

Background Paper on Engagement for Real

October 25, 2017

A resilient city needs to harness the wisdom and skills of its residents. By empowering our community members, they will be ready to act together to address slowly-building challenges such as climate change or acute crises such as floods or wild fires. Engagement can build social capital by giving community members the tools, power and confidence to form and lead organizations, direct activities, share information and build relationships. Supporting a civil society with these skills gives Vancouver a better chance at resiliency to face challenges that city government cannot tackle alone.

CONTEXT

In *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, Rebecca Solnit examines how people in five communities over the past century have responded to disaster and worked together in post-disaster recovery. The case studies and “disaster sociology” show people self-organizing effective interventions, before top-down governments and institutions step in.

Solnit researched the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, 1917 Halifax harbour explosion, 1985 Mexico City earthquake, 9/11 terrorist attacks in Lower Manhattan; and the 2005 deluge of New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina. This year’s hurricane season in Texas and Puerto Rico and the most recent earthquake in Mexico show how important civil society is for post-disaster recovery.

Her findings paint a picture of neighbours working together with common purpose. Disaster survivors, Solnit notes, often share “a feeling of belonging and a sense of unity rarely achieved under normal circumstances.” As strangers become friends, social isolation, alienation, and restrictions disappear. Solnit says that these responses to disasters show social possibilities and provide “a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become.”

A Paradise Built in Hell ends by musing on how our societies can create the shared purpose and social closeness that has been observed after disasters, but without an acute crisis or pressure to necessitate this mutual aid. This is the opportunity of Engagement for Real and the necessary condition for building a civil society prepared to address non-acute crises, like affordability, equity, climate change, migration, declining natural resources, and the threat of natural disasters.

As Solnit writes, “the ability to act on one’s own behalf, to enter a community of mutual aid rather than become a cast-out or a recipient of charity, matters immensely...” Generally, public engagement is premised on the belief that people should be involved in decisions that affect them individually or as a community member.

ISSUES

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Engagement provides a clear framework on power. It defines five levels of engagement, depending on the impact and complexity of the issues. The five levels for public participation goals extend from inform (providing information) to consult (obtain feedback), involve (work with public to understand their concerns), collaborate (partner with public to develop alternatives) and empower (place final decision-making in the hands of the public.). Promises to the public likewise fall somewhere on the spectrum of inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower.

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Most local governments in the Metro region operate somewhere in the range between “inform” and “involve,” such as sharing public notices, offering a survey or hosting an open house. The city’s use of advisory boards, development of neighbourhood plans, and architects use of charrettes are examples in the “collaborate” level. The “empower” level requires delegating decision-making power to the public with a promise to implement what the public decides. Referendums and elections fall to this level of the spectrum.

The collaborate-and-empower models of engagement offer community members a chance to act in mutual aid, rather than being provided or planned for. The collaborate and empower levels of the IAP2 Spectrum offer the most potential for building community member capacity in communication, organization and advocacy skills for resilient action.

Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard’s *Situational Leadership Model* notes that effective leadership needs to be flexible to address the circumstances and the people involved. Effective leadership requires the ability to direct (share information on what is happening when/where and why), coach (two-way communications to provide support), support (shared decision-making on how to accomplish an action), and delegate (passing along responsibility). Different situations (emergencies versus long standing problems) are best suited to different leadership styles.

To strengthen resilience in the face of chronic stresses or the anticipation of crises, communities and local governments need to share power. Community members can be involved in creating communications materials, designing processes and events, hosting their own events and setting up framework decisions. The more that shared information and social capital (i.e. acquaintances and social trust) exist before a crisis, the easier it is for communities, organizations and local governments to respond effectively.

Collaboration often needs support and resources to enable meaningful engagement. In short, engagement for real means that, if we can give people more power over their own and their communities’ futures, then we are building capacity for community members to step up in times of crisis and not wait for government intervention.

QUESTIONS

- What could engagement at the “collaborate” or “empower” level look like in Vancouver over the long term?
- What steps can we take within our own spheres of influence to provide engagement opportunities where participants become the agents of neighbourhood economic, social, cultural and environmental well being?
- How can we better design and resource our engagement efforts to meaningfully include and respect our diverse communities? That is how do we combine ‘Engagement for Real’ with ‘A City for All’?

Background Paper on Engagement for Real is one of a series of papers prepared for Shaping Resilience: A Summit on Resilience and Vancouver’s Future. This paper has been prepared by Daniella Ferguson, a Commissioner on the Vancouver City Planning Commission.