

## **A Framework for Initiating Community Change**

To successfully initiate community change, there are many components an individual or group must consider. The first step towards successful change is defining these different elements: success, the individual or group that can initiate change, and the community that this change will affect. By taking the time to evaluate each factor, a community readies itself and thus facilitates the initiation of change.

### **What is successful change?**

For Meredith Emmett, president and co-founder of Third Space Studio, creating successful community change means that she is able to “take a good, creative idea that people want, that will make their lives different and better.” However, this notion of different and better is empty without any metrics unique to the community and situation. “Different communities put different values on different indicators, and they have different ways of getting from point A to point B,” says Emmett. Success depends almost entirely on the initial goals of the change makers; without realistic goals and methods of evaluating success, the community can lose patience and doubt the effectiveness of any efforts (Millesen 39). Millesen contends that coming up with good ideas is only half the battle. “...They noted that even with vision, enthusiasm, and commitment, if the people who can make it happen are not at the table, great ideas may never come to fruition,” (Millesen 50). Evaluating these ideas after implementation is important for determining efficacy, but analyzing the success of community change initiatives is extremely difficult, “because of their complexity, broad scope, dynamic

nature, and vulnerability to uncontrollable variables,” (Brown vi). Each community faces unique challenges and aspires to unique solutions; a logic model to evaluate the specific circumstances can be a useful tool to help communities determine a course of action.

The logic model defines short-term and long-term goals, as well as a strategic focus and specific actions the community will take to achieve these goals. Emmett asserts that small wins are only effective if they lead to something larger. “At some point, people get fed up with small wins if they are not tied together as a whole,” she says. “It is the job of a leader to reflect back on what changes occurred and what needs to happen.” Community members can become frustrated if progress seems slow, but an accurate timeline with appropriate milestones creates realistic expectations for success. Describing the Dudley Street neighborhood, Saasta writes, “People involved from the beginning, such as Paul Bothwell Bothwell [a minister who had first moved to the neighborhood in the 1970s], say it took at least seven years before residents could really see change and know that the process was going to work. But today, the change is apparent even to outsiders,” (Saasta 3). Tangible change also leads to intangible change in attitudes and morale, says Emmett. Millesen describes the value of tangible programs leading to intangible change, “A number of people we interviewed talked about how tremendously valuable things such as the study tours, guest speakers, and leadership training have been in generating enthusiasm and building trust,” (Millesen 41). While tangible changes are easiest to evaluate using universal metrics, acknowledging all levels of success encourages community members to continue working towards an ultimate goal. Brown writes, “Recognize, measure, and track a full range and continuum of outcomes, including changes in capacities and behaviors, instead of categorizing results

as either processes or products or rejecting ‘soft’ outcomes,” (Brown 39). Just as rock bottom is unique for each individual community member, success and outcomes are understood differently. Continuous acknowledgement of positive outcomes and established procedures and processes contribute to successful change.

In addition to measurable change, Millesen claims that communication is an important outcome. “Much of the success is directly related to how people are communicating across historically entrenched geographical, ideological, industry-related, and socioeconomic boundaries,” she says (Millesen 46). Although this component of success as defined by Millesen is not tangible and as easily assessed as other metrics, sustainability is still important. In their study of sustainability, the Cornerstone Consulting Group writes, “Several interviewees spoke of the importance of continuing and strengthening the *thinking* behind the initiative- making sure that the initiative’s central ideas and beliefs are firmly in place over time and are not compromised or blurred. Some spoke of sustainability in terms of making sure that the core ideas... are assimilated into the thinking of individuals and the practices of organizations,” (Cornerstone 10). Without sustainability, change cannot be considered successful, regardless of the planning and initial successes, since the change is not permanently integrated into the community (whether measured using economic indicators, quality of life changes, or other metrics).

Successful change can be tangible or intangible, short-term or long-term, universally applicable or unique to a particular community, but it must be sustainable, with or without those individuals who initiated the change. By determining feasible

expectations, community members prepare for change and create an environment where change is possible.

### **Who can initiate successful change?**

Frequently, an individual will be able to successfully initiate change if they have the capacity to view the community from an outsider's perspective while maintaining the trust and relationships of an insider. Emmett says, "Someone who grew up in a community and then left and came back gets to be both an insider and an outsider. If you do not have the ability to be both an insider and an outsider, you have to be able to build a team that has that combination of skills." An individual with the right relationships and attitudes is almost irreplaceable for creating successful community change, but he or she alone cannot drive the change. When describing the two leaders of the South Wood County Progress Initiative, a community member said, "You know there are really two catalysts – Kelly with the Community Foundation and Connie with the Heart of Wisconsin. I honestly don't think it could have launched without the two of them," (Millesen 19). Later, another community member clarified, "They have provided the spark for this thing, but [they are] not the sole motivating force, not the sole driver, not the sole organizer... Under the best of circumstances you find that person who provides the spark and then that person finds other people to carry the ball," (28). Emmett elaborated that a successful leader is one who is able to make the community feel invested in their good ideas; if the initial change maker leaves and their projects fizzle without him or her, the individual did not succeed.

While an individual can see the potential for change, actually initiating it usually requires the support of a group of other driven individuals or a formal organization.

Emmett explains that a community foundation can use resources to support change-making organizations, but the presence of a foundation does not produce change. Change makers have to encourage stagnant philanthropic organizations to take risks on new initiatives while balancing the oft-necessary financial support from a foundation. A member of the Dudley Street neighborhood describes the impact of the financial support of the Casey Foundation's Rebuilding Communities Initiative, "...It gave the process a huge boost, Bothwell says. For one thing, it allowed the community to again take the time to 'think about what's happening here and come up with new strategies and an new vision,'" (Saasta 8). Utilizing the resources of the Casey Foundation allowed the Dudley Street neighborhood leaders to thoroughly evaluate their needs for change, which contributed to the ultimate success of the project.

Emmett also emphasized the importance of change agents' positive thinking when initiating change. "Listening to resistance is informative but if you keep responding to the resisters, you are only butting your head against the wall. Frequently this is a problem in organizations because someone will hesitate instead of moving forward with a good idea because they think someone will disapprove." She recommends including advocates who support the change to incubate ideas instead of investing excessive energy in negatives. Successful change requires follow-through with ideas, as Millesen described, and trying to accommodate every individual will stall progress.

If the community can rally around an individual's ideas to create a common vision or theory of change, successful change is possible, and even likely. In her analysis of the CCRP in the South Bronx, Miller explains a lesson their organization learned, "It is important to convene participants very early in the program so that they can be helped to

think creatively about the future and discover the common values and shared vision that provide the basis for working together,” (Miller 47). A balance between community involvement and leadership creates an environment in which everyone feels capable of making change. A successful leader helps people envision the future and see themselves in the changing picture, says Emmett. “This kind of leadership facilitates engagement and brings additional people around the table particularly because the ones at the table are apt to think either they need to make it happen or find the people who can,” Millesen writes (54). In order to invite the right people to the table, change makers must define the community in which they want to initiate change; a realistic assessment of the community contributes to an environment that encourages change.

### **Who will the change affect?**

While Merriam-Webster online dictionary broadly defines community as “a unified body of individuals”, Emmett clarifies that community is defined through geography, identity, and other common interests; frequently communities overlap since individuals associate themselves with multiple communities.

Depending on the identified community, different approaches are appropriate for initiating change. Giving circles, organizations where individuals pool finances and collectively determine their distribution, allow individuals to become more engaged in their personal giving and have a more evident impact on the community (Eikenberry 5). Giving circles are a good alternative to traditional community foundations for those who want to initiate change in a more intimate community and bypass the bureaucracy that often accompanies more formal organizations.

Micro philanthropy is another alternative to the traditional community foundation, for individuals who want to initiate change as part of a larger philanthropic community. Munnecke asserts that the net transformational effect of many people participating in micro philanthropy is greater than a lump sum donation of the same value given by a single individual (Munnecke 2). According to this philosophy, a small donation initiates change in the communities of both the donor and the recipient (3); however, micro philanthropy does not include a specific strategy for community participation in the sense of defining a shared vision past “the greater good”.

Defining a community geographically helps rally the group around a common vision, but residents cannot rely on a community foundation to initiate change. Jennifer Leonard contends that the primary function of community foundations is to raise “community capital,” which leaves the responsibility of starting change up to the community members (Leonard 89). However, a community foundation is a valuable tool for bringing the right people to the table, as Millesen contends. For geographically defined communities, Brown describes the importance of including a diversity of community members to get a variety of perspectives on necessary change. “NII also highlights the need to reach out to residents beyond those most likely to get involved, such as local agency heads, self-appointed leaders, and other traditional gatekeepers,” (Brown 17). A comprehensive “table” promotes a thorough canvassing of the community’s potential and needs for change, as well as any unique barriers that may require extra attention.

In her “Anatomy of an Initiative That Worked”, Anita Miller reiterates that a foundation or outsider hoping to create community change should have faith in the

community. “Trust that the communities with whom you are working will know what they need. They do, however, need help expressing those needs. Your role should be to create the opportunities for them to do so and deliver the talent and resources needed to capture their ideas and weave them together into a powerful vision and action framework,” (Miller 47). While recognizing the power of communities, Miller also emphasizes the importance of teamwork early in the change process so everyone can be involved in creating a shared vision and theory of change (47). If the community can begin to come together behind a common goal, they can build a strong foundation for change.

### **How can a community support change?**

While many case studies focus on crises that spark community change, Emmett instead claims a community member can see an opportunity for positive change and move from there. “The question is, how do you help people see the cost of the status quo and benefits of change?” she asks. “Sometimes a crisis helps people see the benefits of change, but sometimes it’s a more emotional goal. Often, the status quo has got to be so bad that people are willing to move to a new place, but different people in the community have different versions of rock bottom.” Timothy Saasta describes this notion of rock bottom in his case study of the Dudley Street neighborhood. He writes, “But out of their desperation, ‘something began to gel,’ Bothwell recalls. ‘Everybody here knew we had to learn to work together or we were dead. Everyone knew we had to figure out how to build enough of something here that it really made a difference. Nobody preached it: it was intuitive. People knew it.’” (Saasta 6). While it seems the Dudley Street

neighborhood miraculously came together, Terri Bailey, et al. created a framework for community change initiatives that includes five essential conditions for change:

1. Willingness to learn and imagine a better way of doing things.
2. Belief that the new way of doing things will work and the will to act on the conviction.
3. Knowledge of the community's context and history, especially the nuances and impact of race, politics, social networks, and other initiatives or programs that have operated in the area.
4. Leadership capacity, along with continual efforts to develop and replenish the supply of community leaders.
5. Relationships and a shared sense of teamwork (Bailey 7-8).

These conditions for change help create a powder keg that an individual or group can ignite.

Eventually, as change progresses, the line blurs between successful initiation and successful implementation; without successful implementation, the initiation of change cannot be considered successful.

### **How can an individual or group successfully initiate change?**

Regardless of the specifics of the community- the who, what, when, where, and why- the biggest question is still how? With everything evaluated, defined, and in place to facilitate change, Karl Stauber claims that the ultimate requirement for an individual or group to successfully initiate change is community readiness. In her framework for change, Bailey also describes five essential elements of learning that have to be present before an individual or group can begin to make change:

1. A commonly held and well-understood vision for change that includes core values and principles of engagement.
2. A theory of change or plan that specifies where you are going (the results) and how you plan to get there (the strategies).
3. Measurement and evaluation of the outcomes and of interim benchmarks that show what is happening, what is working, and what needs improvement or adaptation.

4. Knowledge creation: that is, an effort to develop new ideas, reflect on the links between what you do and what you accomplish, imagine a better way to do things and disperse the knowledge widely.
5. Investment in creating, adopting, and adapting knowledge-based tools that enable all stakeholders—not just a few individuals—to move ahead with common insight, understanding, and accountability (Bailey 8).

If individuals cannot see themselves in a changed role as part of an improved community, no amount of planning, enthusiasm, or good ideas will make a difference. Every community uniquely defines success, leaders for change, and community itself. While all of these factors must be in place if an individual or group is truly to initiate successful change, the unifying, elusive, and crucial component is community readiness. Taking the time and making the effort to define and evaluate each unique factor is a step towards establishing community readiness.

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