

Giving Root to Collective Action by Paul Born

Margaret Mead the anthropologist and well-respected educator and community activist is often quoted as saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

While it's an inspiring quote, Mead neglects to mention the environment within which this small group of people succeeds.

Each spring I am struck by the miracle of nature. Take a few very small seeds. Plant them in rich soil. Provide them with water and fertilizer and by summer's end you have been rewarded with a rich variety of flowers and vegetables.

I am not a great gardener, but every spring my desire for fresh, organic produce compels me to try and grow something.

In order to grow a good garden I have learned a few key lessons about gardening:

- The quality of the seed matters
- If I prepare the soil well things grow better
- Pruning and weeding are as crucial as fertilizing and watering

Now, oddly enough, after all that work something often happens after the initial harvest - I get bored and most of my produce goes to waste or is picked by my mother-in-law (after she scolds me, of course for wasting all that good food!).

The question I would like to address is: how can we make sure a community-based collaborative initiative gets a good start in life?

This is an interesting and very important question for which I bring great wisdom. After more than 25 years of experience in the field, having launched a national initiative, and having devoted years of study and practice to collaborative processes, I have developed an answer to this question that is rooted in deep understanding and contemplative thought.

The answer is, "***It depends.***"

Yes, it depends on many factors and conditions.

Like growing a good garden, the key is good soil, quality seeds, a bit of gardening know-how and the fortitude to follow through.

But as those of you who garden in the city know, good soil is not always very easy to find and what are good seeds anyway?

Community collaboration, like gardening, would be easy if the conditions were always perfect and predictable. If we could control the weather our garden would always grow according to plan.

Community collaboration is filled with many surprises and less than ideal conditions and so, as with gardening, forming a collaboration in our communities requires adaptability based on the conditions we are facing. And so I defend my well-honed response: it depends.

Continuing to use the gardening metaphor, let's look at the role fertile soil plays in community collaboration.

In his article, *Can this Collaborative be Saved*, Paul Mattessich outlines three points that we need to consider when starting a collaborative effort.

The **first** is to consider whether there is a rich history of collaboration or cooperation in your community. If you can answer to the affirmative here you have an advantage. People can easily understand what you are trying to do and have the skills to join in.

If there is no history of collaboration in your community you will need to spend a lot of time educating, shaping expectations and developing buy in from potential partners, funders and others whose support is crucial to your success.

Mattessich's **second** consideration to bear in mind is the reputation of your group and each of its members. If you have people in your collective who are well known and trusted with a reputation for getting things done it will take far less time to develop trust and to achieve the kind of clout required to catch the attention of stakeholders.

The **third** condition is an appropriate political and social climate for the things that you want to accomplish. If your issues are well known and commonly understood as important they will be supported more easily; that is, there will be fewer weeds to pull. (Have you ever planted a garden in soil from reclaimed lawn? It sometimes takes years to get rid of the grass.)

I would consider these three factors, a rich history of collaboration, a good reputation, and the appropriate political and social climate, critical when considering any collaborative effort. If you lack any or all of these factors you can still continue your effort but I caution you to be realistic. This is the "it depends" factor in action. Think of these factors as good soil. If you have all three, things will grow faster. If you do not have the three factors, you will need to take extra care and your collaboration's efforts will require extra supports.

Good Soil & Planting Good Seed Well

Good soil does not a garden make. The most difficult soil can produce a bountiful harvest if you seed well. In building a community collaboration effort what might '*seeding well*' look like?

The seed in community collaboration is most often an idea. Given that all communities are different and unique it will be important to frame the idea to the conditions or climate of the community. In other words, what resonates in one community may not resonate in another.

We have learned this in framing the work of poverty in many communities across Canada. In Victoria, the issue is framed as improving the quality of life for *all* citizens, given that most citizens already believe they have the best quality of life in the country. Building on this commonly held belief the Quality of Life Challenge is able to engage in a debate on what a good quality of life would be for Victoria's most vulnerable citizens.

In Saint John, a community with one of the highest per capita poverty rates in the country, the issue is framed through a vision of being "average" by reaching the Canadian "average" poverty rate of 15% rather than the city's 28% poverty rate. Framing the idea or vision in a way that resonates with a community is often crucial in building understanding and buy-in.

Planting a seed in community collaboration is about engaging community members in the idea to achieve buy-in and to mobilize the collective energy and will of the community. *How* we engage our community to achieve this buy-in "depends."

It depends on community conditions and the strength of the organizing group. If there is a strong history of collaboration this process is most often quick and can be done in larger groups. If the credibility of the organizing group is weak or involves a single sector then more strategic and smaller meetings are needed. The key is to assess the readiness of the community to move from an idea to planning. You cannot rush this stage - a few ideas may sprout but your chances of success are greatly diminished if you move too quickly from visioning to planning.

The very act of planting the seed is critical and requires leadership. I define leadership as having a vision for the future and doing what it takes to realize it. Like a garden, you need to know what you want to plant, how the plants may grow, how far apart the tomatoes should be, etc. If you do not have a vision for the garden planting seeds can be futile. Imagine digging a big hole and throwing all of your garden seeds into it. That's not much of a garden.

In community collaboration a small group of people are lead by a vision. They can see not only the end vision but also the various steps required to get to the end.

Good Soil, Planting Good Seed Well & Effective Gardening

So even if you have good soil and have planted it well there is no guarantee that you will have a bountiful harvest. This in itself is important wisdom for community collaboration. Taking the time to prepare a community is no guarantee of success. To succeed in gardening you need to know how to garden, to succeed in community collaboration you need to know how to mobilize and build your community.

At Tamarack we are in the process of developing a five-day course to strengthen collaborative leadership. Here are three skills that I find most critical.

The **first**, as Peter Senge shares in his book The Fifth Discipline, is the ability to see the forest and the trees; that is, to know how to first nurture the individual plants in a garden but also to know how to nurture and tend the whole garden. In other words, we must fully understand that the health of the community as a whole is critical to the success of each social change initiative. This requires systems thinking – the ability to see and nurture patterns in a community – to understand the complexity and interrelated nature of the issues. For example, raising a healthy child requires many integrated factors. Though these factors can be nurtured one at a time (literacy, empathy, physical health, etc.), a healthy child requires all of these factors working well all at once to succeed.

In the case of community collaboration, therefore, the skill for the leadership team is not only about implementing a specific project well, but also about understanding the social change process - advancing a community's thinking and action in such a way as to change how the community acts. We call this creating a community movement for change.

The **second** skill to strengthen collaborative leadership is to be able to effectively nurture the tension between process and action.

One of the skills I needed to learn in gardening was not to water the plants too much; another was to know when to prune my tomatoes. The skills of community collaboration are no different; at times we need to be patient. We have talked enough, we have planned enough, now we must wait. The idea is not ours alone, the community must respond. At other times we do too much; ideas sprout that we do not need to attend to and we must remain focused. We have to be able to move from collaboration to action. If the plants are not growing we must intervene. If there are no buds on the plants there will be no harvest.

The idea of community collaboration is often so compelling that people feel that it is an end in itself. The truth is that it is a process to achieve a result. We use the community collaboration process because we consider it able to achieve better outcomes, real changes that affect real people and improve their quality of life.

The **third** skill I want to talk about is opportunistic resilience. My favorite time in gardening is picking and tasting that first ripe tomato. All the others are still green but by some luck, under perfect conditions, this one tomato is weeks ahead of the others. Early wins, as we call them in community collaboration, are critical. In order to realize our big harvest, the significant social change we hope to create, we need to help our coalition to taste the early fruits of our efforts if we are to maintain their commitment and energy.

For this reason we must seek opportunities to create these early successes. In gardening we sometimes will place a bit of glass over our tomato plant to help it grow faster. In community collaboration we will seek ways to accelerate change, choosing one or two ideas with the greatest promise, and focusing our energies on them to achieve those early wins.

In Calgary a group seeking to reduce poverty felt a quick win was to enable reduced transit fares for poor people. So far they have secured the city council's commitment to reduce fees by 30% for people with disabilities. They are now working with city staff to extend this to all low-income residents of Calgary. This is a very small achievement for this group's ambitious goal of moving 2,000 families out of poverty but it has been a huge motivator for the coalition.

But leading a collaborative community effort involves more than early wins. It is also important to have the resilience to know that if you persevere there will be a harvest ... but only if you are resilient. And relentless, always seeing that eventually there will be a harvest, doing all it takes to maximize the yield and beauty of the garden.

Once the harvest begins you need to have the energy and the will to realize the gain. Most importantly, you have learned that it is more important to do it together as a community than to do it alone. You take the time to celebrate not only to keep everyone motivated but as a way to mobilize even more people. Resilience is relentless incrementalism, taking small steps, seeing each one as if playing dominoes, knowing that each step leads to a whole and once many steps are in place change occurs. Like dominoes set up in a pattern, one behind the other, tip just one and a wonderful story unfolds.

Preparing good soil, planting seed well and gardening effectively.

Vibrant Communities

Vibrant Communities is active in 16 cities. Six of these cities have achieved citywide buy-in for their idea and have collectively developed over 250 partnerships with business, all levels of government, voluntary organizations and many people living in poverty. Many thousands of people have been engaged, community plans have been written, partnerships formalized, and community funds have been raised. In other words, the garden has been planted. We are already experiencing early wins and the momentum is growing.

St Michel is one of these six Trail Builders, as we call them in Vibrant Communities. They have tended the soil by forming a coalition in St Michel and also within the greater city of Montreal. They have chosen key leaders with a strong reputation. The mayors of both St Michel and Greater Montreal are active and the city and province are highly supportive. It is a very difficult place to grow an idea but they

have partnered with TOHU and others. They have masterfully crafted and communicated their idea and skillfully engaged many in their community. Under the leadership of Pierre Durocher, guided by Lyse Brunet, and supported by exceptional community leadership, this remarkable collaboration has emerged.

Trois-Rivières is another of these 16 cities that have joined together to learn about community collaboration to reduce poverty in Canada. The 16 communities meet together and learn over the phone, on the Internet and through papers they write. They are supported with technical, policy and financial resources from Tamarack, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

Vibrant Communities aims to establish six exemplary community collaborations to reduce poverty for 5,000 families in Canada by 2008. But that's not all. We're also working to create the knowledge required to advance this work of collaboration by making it easier and more effective. We hope that more and more communities will join us so that we can truly own the poverty issue in our communities and work together to ensure we have the lowest level of poverty in Quebec and in Canada.

And so today we share what we have learned so far.



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