



*Reclaim Our Humanity - Transform Our Community.*

## **LEARNING PLAN**

In spite of the determined and passionate local efforts of many, both in the past and currently, poverty levels continue to widen and deepen in Abbotsford, and most other communities. In 2005, concerned citizens from business, government, the voluntary sector, and those living in poverty in Abbotsford committed to explore building a caring, prosperous, and healthy community through becoming a Vibrant Community.

An important measure of success in achieving lasting positive results is reduction (versus alleviation) of poverty. Alleviation deals with buffering the effects of poverty, while reduction attacks the root causes of poverty. Poverty has many inter-related root causes: there is no single factor that if altered will rid this community of poverty. The journey away from poverty is often a long and unpredictable one with no quick fix solution. Therefore, we all need to commit our efforts to changing our approach and focusing on root causes and tailoring our community response to what will work for the people in this community.

Together, we will develop a comprehensive, Abbotsford-based and locally driven approach to success. We will involve leaders from all sectors of the community who care about Abbotsford and its neighborhoods, businesses, workforce, and residents. While taking an asset-based systemic approach, we will also explore the successes, challenges and entrenched problems that exist in our community, and the public policy landscape that may be blocking results.

This learning plan marks the first step towards building a learning-oriented, action-based, inclusive movement with one common focus: poverty reduction. Learning will ensure that our community acts with knowledge of the consequences of what is done (and not done), ensuring that the most appropriate activities take place at the best time. Inclusive processes ensure involvement of everyone necessary for the most positive impact in achieving our objectives.

At the end of this phase, we hope to have reached a place of critical mass, a 'tipping point' in Abbotsford: a point at which enough people believe in poverty reduction, and are willing to change their behaviour, to effect real and durable change.

Our learning plan is a *living* document: it will develop and change as Vibrant Abbotsford moves forward.

## DEFINITION OF POVERTY:

A significant amount of work has already been completed in Abbotsford to explore what poverty means. Subject to further identification of more specific, unique contributing factors that deepen our understanding of poverty in Abbotsford, the Vibrant Abbotsford working definition of poverty is:

*Poverty is the condition of a person who does not have sufficient social and economic resources to achieve holistic well-being, and live with dignity, choices, and power which support full participation in society.*

Poverty is more than just a lack of income. It is a pervasive and complex reality featuring a number of dimensions<sup>1</sup>. We know that a variety of factors falling outside of the control of individuals contribute to poverty: these include age, gender, ethnicity, migration, household size, health, physical and developmental ability, sustainable incomes, etc.

To reduce or eliminate poverty, we need to affect factors that can influence the incidence of poverty in Abbotsford by establishing healthy dimensions in our community. These include safe and affordable housing, fair access to education, a feeling of hope for the future, active participation in community building, generation of financial assets, etc.

Poverty reduction depends on the community's understanding of and concern for its causes, conditions and consequences. To effect systemic, durable changes to poverty levels, the complexity of the issue must be acknowledged. Mostly short-term, surface solutions can only result without this acknowledgement<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix One for examples of factors that contribute to poverty.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix Two for our interpretation of the complex nature of poverty reduction.

## **OBJECTIVES:**

Vibrant Abbotsford exists to encourage and facilitate collaborative efforts to reduce poverty through systemic change to community conditions, thereby enhancing the quality of life for all who call Abbotsford home. To this end, we will focus our efforts toward building and utilizing our collaborative partnership with the Tamarack Institute and the Pan-Canadian Learning Community. We will attract and use local, regional, and national assets and knowledge resources. We will promote interest in community-based poverty reduction activities in our community, and work diligently to increase their effectiveness.

The purpose of the learning plan is to arm us to challenge and explore ways of unleashing community potential. This includes effective use of knowledge and connections needed to decide whether or not we will continue as part of Vibrant Communities. Upon meeting our learning plan objectives, we will have many of the resources needed to move ahead with poverty reduction strategies. To achieve this we will:

1. Increase our understanding of the systemic causes of poverty, as they impact Abbotsford.
2. Increase the community's understanding of the causes, conditions, and consequences of poverty in Abbotsford.
3. Increase our understanding of past and current efforts to reduce poverty.
4. Determine local strategic approaches to reducing poverty in Abbotsford.
5. Convene and facilitate opportunities for action that will influence attitudes, policies, and practices at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels.
6. Decide whether to continue as a Vibrant Community, and move to Phase Two of the Vibrant Communities initiative.

## ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES:

The anticipated outcomes of our learning plan (phase one) are:

1. A resource composed of existing and new research related to poverty and the socio-economic well-being of Abbotsford citizens. It will provide our foundation for understanding the depth and nature of poverty, identifying socio-economic targets, and determining our local strategic approaches to reducing poverty in Abbotsford.
2. Community citizens, stakeholders, and leaders understand issues related to poverty in Abbotsford, and embrace a shared vision of a caring community that pro-actively seeks to significantly reduce poverty.
3. Our community is empowered with locally relevant knowledge gained from local, national and global learning and an understanding of poverty's causes and conditions. We will be able to identify and generate priority initiatives that most appropriately reduce the depth and character of Abbotsford's poverty.
4. Community citizens, stakeholders and leaders are engaged in open and self-organizing networking systems that facilitate collaborative inter-sectoral partnerships working towards reducing poverty in Abbotsford.
5. Community citizens, stakeholders and leaders have a greater sense of community and inclusivity, demonstrating positive interest in becoming engaged in local poverty reduction efforts.
6. Vibrant Abbotsford is recognized as a credible leader and catalyst for innovative and collaborative poverty reduction efforts in our community.
7. Vibrant Abbotsford has appropriate and specific information and knowledge that enables us to embrace practical and collaborative poverty reduction solutions.
8. Vibrant Abbotsford is able to determine its future status as a member of Vibrant Communities.

We are aware that not all outcomes can be anticipated, especially when dealing with complex issues and systems. Vibrant Abbotsford will act intentionally to recognize and document unanticipated outcomes as they arise.

Likewise, we are aware that not all poverty reduction successes will or should be completely attributable to Vibrant Abbotsford. Where we have in any way contributed to local, provincial, or national poverty reduction or other positive community outcomes, we will note our contribution as a success, and wherever possible, will recognize the contributions of others to our own success.

## **KEY ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING THE OBJECTIVES:**

### **1. Increase our understanding of the systemic causes of poverty, as they impact Abbotsford.**

- Develop / use existing indices of systems research tools and assets, particularly as they relate to social research.
- Create a collaborative process to establish relevant, comprehensive and sound information about societal systems and inter-relationships as they relate to the causes of poverty.
- Conduct a program of research identifying the systems of causes that contribute to the creation of poverty in our community.
- Create a glossary of terms that will assist us in building a common language around community economic development, inclusion, collaboration, and poverty reduction.

### **2. Increase the community's understanding of the causes, conditions, and consequences of poverty in Abbotsford.**

- Create a collaborative process to establish relevant, comprehensive, and sound information about poverty-related issues in Abbotsford.
- Develop a dialogue around Abbotsford-specific poverty research needs.
- Conduct a comprehensive, asset-based exploration of Abbotsford's quality of life.
- Endeavour to undertake a bold and fearless examination of the existing Abbotsford-specific challenges and deficiencies that cannot be changed, and determine ways to work around these.

### **3. Increase our understanding of past and current efforts to reduce poverty.**

- Create a collaborative process to establish relevant, comprehensive, and sound information about poverty reduction efforts in Abbotsford and beyond.
- Develop a dialogue around Abbotsford-specific poverty reduction research needs.
- Ensure that Vibrant Abbotsford participants define and understand the work that is done by the Vibrant Abbotsford Leadership Table.
- Provide community access to regional, national, and global learning opportunities, best practices, and other resources regarding poverty reduction tools and strategies.
- Provide and encourage access for participation in Pan-Canadian Learning Community tele-learning sessions offered by Tamarack and other national, regional, and local CED opportunities.

**4. Determine local strategic approaches to reducing poverty in Abbotsford.**

- From research, develop appropriate and locally relevant strategies for long-term, durable poverty reduction.
- Develop a strategic communications and public relations campaign that disseminates results of poverty research.
- Create conditions for a community-based movement for change through collaborative and open relationships.

**5. Convene and facilitate opportunities for action that will influence attitudes, policies, and practices at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels.**

- Coordinate Vibrant Abbotsford activities around existing seminars and conferences taking place in our community, in which the spectrum of poverty symptoms/root causes can be addressed / discussed.
- Generate new knowledge, new solutions, and new ways of working (more of 'the same' will produce the same results!).
- Seek and secure opportunities for inter-sectoral participation and engagement in poverty-related initiatives.
- Seek collaborative partnership opportunities with local, regional, and national community economic development and related programs and initiatives targeting poverty-related conditions and solutions.
- Based on both new and previously identified priorities, identify technical resources and funding partnerships that may be accessed to support this work.
- Provide collaborative leadership in the community for Vibrant Abbotsford activities. This requires development of learning around focused, consistent leadership practices that are applied to our activities and act as an example for those involved.
- Act as advocates to facilitate policy discussions / solutions at municipal, regional, provincial, national, and global levels.
- Encourage collaboration between governments, businesses, and community leaders.

**6. Decide whether to continue as a Vibrant Community, and move to Phase Two of the Vibrant Communities initiative.**

This decision will be reached through a process of evaluating the research findings, with attendant evaluation of the process itself. Tamarack will be included in the decision-making process.

## Appendix One

### Factors contributing to poverty

People in poverty face challenges virtually unknown to those with secure and comfortable incomes – challenges from both obvious and hidden sources. Research has indicated that those challenges can be clustered into four broad groupings.

<b>Some Factors Contributing to Poverty</b>			
<b>Behaviors of the Individual</b>	<b>Human and Social Capital in the Community</b>	<b>Exploitation</b>	<b>Political/Economic Structures</b>
<i>Definition:</i> Choices, behaviors, characteristics, and habits of people in poverty	<i>Definition:</i> Local resources available to individuals, businesses, and communities	<i>Definition:</i> How people in poverty are exploited because they are in poverty	<i>Definition:</i> Economic, political, and social policies at the international, national, provincial, and local levels
<i>Sample factors include:</i>  Addictions Breakup of families Commitment to achievement Crime Dependence on social assistance Domestic violence Intergenerational character traits Language experience Mental illness Orientation to the future Planning skills Racism and discrimination Single parenthood Spending habits Work ethic	<i>Sample factors include:</i>  Adequate skill sets Availability and quality of education Availability and quality of job specific training Availability of jobs Availability of well-paying jobs Childcare for working families City and regional planning Decline in social morality Intellectual capital Middle class flight Neighbourhood decline Quality and availability of transportation Racism and discrimination Social capital Urbanization	<i>Sample factors include:</i>  Drug trade Employment scams Gambling Internet scams Lease to purchase outlets <b>Payday lenders</b> Racism and discrimination Sex trade Sub-prime lenders Sweatshops Temp and part-time work	<i>Sample factors include:</i>  Corporate influence on legislators Decline of middle class Decline of unions De-industrialization Disincentives Economic disparity Globalization Immigration patterns Job loss Racism and discrimination Salary ratios of CEO to line workers Social policy Taxation patterns

*Source: A Framework for Understanding Poverty, by Ruby K. Payne, PhD., and Phillip DeVol*

Poverty is a complex issue, and all four of the issues listed are contributing factors. In order to understand poverty and achieve progress in poverty reduction, it is necessary to address all four areas.

*The real question is how to change systems.* Historically, the mechanisms for change include revolution, legislation, financial supports for those in poverty, and education. Systems are the result of structures, patterns, purposes, and processes that organisms engage in to survive, and are only as moral as the individuals in them. The same can be said of governments and religious organizations, which also have systemic characteristics. In order to achieve systemic change, all facets of the community must be engaged, including workplaces, healthcare providers, religious organizations, law enforcement, correctional institutions, social service agencies, and government.

Underlying principles for this work include:

- Strategies must be developed for all causes of poverty
- All three classes must be at the table when decisions are being made by the community as a whole
- The work of communities is to help families build resources
- Communities need to collect data on quality-of-life indicators, then give progress reports on improvement

Part of the process will involve improving the outcomes of organizations that work with people in poverty. This will require that organizations examine, and if necessary, change their theories of change, program designs, policies, procedures, and front-line staff skills. Part of the process will also involve engaging people currently living in poverty. We know that people in poverty already are excellent concrete problem solvers; the goal is for them to parlay those skills into helping communities make systemic changes.

## **Appendix Two**

### The complex nature of poverty reduction

The predominant metaphor used in organizations today is that of a machine. Almost equally popular is the metaphor of a military operation. If an organization is a machine, then we simply must specify the parts well and make sure that each part does its part. If an organization is a military operation, then command, control and communication needs to be hierarchical; survival is key; and sacrificial heroes are desired (although no one really wants to be one themselves). Most of today's organizational artifacts – job descriptions, rank-and-file employees, turf battles, strategic plans and so on – emerge from these largely unexpressed and undiscussed metaphors. If you buy into these metaphors, then the traditional actions of management make sense and should work.

The basic problem with these metaphors when applied to a complex adaptive system is that they ignore the individuality of agents and the effects of interaction among agents. Or worse, they simply assume that all this can be tightly controlled through better (read: more) specification. While there are many situations for which the machine and military metaphors might be useful – for example, routine surgical processes – there are also many situations for which these metaphors are grossly inadequate. When we view our system through the lens of complexity, we take on a new metaphor – that of a CAS – and, therefore, are using a different model to determine what makes sense for leaders to do.

Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg, Paul Plsek

### **The Nine Principles of Working with Complexity**

1. View your system through the lens of complexity.
2. Build a good-enough vision
3. When life is far from certain, lead with clockware and swarmware in tandem
4. Tune your place to the edge
5. Uncover and work with paradox and tension
6. Go for multiple actions at the fringes, let direction arise
7. Listen to the shadow system
8. Grow complex systems by chunking
9. Mix cooperation with competition

*(Read more from "Edgeware – 9 Principles of Working in Complex Adaptive Systems" at:  
[http://www.plexusinstitute.com/edgeware/archive/think/main\\_prin1.html](http://www.plexusinstitute.com/edgeware/archive/think/main_prin1.html).)*

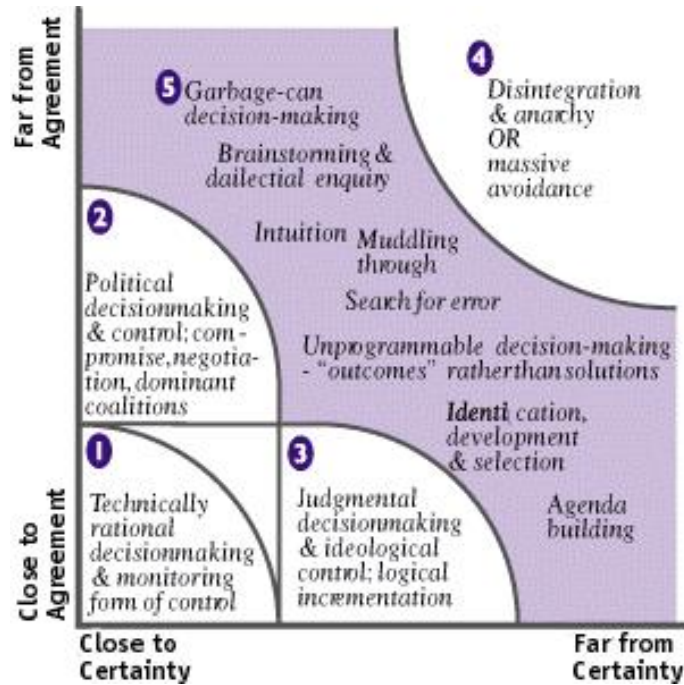
Within the nine principals of working in CAS, there are four key themes to be understood:

- All complex systems are built up from numerous components which constantly drive large and small scale change, through common mechanisms, in the overall system.
- The mutual dance of interdependence among organisms is stressed as is the growing recognition of the central role of cooperation in fostering survival as contrasted with reliance on competition.
- Complex systems seem to operate and survive best when they operate on the edge of chaos and order and when behavior is organized from the bottom up.
- To effect a systems behavior or development one must appreciate its patterns and power, apply interventions judiciously, and don't bet on a limited set of strategies.


**The Stacey Matrix:** The art of management and leadership is having an array of approaches and being aware of when to use which approach. Ralph Stacey proposed a matrix to help with this art by identifying management decisions on two dimensions: *the degree of certainty* and *the level of agreement*.

<b>Close to Certainty:</b>	Issues or decisions are close to certainty when cause and effect linkages can be determined. This is usually the case when a very similar issue or decision has been made in the past. One can then extrapolate from past experience to predict the outcome of an action with a good degree of certainty.
<b>Far from Certainty:</b>	At the other end of the certainty continuum are decisions that are far from certainty. These situations are often unique or at least new to the decision makers. The cause and effect linkages are not clear. Extrapolating from past experience is not a good method to predict outcomes in the far from certainty range.
<b>Agreement:</b>	The vertical axis measures the level of agreement about an issue or decision within the group, team or organization. As you would expect, the management or leadership function varies depending on the level of agreement surrounding an issue.

There is a large area on this diagram (5) which lies between the anarchy region (4) and regions of the traditional management approaches (1,2 and 3). Stacey calls this large center region the zone of complexity - others call it the edge of chaos. In the zone of complexity the traditional management approaches are not very effective but it is the zone of high creativity, innovation, and breaking with the past to create new modes of operating.



Read more about Stacey Matrix and Complex Adaptive Systems at:  
[http://www.siliconyogi.com/andreas/it\\_professional/sol/complexsystems/StaceyMatrix.html](http://www.siliconyogi.com/andreas/it_professional/sol/complexsystems/StaceyMatrix.html)

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