3) La motivation principale pour l’action doit être d’apprendre et non d’atteindre des résultats prédéfinis. 4) Il est nécessaire de se centrer sur une partie du problème tout en demeurant conscient du lien entre cette partie et le tout plus large et complexe. 5) Une vision engageante et invitante du futur est nécessaire pour diriger les personnes pendant les périodes difficiles. 6) Le bon changement émergera, mais localement et à petite échelle. Finalement, 7) plus notre vision est claire et cohérente, plus nous trouverons d’opportunités pour la réaliser.

D’implanter ces habitudes, pratiques et attitudes prend une élaboration compétente et la facilitation du dialogue. Mais ça prend aussi une profonde reconnaissance de nos pensées, car notre monde intérieur peut littéralement remodeler le monde extérieur. ■

Westley & Born offer the most practical tools & suggestions for what it is we need to do or ask in order to realize these prerequisites in the communities where we work. If Eckhart Tolle is correct however, we also need to be more mindful about what we think.

replicated. It sounds like our “emergence muscles” can be strengthened by living in the moment.

7. Connections between our inner world & the outer world we work in

Westley et al compare these connections to a “door that opens when intentionality joins possibility.” I think they mean that the more clear and consistent our vision for change, the more likely we will find opportunities to make it happen. In other words, thoughts are things; we literally can influence possibilities in the outer world with what and how we think – with our inner world, in other words.


In their interviews with change agents, Senge et al found that there was a connection between when things changed and the energy that surrounded a project. People talked about a shift in energy that occurs when they move from re-creating the past to creating a new future, and when the focus is on intention or purpose. The authors equate this shift to the oneness that people experience when they meditate. “This connection between inner work and outer work is one of the most important findings of our interviews.”

Using All Our Tools: Inner & Outer?

Westley et al and Born offer the most practical tools and suggestions for what it is we need to *do* or *ask* in order to realize these prerequisites in the communities where we work. Born offers many examples from his experience in Vibrant Communities that illustrate his

contention that our dialogue or conversation design and facilitation skills are really central to planting all of these prerequisites in groups and communities. (See sidebar, this page.) I for one am going to get better at working with these large group dialogue methods.

If Eckhart Tolle (*The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, 1999) is correct however, we also need to be more mindful about what we *think*. The implication in Senge is that social change may be influenced by the energy fields of individuals and collectives. Tolle, Deepak Chopra, and many other authors would say the energy field is a result of our intentions. This makes me wonder if large group meditations or visioning exercises might be the most significant thing we can do to increase the possibility of a paradigm shift, whether it is toward the solidarity economy, or re-localization, or putting children first.

What if we (a coalition of change-makers) could agree on a core, common vision for our future? What might happen if we took three minutes at the same time each morning to focus on this vision? What could we do if we turned to the energy of the universe to affirm our intention for transformation, for a paradigm shift? What might the impact be in the places we live? 

MICHELLE COLUSSI is a staff member of the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal and a member of the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet). She is currently organizing research to support a new edition of the *Community Resilience Manual* (Centre for Community Enterprise, 2000). Contact her at mcolussi@cedworks.com.

Community Conversations

Part II of Born’s *Community Conversations* describes ten large group techniques and contrasts their benefits and uses.

- Conversation Café
- Peer to Peer Conversations
- Identify the System You Desire to Engage: The Top 100 Partners Exercise
- Future Search
- Open Space
- Sharing Our Success Stories using Appreciative Inquiry
- Common Meaning
- Food and Movies to Facilitate Conversation
- Conversations that Give Voice to Photos
- Building a Learning Community to Sustain the Conversation

Born supplies a very practical introduction and resource for deciding which of these techniques to use and when. If you are hiring someone else to use them, it can help you assess their skills.

Born talks about facilitating dialogue that helps people “engage in each others’ meaning,” and Block says, “collective transformation hinges on changing the structure of how we engage each other.” If this is true – if learning to engage citizens in ways that increase learning, collaboration, and innovation is essential to our ability to transform the places in which we live – then we all need to be aware of these methods and to be using them. ■