

Transforming our Communities

By Paul Born

Transformation conjures up many images. For some it might be threatening because it means a change – even more threatening, a complete change. It might energize others because that change is something that improves their community or even themselves.

There is something positive, even alluring, in Peter Drucker's quote above, and for my "glass half-full", bear hug type personality, "transformation" conjures images of thriving communities where people work together, feel included and a sense of belonging. Communities where people care for, and are cared by, each other. There is recognition that all things are interconnected and people naturally collaborate with one another. Conflict is eliminated, or at least mitigated, by a collective understanding that what affects one affects all.

The reality is that the changes we are seeing in our communities and in communities all over the world is not without its pain. Globally we see suffering in much of Africa and war and strife in the Middle East. We see ethnic and political conflicts and the growing gap between the rich and poor. In Canada we see unprecedented economic growth while many of our aboriginal communities and new Canadians are falling behind. Is this transformation really changing things for the better?

Peter Drucker says that he sees a change happening. He does not judge that change or predict its outcome. This, I believe, is where the challenge lies in his quote. The opportunity is there to transform our communities for the better in the midst of change but the opportunity is equally there to allow the transformation to evolve into something awful and destructive.

In my travels throughout North America and occasionally beyond, I see many signs of hope. There is a new spirit emerging – it is a collaborative spirit and a deep recognition that if we all work together in our communities something beautiful can happen.

Trans•for•mation

Every few hundred years throughout Western history, a sharp transformation has occurred. In a matter of decades, society altogether rearranges itself- its world view, its basic values, its social and political structure, its arts, its key institutions.

Fifty years later a new world exists. And the people born into that world cannot even imagine the world in which their own grandparents were born. Our age is in such a period of transformation.

*~ Peter Drucker, *Managing in a Time of Great Change**



How then might we transform our communities?

Community transformation is partially about the way we *think* about our work, which in turn affects the way we *do* our work. The process is important. Every event, every conversation becomes an opportunity for engagement and every opportunity for engagement becomes an opportunity to talk about the values and the vision behind our work. As more and more people become engaged, the credibility, capacity and capital required to achieve the change we desire grows, as does our momentum. Transformation therefore becomes more about thinking like a movement. As we do our work we are in pursuit of a larger systems change.

How do we do this?

A collaboration in the city of Hamilton has adopted the transformational vision "Making Hamilton the best place to raise a child." On the surface this is a project where a small group of people gather to understand what it takes to raise a healthy child. They assess the community and look for gaps in services that are preventing parents and the community from raising healthy children. As the organizing group talks to their community about this transformational vision, a dozen projects emerge with a goal to implement each one. If Hamilton were to work like this they would observe more programs that, in small ways, benefit the community and children. In essence, nothing would really change, there would be no transformation.

But that's not the case. The collaboration in Hamilton is about community transformation. The leadership team is deliberately pursuing changes to the entire community system that has been developed for children.

How are they doing this?

First, they are trying to understand who might be engaged. They continually ask, "Who needs to be involved? Who are the people and organizations that make up the system for child development? Who are the people that can and want to transform the system?"

Next, they get these people and organizations involved. The more people involved who make up the system, the better the chance of transforming the system. Involvement can come in many forms, such as coming to a consultation, donating funds, implementing a project or participating in a group. People become involved in many ways but talking with each other is what they most often do. Sharing observations, reactions, fears and hopes is an important part of the process. Dialogue generates ideas that, over time, become plans. In fact, the very process of talking and planning leads to action. Hamilton consistently gets the right people together talking about the right things.

By bringing people into a conversation that resonates with their values, and inviting them into a journey of discovery, the purpose of the Hamilton collaboration will become the purpose of each member of the collaboration. They try to engage people around their values (raising children well) and ask them to become involved in a journey towards a vision. They are not, in the early stages asking them to *buy into the vision – the transformation*. Instead, they are inviting them on a journey in which they will help *shape the vision*.

Over time, involvement leads to “buy-in.” Personal ownership of the idea and the collective purpose builds as people work together to make the change they desire to see. In Hamilton, most people come to the work of making the city the best place to raise a child through personal interest or simply because they were invited. Though they might seem to resonate with the values behind the vision, there is often skepticism or lack of clarity as to what the vision means. But, the more people talked, and built trust with others and were able to shape the vision, the easier it was for them to buy into the vision.

As people become involved in a vision that resonates with their values, they move from *observers* of the vision to *owners* of the vision. They start to ask, “What can I do to help?” They become part of the transformation.

Transformation does not occur until there are many people of purpose engaged in the vision. When we have a network of committed people on a journey where their values and vision merge, we often observe explosions of energy occurring amongst those involved. A chain reaction develops wherein one person’s energy spurs on another, one successful project spurs another and these reactions trigger the momentum needed for the change. As the energy grows, it often feels like chaos. Rapid learning, innovation and experimentation take on lives of their own and a movement for change (a community transformation) is born.

These observations are critical. If we are to build the kind of communities we want, we would be wise to better understand how transformation occurs. This will allow us to be deliberate about growing the momentum we need for true transformation to occur.

The issue the Hamilton collaborative is trying to address is a growing poverty problem. It is not that organizations in Hamilton are not doing good work or that people do not care about poverty. The Hamilton organizers knew that if there was to be a transformation on poverty in their community they needed to introduce a new way of thinking that would lead to new ways of working.

When we observe the movement building (transformation) patterns of the Hamilton story we see that they are similar to the many successful collaborations we have observed.

First, they needed to move from the idea of incremental change (i.e. helping the poor) to a higher aspiration. Over the course of nearly two years, and after much dialogue, they agreed that their real desire was to make Hamilton a great place for families and adopted the aspiration “Hamilton: the best place to raise a child.”

Second, they recognized that children have at least five stages of development and if they were to pursue their goal they needed to create a whole system change. They would not focus their work solely on early childhood development. They wanted to change the education and economic systems so that there would be opportunities for young people along their stages of development.

Third, they recognized that if they really wanted to create the best place to raise a child the energy and efforts of the whole community was required. And so they included everyone who cared about children in their community. They solicited input and involvement from all sectors because they recognized that everyone had something to contribute.

To pursue this level of engagement they formed a multisectoral leadership roundtable ensuring everyone engaged would feel represented and that all voices of the community were at the table.

Finally, they recognized that if this was really about system change innovation was critical.

But even this was not enough. Acting differently or even thinking differently would not change their community

They needed to make their vision of Hamilton as the best place to raise a child a community priority. To do that, they needed to think like a movement.

The small core group of early adopters was not enough to advance their bold idea, they needed to engage people more people who owned the vision and continuously reach out and engage as many people as possible in their work, helping them to learn, understand and internalize their purpose. Every action became an opportunity to build momentum.

I believe Peter Drucker. Our society is in transformation.

Stories, like Hamilton's story, give me hope that the transformation will result in better communities in Canada and around the world.

I have observed hundred of similar stories led by people who are impoverished, who work for governments and even business. I have seen our voluntary sector come alive, working together with all sectors in profound new ways. I am hopeful. Yes, the glass is half-full!

Margaret Wheatley's beautiful poem, "Turning to One Another", speaks to the transformation in the Hamilton story. Whenever you are in doubt of what to do as you work to transform your community, look to this poem to be a compass on your journey.

Turning to One Another

*There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.
Ask "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.
Notice what you care about.
Assume that many others share your dreams.
Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.
Talk to people you know.
Talk to people you don't know.
Talk to people you never talk to.
Be intrigued by the differences you hear.
Expect to be surprised.
Treasure curiosity more than certainty.
Invite in everybody who cares to work on what's possible.
Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.
Know that creative solutions come from new connections.
Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know.
Real listening always brings people closer together.
Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.
Rely on human goodness. Stay together.*

- Margaret Wheatley, Turning to One Another