WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL AND FULFILLING COLLABORATIONS IN RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

RESULTS FROM AN OPEN SPACE EVENT HOSTED BY TRANSITION GUELPH
On Tuesday June 10th, Transition Guelph held an Open Space event aimed at examining how we can make the move from a competitive model to a collaborative model in our community. The question we asked at the Open Space was

“How do we move from competition to collaboration to promote the local good that is happening in Guelph?”

We had some amazing discussions that covered topics from practical applications to dealing with emotions like fear to making sure the right people are at the table.

The information below is a summary of the discussions that happened at the Open Space; we hope that you will find it useful when looking towards future collaborations in your life, community, or business.
CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL AND FULFILLING COLLABORATIONS IN RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

1. AIM FOR DIVERSITY IN YOUR GROUP, BUSINESS, OR ORGANIZATION
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Diversity can have many faces. Some different demographics to consider are race, ethnicity, income, age, gender, and culture. Your group can benefit from having different perspectives in almost any conversation: more diversity means that you have a wider perspective and the ability to consider perspectives that otherwise might be forgotten, ignored, or silenced.

Creating events and programs collaboratively with diverse groups is a great way to get people involved with your activities. When planning events, make sure to reach out to a wide range of organizations. Look for organizations that already represent a specific demographic in your community and take the time to invite them personally to contribute or attend. If you can form a relationship with key members of a group that represents a specific demographic, ask them for their perspective early in the planning stages.

Representatives from different cultural backgrounds may be able to inform how you plan or structure your activities to reach members of those demographic groups.

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Ultimately, having a wider perspective through diversity in your organization can help inform the planning of your activities and ideas to be more successful with a wider range of people.
2. ENSURE THAT KEY CHANGEMAKERS ARE AWARE
Every community has them: the people who love seeing positive change happen. They are usually connectors of hubs, partners with many groups and organizations, and are often called upon when new initiatives are looking for support. In our city of Guelph, Ontario, we have changemakers in abundance. A recent mixer event focusing on good work that is being done locally sold out and was attended by small business owners, non profits, local government, and more.

Not only can changemakers give great perspective and draw from experience, but they can also connect you to other people who you want at the table. They’ll be able to help promote your events, market your products, and also draw in potential partners during the planning phase.

Who are the changemakers in your community and how can you connect with them? If you’re collaborating in a specific industry, look for the people whose names get passed around at industry events, check websites of local business organizations, or even consider calling local organizations for their recommendations on who to get in touch with. Once you find out who the people are that you want involved, make sure you reach out to them personally. Suggest grabbing a coffee or tea or chatting over lunch. When you see them out in the community, take the time to say hello. One-on-one, in person communication can help build strong relationships better than electronic or non-personal communication. Forming those personal relationships will make a lasting impression.

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3. Ensure that resource use supports local economy or ethical sourcing of goods; consider the supply and value chains of resources used.
When looking at a local activity, there are often ways to contribute towards and increase the local economy and local business that may not be apparent at first glance. Whether you are running an event, creating a product, developing a technology, or supporting a group, staying local can have a huge benefit for your organization and your community.

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By spending locally, you are putting money back into your community. Look for local businesses and locally sourced goods. Look at the supply and value chains of goods and services used in your project. This is a great way to increase resiliency in your area, and other businesses and organizations will take note of your special efforts! Talk to others about their experiences and find out if they know where to source resources locally. Are there organizations in your community that can help you source fair trade? Check with them before making purchases or spending resources. Is there a business that focuses on ethically sourced goods? On local supplies? Start building relationships that can help you in the future as well.

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4. MAKE CERTAIN THAT COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES ARE FILLING THE NEED OF THE COMMUNITY
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Before planning an event or new program that you think would be a great candidate for collaboration, make sure that you do your research. In some cases, the needs of the community that you are trying to serve may not match what you have planned. By going into the community and researching needs directly, you will have the opportunity to connect with the people you are hoping to serve. Forming those relationships early on in the planning process will not only give you first hand information from and about members of the community, but will also set the stage for future contact when you are looking for champions to help promote your event or program in the future.

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5. DESIGN MEASURES FOR TRACKING PROGRESS
Think about what your collaborative activity seeks to accomplish. Are you trying to reach a new demographic? Are you looking for ideas? Are you trying to raise funds? Whatever your goals might be, one way to track your progress is to have measurable results that you can examine and share. Think detail-oriented for a moment rather than big picture. Are you trying to raise $100 or $1000? Can you put a number on the new contacts you’d like to make? Is it 15 people? Maybe 50? By including numbers and specific details in your description of goals and desired outcomes, it will be possible for you to evaluate your actions and revise future goals according to the results.

Along with measurable goals, it’s important to set aside time for reflection and analysis to see how your collaborative activity is working. How are people feeling about the progress (or, potentially, lack of progress!) that is being made.

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Whether you are running a one-time event, a series of events, or implementing long term programming, revisiting your goals on a regular basis is important to keep you on track and focused.
6. PLAN FOR ADEQUATE RESOURCES TO IMPLEMENT RESULTS
Collaborative activities are often a great way to get a number of different perspectives and possible solutions to a big picture problem. In many cases, the idea of “dreaming big” or “thinking outside the box” is encouraged to help find new ways to address a communal concern. The result of this approach can often be some very inventive solutions that might not have come to light had there not been a wide diversity of groups and organizations represented at the table. When examining the feasibility of implementing the results, remember to include the resources available to you (or not) in your planning. Do you have a lot of volunteers but not a lot of money?

Are you working with a large budget, but missing key people to get things done? Planning for what resources you have available will set you up well for the time when you start implementing results.

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7. BE AWARE THAT CHANGING PARADIGMS IS HARD
The need for a change in personal perspective in moving from a competitive to collaborative model when doing business came up in discussion often at the Open Space event. For many people, competition is a concept we are taught early in life and drilled into us as we choose a career, enter the workforce, and strive to succeed. Changing models to a collaborative ideal can not only be challenging, but also frightening for many of us who have operated in the competitive mind frame for much of our lives.

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Preparing yourself with knowledge about how the collaboration will benefit all parties involved will go along way towards conveying your message clearly. Be aware that some might not understand the benefit of collaborative activities at first glance. You may have to make the case for the importance of collaboration in business terms. You may also have to walk away from what you think might be a great partnership if collaborative activities aren’t working for all parties. Changing the model of how we do business and work together isn’t going to happen overnight.

What can you do? Be patient, understanding and open-minded; listen so that everyone feels heard. Be aware that change is hard and takes time. Don’t back down at the first signs of discomfort, but also know that not every effort will result in what you hope or expect. Honour that collaboration is hard work!

Whether you are in full collaborative swing or just proposing your first collaborative activities with other businesses and organizations in your community, be ready to face some skepticism.
Overall, collaborative activities can help communities become more resilient and more successful. As a society, we hope that more organizations, businesses, and individuals can start shifting the way they think about competition and collaboration to see the benefits of working *together* rather than competing against each other. Whether the competition is over people’s time, attention, or money, we believe that there are ways that we can work together that will benefit everyone in the long term. We hope that these ideas help your collaborative activities in the future!

*Presented by Transition Guelph.*
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