

CAPACITY BUILDING AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

More than a dress rehearsal...



BC Healthy Communities
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In a recent conversation, a colleague reported: “Our organization believes that quite enough time and effort has been spent on capacity building. Now we need to get down to work. Communities have built enough capacity. We’re ready to take action.” From this perspective, I realized, capacity building is something we do in preparation for something else. It’s like the dress rehearsal before the real show begins.

But life, we know, is not a dress rehearsal. Life unfolds moment by moment, and each moment is the real thing. And so we must live it as the real thing – with as much awareness, knowledge, purpose, and ethical action as we can muster in every moment. Awareness, knowledge, purpose and ethical action are human capacities that grow and change as we grow and change. They join a list of capacity building elements that are more commonly addressed: information, behaviours, skills, techniques, policies and infrastructure, and the always-in-short-supply capacities of funding, staffing and other helpful resources. Taken together, these capacities influence how rich and full a life we lead, and how we build healthy community. Like all capacities, we are challenged to keep growing them as life becomes more complex. There’s not much doubt that life is becoming more complex. For one thing, the fact that we’re now living in a global village requires us to examine everything in a larger context. But it’s also true that in small, seemingly homogeneous communities, life is also gaining in complexity. We see this, for example, in the ways that global markets influence local economies, which in turn influence local policy, job opportunities, and housing affordability. The complexity sciences teach that change is a fundamental pattern in all living systems. Human beings are excellent examples of living systems, and the history of human development is the history of growing complexity – physical, mental, cultural, and social. In fact research shows that, for humans at least, a failure to develop is a failure to thrive.



Two orders of change...

Development, of course, means change. Gregory Bateson¹ introduced us to the idea of two orders of change. With first order change, he explains, we can make adjustments to maintain or restore balance. But with first order change we continue to explain things in conventional ways – in other words, we continue to tell an old story. Our goal? To keep things more or less the

way they’ve always been. For example, faced with a health concern, my desire for renewed health will likely lead me to acquire pertinent information, gain a few new skills and techniques, and adopt new behaviours. But while my actions might change, my worldview need not. I can, for example, continue to view my body as a collection of somewhat separate parts, not recognizing that this elegant and complex system includes not merely my physical self but my mind as well. In an attempt to restore equilibrium to my body, I may be more than willing to adapt and adjust my behaviours. But I am not as ready to make the mental changes that will make a deeper difference. And the changes I do make are reversible – I can just as easily go back to my old ways.

¹ Bateson, Gregory. Mind and nature: A necessary unity (1970). New York: Dutton.

Second order change, on the other hand, asks that we not only do something differently, but that we shift our perspective as well. Thus, second order change involves a deeper level of learning. When second order change occurs, I see things in new ways. I begin to tell a new story – about myself, and the world around me. With new insights and an expanding worldview, I experience significant shifts in my assumptions and beliefs, my motivation, my sense of connectedness, and my sense of agency and influence. I now recognize how my health is influenced not only by my physical actions, but by my mindset, my culture, and my social surroundings. My relationship to my health has undergone a transformation: I not only see a bigger picture, but I understand the interconnectedness of each factor that affects my health. And I can act accordingly.



Here's another example. Most days now I hear something in the news about environmental concerns such as global warming and the depletion of non-renewable resources. Armed with this information, I am willing to adapt my behaviours. If we all do our small part, I explain, the earth will have a chance to rebalance and renew. And so I recycle. I'm careful with my water consumption. I ride my bike to work, and lobby for bicycle paths. But each of these behaviours is reversible; I can stop at any time. This is change of the first order. Second order change runs deeper. It goes to the very heart of who I am, and how I live in the world. As my mental models expand to acknowledge the systemic nature of ecological connectivity, it changes the way I think about myself in relationship to my environment. This new awareness is reflected in my actions; I act with the knowledge that everything I do has an effect on the world around me. I begin to recognize interconnections among factors I once considered separately. I note, for example, how the environment is intrinsically linked with the economy, and how the economy is intrinsically linked with the psychological and spiritual well-being of community members. With an expanded worldview, I recognize how our cultural and social structures can support or diminish each of these essential determinants of health, well-being and healthy development. This broadened awareness is my new story, shaping my experiences and my actions.

Telling the New Story

To build healthier communities in BC, we need to set our sights on second-order, transformative change. We need to expand capacities on every front: our thinking, our knowledge, our commitment, our relationships, our resources, our partnerships, and our activities. We need to season this capacity building with a generous sprinkling of learning, and a ladle-full of collaborative action. And, importantly, we must codify our growing capacity within healthy public policy.

In my experience, much of the change we make in communities is first order change. It adjusts and rebalances, but it does not transform. Sometimes adjustment and rebalancing is just what is needed. But it often falls far short of the mark. The building of healthy community requires that we pay equal attention to both types of change.

Building Capacity for Real Change Having set our sights on second order change, let's revisit the notion that capacity building is a forerunner for concrete action. In my view, capacity building doesn't precede action – it includes action. This is reflected in the Healthy Communities Approach: Integral Capacity Building Framework. With a four-fold focus on learning, engagement, asset building and collaboration, this framework addresses multiple aspects of capacity building.

In this approach, learning is action. Engagement is action. Expanding assets is action. And collaboration is action. Seen this way, capacity building isn't a prelude to action – it's the way we take action. Mindful action. Informed action. And it's the way we make action as effective and sustainable as it can possibly be. Seen in this light, capacity building isn't something we do from time to time. It's certainly not "what we did last year, in preparation for our next great project." In fact, capacity building is more than what we do – it's also what we be. Capacity building is a mindset as much as an activity. As community capacity builders we are committed to being active learners, active participants, active asset builders and active collaborators - at all times, in all contexts. With a capacity building mindset, we call forth community potentials, nurturing excellence, expansion and positive change in all areas of community experience: social, environmental, economic, physical, psychological, spiritual, and cultural. With a capacity building mindset we are more likely to make change that is effective and sustainable.

For more information see www.bchealthycommunities.ca or call 1-888-356-0892.



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Questions for reflection:

1. What are your experiences with first order change? In yourself? In your organization? In your community?
2. What are your experiences with second order, transformational change? In yourself? In your organization? In your community?
3. How can the BC Healthy Communities Capacity Building Framework support second-order, transformational change? In yourself? Your organization? Your community?

Additional Reading:

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Senge, P., Scharmer, C.O., Jaworski, J. and Flowers, B.S. (2004) *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, organizations and society*. Cambridge, MA: The Society for Organizational Learning, Inc.

Wilber, Ken. *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution* (2000). Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc.