

Vibrant COMMUNITIES

Coaching Matters

In almost every community across Canada, people are working on stubborn problems – everything from poverty, crime, environmental decline and racism - that don't seem to go away.

These are complex problems and our responses, unfortunately, are often fractured, with a lot of people working on little pieces of these problems

Thankfully, there is a new generation of community responses emerging that approaches these issues more holistically and engages a broad range of community stakeholders. They are called [comprehensive community initiatives](#) and there are literally dozens of such high profile initiatives – in areas ranging from homelessness to the quality of life for urban Aboriginal peoples – operating right now in Canada.

At the heart of each of these collaborations is a committed group of leaders – some paid, others not – that take responsibility for pulling together a broad range of community players and creating an environment in which they can work together to tackle the root causes of distressed communities and marginalized residents.

It's important but tough work and these leaders often turn to professional “Coaches” for support.

Coaches are people with extensive knowledge and experience in different areas of community building. They provide community leaders with a sounding board and a guiding hand as they journey through the day-to-day work of broad-based collaborations to work on community issues.

Coaching can't guarantee the success of a community collaboration, but it can help it become more effective.

Just ask Jenny Kain and Karen Gingras in Edmonton. Karen is the Executive Director of the Edmonton Community Loan Fund and Jenny works for [Community Services with the City of Edmonton](#). Their organizations are co-sponsors (along with The United Way of the Alberta Capital Region) of [Vibrant Communities Edmonton](#) – an emerging initiative in Edmonton focused on reducing poverty.

Last year, Karen and Jenny decided to enter into a coaching relationship with [Garry Loewen](#) – an experienced community leader who devotes some of his busy schedule to coaching organizations participating in Vibrant Communities – a Pan-Canadian initiative that brings together up to 15 communities to explore new ways to substantially reduce poverty.

The working relationship between Karen, Jenny and Garry is simple.

Every month, Karen and Jenny send Garry an email with a list of issues they are wrestling with and want to work through with him. Sometimes the issues have to do with the mechanics of putting together a community plan. Other times they revolve around how best to engage a key local organization in the collaboration. There are even times when they just want to talk about the struggle of balancing the heavy responsibilities of stewarding the early days of a comprehensive community initiative with fulfilling the day-to-day duties of their home organizations.



Garry Loewen

Garry, who visited Edmonton in the early days of the coaching relationship and makes it a point to keep up to speed on everything the Edmonton collaboration is doing, then takes about a week to prepare for the coaching session. Mostly, this is devoted to reading background materials and thinking through how best to support Jenny or Karen. Sometimes, it also means doing extra research of how other communities and leaders work through the issues.

Once ready, he calls Karen or Jenny for a coaching session. They spend an hour together, talking through the issue and identifying options on how best to proceed. Garry may challenge them to look at the issue in a different way, but he never pretends to advise them on how to do their work. The call ends and Karen or Jenny always leave feeling supported and usually with a good idea of their next steps.

It may not be rocket science, but it is productive.

“It is really helpful to get the insights, experience and knowledge of someone outside of the initiative who still really understands the work,” Jenny says. “It’s a great use of time, a very productive hour, that allows us to focus on priority issues and it often leads to tangible outcomes.”

Karen agrees, “He has helped me crystallize how some of our work should be implemented - his patient advice, wisdom and encouragement are very much appreciated and have helped me to do better work in Edmonton.”

Any complete study assessing the elements of successful comprehensive community initiatives generally identifies a committed and talented core leadership group as an essential ingredient.

Communities, and their supporters, that are serious about embracing a comprehensive approach to creating a good quality of life for all its residents and using a collaborative approach to make that happen will explore coaching as way to support that important resource.

Related Links:

- [Vibrant Communities](#)
- [Coaching in Vibrant Communities](#)
- [Vibrant Communities Edmonton](#)

