From consultation to participatory engagement: a concept paper and design plan for creating ownership and activating leaders in community engagement initiatives

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There are essentially two paths to finding out what people think of a new set of ideas: engagement that seeks to simply reform the status quo, or participatory community engagement that leads to a transformational shift in the status quo. The first requires only that the system itself (composed of a consulting body,, stakeholders, ideas and resources) be brought together to comment, collaborate, or plan about existing models of public service. The second requires much deeper exploration, introducing new mental models, completely new ways of doing business and transforming stakeholders to co-creators.

Most forms of community engagement practiced in the public sector are incremental and seek only to initiate small scale change. These include consultation on changing programs and services, refinements to existing structures of government or creating new initiatives in line with a government's stated policy objectives. Governments in general are loath to change much about the fundamentals of public service delivery. Large scale change is risky. With a high chance of failure, political capital can wither away as well. So most governments, even as they champion reform-based agendas, rarely undertake truly transformational shifts in their ways of doing business.

In recent history is British Columbia only a few truly transformation shifts in public policy have occurred. These might be said to include:

- Creation of the treaty process and the subsequent rights and reconciliation agenda. Still very much a work in progress, these new ways of working with First Nations completely overturned the ways in which provincial government had dealt with indigenous issues. Starting in 1973 and moving through a series of court cases culminating in the 1999 *Haida/Taku* ruling, the provincial government was forced to respond to the reality that First Nations' rights and title were active in the legal landscape and posed a significant threat to the government's status quo with respect to resources, land use and citizenship. Undertaking this process required a mind shift in government and a different approach to working with First Nations not only as stakeholders but as co-owners of lands and resources.
- Electoral reform. Following the election of the Liberal government in 2001, a citizen's based electoral reform commission was established. It drew a man and woman at random from the voter's lists of every riding in the province and set them to work studying and making recommendations about a new form of electoral process in British Columbia. They reported in 2006 and a new system was placed on the ballot as a referendum question. It failed by the narrowest of margins. Again in this case, transformational change involved a group of stakeholders being given the responsibility to redesign the system, and required a massive shift in mental models to even

conceive of the new system, let alone reach consensus on it's implementation.

When we are initiating public policy change initiatives we have a choice. Most of the work done in First Nations child and family services and education requires a fundamental shift in mental models because non-indigenous models of child rearing, education, learning and family and community support are at odds with indigenous models. In order to effect transformational and meaningful change in First Nations communities, both indigenous and non-indigenous governments must work at transforming their mental models of not only education and learning, but also HOW change is effected and how leadership can be different.

This paper provides a road map for transformational community engagement that seeks to shift the mental models that underlie so much policy and programming directed at First Nations communities. It must be remembered that these mental models are held not only by non-indigenous governments and organizations but by indigenous ones as well. The legacy of colonization is that we often make ourselves appear in the forms of the colonizer in order to work with the colonizer. Transformative change in First Nations communities requires the opposite to happen.

A word on mental models

Mental models are those frames of reference that define our thinking and how we view the world. They are frames that we take for granted, and to view or own mental models is a bit like trying to see the colour of our own eyes without a mirror. Our mental models inform everything we do and many clashes of ideas between indigenous and non-indigenous organizations can be traced to misunderstandings of mental models, both of our own and of the other.

For example, an overwhelming mental model in non-indigenous society is that of scientific materialism. Over the past 450 years in European society, scientific materialism has brought a worldview that has privileged what can be objectively known and proven through empirical methods. Things only have reality if they can be studied objectively. If a thing can be measured, it can be managed. This has proved very useful in understanding the world from a scientific point of view but it has done a great disservice to what is invisible to the eye: namely culture and values. Scientific materialism equates culture and values with collective and individuals behaviours (you can know a people by studying their ceremonies and songs, you can know a person by watching what they do). Such objective analysis results in tragic misunderstandings. For example, missionaries who watched the potlatch in action saw only the distribution of wealth and felt the affront of capitalist notions of property, frugality and hard work and had the ceremony banned. Of course, potlatching societies use the these ceremonies to practice a wide range of important cultural and governmental duties including governance, social services, religion, law and order, resource management, and community planning. Perhaps missionaries knew this, but most stated accounts discussed the visible and measurable effects of the potlatch, and this empirical methodology resulted in the wrong conclusion about what was good for a people.

Similarly on the individual level, a person's values are not synonymous with their behaviours.
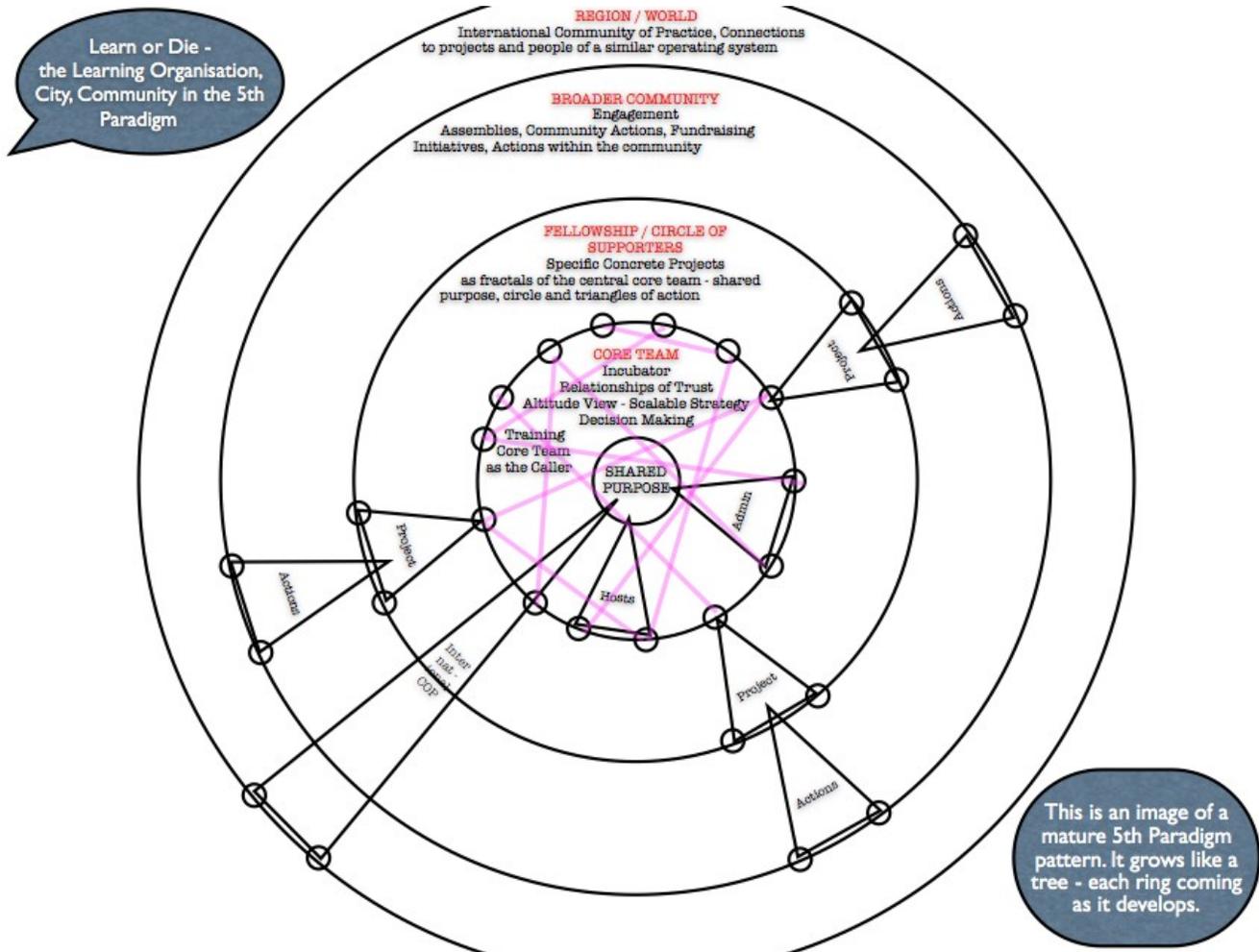
Many First Nations people have experienced the results of this false assumption in the world of social work for example, where children are routinely removed from a home because a social worker draws conclusions about a parent's values based on the state of their house. In education a child's inability to learn in a classroom setting often leads to that child being diagnosed with a learning disability, labeled as having a problem and being medicated, punished or expelled. The fact is that many children learn in many different ways and a child who is fidgety in class may not be bored, but may in fact be actively processing learning using the limited kinesthetic tools available in the environment. Put that child in a place where moving around is welcome, and the learning accelerates.

Human beings are very skillful at convincing themselves that their worldview is not only correct but is indeed the only way to see the world. For transformational change to occur, mental models must be questioned. Leaving mental models and worldviews unexamined results in a more superficial engagement with change.

In the context of policy change with respect to children and families, moving from a system that is a legacy of colonization to one that re-establishes a set of holistic indigenous values in which children are sacred is a huge shift for non-indigenous society to make. The challenge here is to engage partners in a true understanding of the values and beliefs that underlie the proposed framework because those values represent a powerful worldview. It does no good to simply pass over those things with some tacit agreement and assumptions about what they mean if transformational change is desired. To do so will simply result in surface level reforms being dressed in language but not fundamentally affected by change. To engage people therefore starts with this work and proceeds from there.

Community engagement to undertake this shift requires engaging on new ideas and engaging in new ways that are in line with the values. This means implementing a holistic community engagement strategy that is rooted in First Nations ways of knowing.

Introducing the fifth paradigm of organizing

Learn or Die - the Learning Organisation, City, Community in the 5th Paradigm

This is an image of a mature 5th Paradigm pattern. It grows like a tree - each ring coming as it develops.

This diagram, developed by the Art of Hosting community of practice, shows a healthy, integrated and robust picture of engaged organizational practice. At the centre lies the shared purpose of an initiative around which sits the first ring of the core team. The core team members both steward the core shared purpose and help catalyse and lead "action triangles" that reach out into the community of stakeholders and the wider world to make projects happen that activate the purpose held at the centre.

The reason this is called the fifth paradigm is that it builds on four traditional human paradigms for organizing:

- The CIRCLE which is a powerful structure for reflection and cultivating a shared centre and for sharing leadership equally.

- The TRIANGLE, which is the basis of

Organizational Paradigms
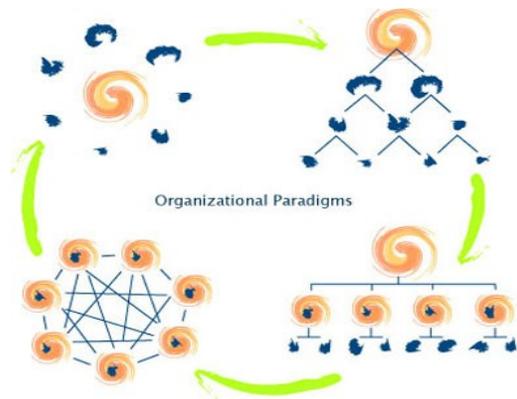
hierarchy and is an efficient way of moving to action by having a leader who sees the bigger vision and the core purpose and several supporters or helpers who can carry out a project.

- The BUREAUCRACY which, when it is functioning well, flows resources from the centre to all of the parts of the system, like an irrigation system that ensures that every field has enough water. In exchange for resources, lower levels in the system provide accountability up to the top. Bureaucracies slow down action, which can be a problem if they run rampant, but which is generally a good thing to ensure that action does not move too fast.

- The NETWORK which is the emerging form of human organizing. We are all now connected in myriad ways to one another and to others around the world and this affords us access to resources, ideas and support from previously unknown sources.

The fifth paradigm blends all of these models together in a way that can hold an initiative together as the work goes to scale.

## *Beginning with shared purpose*

"Purpose is the invisible leader" - Toke Moeller.

Engagement for systemic change requires that the system that is to be changed can be present at the beginning of the process. As much as possible a shared vision and purpose is one that will be sustainable over time because it invites all the active members of a system to co-own the vision and share the responsibility for translating that vision into meaningful change.

Purpose creates energy. As we discover what our purpose is we discover passion for our cause. This passion and energy can keep us in the work during hard times when we hit seemingly insurmountable walls in our work. Because of the energy created by a strong purpose, it is important to share it as early as possible in a process so that parts of the system don't risk being alienated or left behind from a passionate core team that makes great strides at the expense of inclusivity and trust.

A shared purpose co-owned by a committed and diverse core team can be the core that transforms a system. A purpose that is held by only one part of the system can create passionate conflict as people advocate for their desired future and are met with resistance to change. The challenge then is to design a process that involves as complete a cross-section of the system itself to learn together about how to transform the system. Moving from a shared vision to real tangible transformation can happen very quickly, but there are a few critical steps on the path that need attention:

Critical steps in the engagement process
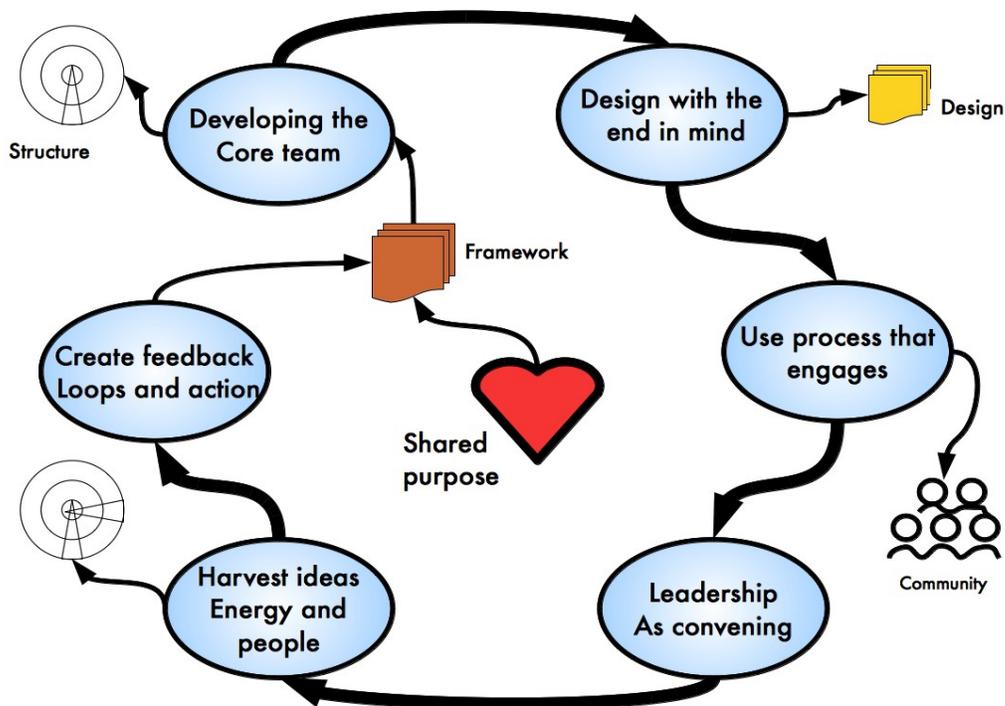
Developing or expanding a core team

The core of the work is very important in systemic change. What happens at the core translates out through the levels of work of engagement. Values, intentions and practices are held here, and it is important to hold these with integrity. For example if a core belief is around the sacredness of children, the core team must embody that value. How is sacredness brought into the process of working together? The core team must deeply embody the change it wants to see. If the change involves shifting a system, the core team must lead the way in shifting its own system in the direction in which it wants to change.

What is held at the centre of the work is not simply the values, beliefs and visions, but the centre becomes a place to practice these on a systemic level, even with a small group.

The work of the core team is three fold. First it is to hold the deep core of the work, the shared purpose and translate that into an invitation for action – in this case the framework. Second it is to learn about and incorporate new ways of doing things, and to lead the way in this learning. . Third it is to pay attention to relationships between people in the system to create a system of accountability that is based on trust and respect. This is by far the most

sustainable form of accountability in human systems.

The core team is a place of practice based on principles.

Begin the design process in earnest, and start with the ends in mind.

In planning large scale processes, I use a tool called the "chaordic stepping stones" to help design a process that can hold large amounts of uncertainty and complexity while still staying true to a central purpose. As you begin to design the engagement strategy work through the following questions and processes, remembering that the engagement process is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. This process produces a design, and an engagement plan including:
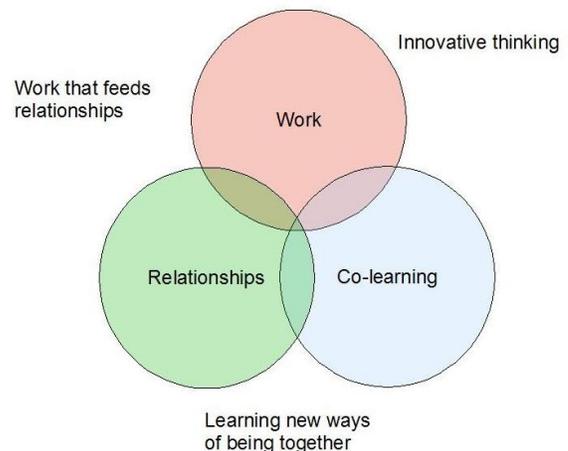
- material for invitations (derived from the **need, purpose, principles and people** conversations)
- participatory process that generates new thinking (derived from the **limiting beliefs, concept and structure** conversations)
- a harvest and action plan that is useful and advances the shared purpose (derived from the **practice and harvest** conversations)

Need

The need is the compelling reason for doing anything. Sensing the need is the first step to designing a meeting, organizational structure or engagement initiative that is relevant. The need is outside of our work: it is the thing that is served by the work you are doing.

- What time is it in the world now ?
- What time is it for our initiative now ?
- What are the challenges and opportunities we are facing ?
- What do I really need to be able to understand and work on in the world?
- What is the need that this project can uniquely meet?

Purpose

From the need flows the purpose. Purpose statements are clear and compelling and the guide us in doing our best possible work.

- If this work should live up to its fullest potential, what do you dream (or vision) is possible?
- What is the purpose we can adopt that will best meet the need?
- What could this work do/create/inspire?
- What is the next level for the for our work? Where should we be heading?
- What is the simplest and most powerful question we could keep at the core of our work?

Principles

Principles of cooperation help us to know how we will work together. It is very important that these principles be simple, co-owned and well understood. These are not principles that are platitudes or that lie on a page somewhere. They are crisp statements of how we agree to operate together so that over the long term we can sustain the relationships that make this work possible.

- What are the principles we want to enact at for our learning networks?
- What is it important to remember about how we want to work with the participants in our initiative?
- What do we think is most important to remember as we design to meet the need and purpose?
- What unique ways of doing work and being together can we bring to this work.
- If our team should live up to its fullest potential - what do you dream (or vision) possible for this team?
- What would it look like if we put our guiding principles into practice in an everyday fashion?

People

Once the need and the purpose are in the place and we have agreed on our principles of co-operation, we can begin to identify the people that are involved in our work. Mapping the network helps us to see who is in this work for us and who will have an interest in what we are doing. This is where we can begin to see who to invite in to the engagement process

- Who is in the room?
- Who is not in the room and how do we bring them in?
- How do we leverage relationships to propagate the ideas generated by our work together?
- Who will be interested in the results of our work?
- Who will need to be on board for our work to be successful and sustainable over the long run?

Concept

As we move to a more concrete idea of what our structures are, we begin to explore the concepts that will be useful. This is a high level look at the shape of our endeavour. For example, if our need was to design a way to cross a body of water, we could choose a bridge, a causeway or a ferry. The concept is important, because it gives form to very different structures for doing our work.

In our work together we might explore here the different kinds of structures including circles and networks and really understand what these are, how the operate, how they are embedded with various contexts and cultures and what implications each has for our work.

- What are the shapes that we might choose for our work?
- What is the deeper pattern of our work and what organizational forms are in alignment with that?
- How might we activate our principles to best do our work?

Limiting beliefs

So much of what we do when we organize ourselves is based on unquestioned models of behaviour. These patterns can be helpful but they can also limit us in fulfilling our true potential. We cannot create innovation in the world using old models and approaches. It pays to examine ways in which we assume work gets done in order to discover the new ways that might serve work with new results. Engaging in this work together brings us into a co-creative working relationship, where we can help each other into new and powerful ways of working together, alleviating the fear and anxiety of the unknown.

- What makes us tremble, and what do we fear about new ways of working together?

- Who would we be without our stories of old ways of working?

- What will it take for us to fully enter into working in new and unfamiliar ways?

- What is our own learning edge in working together?

- What do you need from our core team to feel supported in the places that make you anxious?

Structure

Once the concept has been chosen, it is time to create the structure that will channel our resources. It is in these conversations that we make decisions about the resources of the group: time, money, energy, commitment, and attention.

- Who are we becoming when we meet and work together this way?

- How do we support the aspirations of the group?

- What is the lightest structure that will serve our purpose and need?

- What role might the Core team play when the project is over?

- How do we wisely combine the various organizational concepts to support our work and sustain the results?

When we get to the point of designing engagement meetings, we can chart our process out using a simple table to ensure that the integrity of the design is fully incorporated:

Time/Day	Need/Purpose	Activity	Harvest	Notes

It is important that every item on an agenda have a connection to the core purpose of the initiative and that it produce a harvest, even if the harvest is something intangible such as "participants get to know each other."

Practice

The ongoing practice within the structures we build is important. This is the world of to do lists, conference calls and email exchanges. The invitation here is to practice working with one another in alignment with the designs we have created.

- What do we need to do to sustain our work together?

- What is our own practice of working in networks?

- How do we extend the spirit of the gathering into future asynchronous environments where we can't be face to face?

- How do we leverage relationships and support the work that arises from them?

- How do we sustain and nourish our relationships and collective aspirations?

- What commitments are we willing to make to contribute to the success of our endeavour?

Harvest

There is no point in doing work in the world unless we plan to harvest the fruits of our labours. Harvesting includes making meaning of our work, telling the story and feeding forward our results so that they have the desired impacts in the world.

- What are the forms of harvest from our work that best serves the need?

- What intentional harvest will serve our purpose?

- What are the artefacts that will be the most powerful representations of what we have created?

- How will we carry the DNA of the our work forward?

- What are the feedback loops that we need to design to ensure that learning and change accelerates itself?

- How will we stay open to emergent learning?

- What are the questions we need to carry about what we are learning by meeting this way?

These conversations are important to have up front to draft a design for the process that is based in the need, focused on the harvest and connected to the shared purpose.

Invite others to engage beyond downloading

One of the biggest challenges with engagement processes based on the consultation model is failing to actually engage people in the work. For systemic change to take hold two things must happen in the engagement process. The first is that new ideas need to emerge and the second is that new leadership needs to come forward. Failure to do either of these things will stall a change initiative as ideas bog down in what we already know or stakeholders fail to become interested in the work to the point of actually supporting it. The sign of a vibrant change initiative is having people move in from the edges to the core team, coming closer to the core purpose of the initiative and taking more and more responsibility for seeing it through.

Writing about the change theory of Otto Scharmer called Theory U, Joe Bartmann has captured the kinds of listening that need to take place to truly move beyond existing mental models and create new, as yet unknown futures:

> Listening isn't quite as simple as just sitting down while someone else is talking to you. We've all had a conversation with someone when it feels like they aren't really there with us, and we've all drifted off somewhere else when we were meaning to really listen to someone, right? Below is a concept of four deepening levels of listening outlined by C. Otto Scharmer in his book about the U Process.
>
> Level 1: This is the way, unfortunately, I believe most "listening" takes place. Level one is really not listening at all, it's reacting from old habits and mental models. It's when we're thinking about what we want to say next instead of listening to the other person. Level one is like downloading old ideas and habits of judgment from some database in our heads, reconfirming old opinions and positions.
>
> Level 2: If Level One downloading is really being stuck inside ourselves and our old ideas, the next level is like stepping outside to the edge of yourself, and observing what's really going on. The difference is being open-minded enough to see new data, see more of the picture. This level isn't too hard to reach.

Level 3: Taking another step deeper into listening is like observing from within the person you are listening to. It's opening your heart enough to see through another's eyes, to see and hear what they see and hear. It's a major shift in perspective.

Level 4: The fourth, quite radical level of listening that Scharmer proposes is more tricky to explain, and achieve. It's listening from a different 'source,' a place where you open your spirit and will to let the future emerge through you. It's not really about what you hear another person say, but more about trusting the inner knowing that bubbles up inside you from somewhere.

Most consultation happens at the level of "downloading": where the participants in a process simply unload what they think. Meetings structured for downloading include brainstorming sessions, and other tools, including surveys, only tell us what people know. In the context of an engagement meeting, this kind of talk is unproductive because it does not lead to participants working together to discover solutions and ideas that are emergent. One core purpose of an engagement process is to discover together what is new, how we bring a new system into being.

This requires us to practice participatory meeting methods that reflect three activities of work, co-learning and relationship building outlined above and that result in truly creative talking and listening. Processes such as Open Space Technology, World Cafe, PeerSpirit Circle, and Appreciative Inquiry are well known processes for channeling leadership, story, relationships and creativity into discovering emergent learning and new forms of public policy.

Move to practicing leadership as convening.

Once the engagement process is in full swing, the role of the core team becomes to provide leadership through continuing to convene stakeholders. In the context of this work, this might mean that the core team brings together government, community and First Nations organizations on a regular basis to share what they are learning in the engagement process and to create a series of learning feedback loops for beginning to initiate changes to the mental models and program structures of ECD programming. It means continually feeding the learning from the process back into the system, to improve the framework, build the implementation plans and invite more and more people to become committed to making the change.

From his book Community: The Structure of Belonging, here is Peter Block on leadership as convening:

The shift is to believe that the task of leadership is to provide context and produce engagement, to tend to our social fabric. It is to see the leader as one whose function is to engage groups of people in a way that creates accountability and commitment .... Convening leaders create and manage the social space within which citizens get deeply engaged .... Engagement, and the accountability that grows out of it, occurs when we ask people to be in charge of their own experience and act on the well-being of the whole. To do this leaders must:

- Create a context that nurtures an alternative future, one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment.
- Initiate and convene conversations that shift people's experience, which occurs

through the way people are brought together and the nature of the questions used to engage them.
- Listen and pay attention.

As the project unfolds, convening strategic conversations becomes important as does supporting the emerging leaders that appear in the engagement. Some of these leaders will become important members of the core team, some will be important stakeholders or become crucial for implementation. Paying attention to the emerging leadership is a critical task of the core team as the engagement process unfolds.

Harvest ideas, energy and leadership but hold the core.

Just as important as designing the process for participatory engagement is the imperative to be clear what you are harvesting from the effort. Harvesting refers to taking what has value from the process. In many consultation processes and participatory meetings, a huge amount of information is generated. Without a framework for making sense of the harvest of an engagement process, you are left with a meaningless and incoherent collection of words and ideas.

In the case of the ECD framework engagement, harvesting ideas from the process can result in refinements to the framework, tactics for seeking policy and systemic change, prototyping new ideas and concepts and creating and implementation plan. It is important to know the harvesting purpose of every engagement event so that you can make a precise application of what is learned. A series of open and general community meetings may generate awareness, but the harvest will be too diffuse to be practical. Better to design workshops aimed at learning specific things, asking specific questions and co-discovering new ways forward around specific needs.

Just as participation can be a key part of the engagement process, so too can it be a part of harvesting. Relying on a group of participants themselves to help make sense of the data gives a fuller perspective to the work and creates a strong sense of co-ownership and commitment to the results.

At it's most basic level a process for participatory harvest might look like this:

1. Collect data in meetings from flipcharts, participant notes and other methods.
2. Collate the information into a document.
3. Solicit volunteers from the group of participants to work with the material.
4. Prepare a set of questions to help guide your inquiry of the material. The questions need to relate to the core shared purpose of the process, and so should be developed by the core team. Basic questions work best, such as: what patterns do we see in the data? What great ideas are contained in these documents? What action steps and recommendations do you see?
5. Circulate data and questions to the volunteers and give them time to read and note their answers.
6. Convene a meeting to discuss the findings and produce a summary of the data which is then shared with participants from throughout the engagement process.

Harvesting data is important but harvesting this next level of leadership and involvement is also important. People that participate in these meaning-making processes often become core champions of the work and many will join the core team. In that way the energy of the process is brought into the core and leadership and capacity grows.

Develop feed back loops and action triangles connected to the core

Finally, the last stage of an participatory engagement process is to ensure that you have built feedback loops into the process so that ideas and leadership can be fed back into the framework and the actions that spring from the engagement can unfold co-led with leaders from the community who have been a part of the collaborative development process. Feed back loops include communications, sharing ideas with community as well as building future iterations of the frameworks and action plans which change as you repeat the cycles and continue to explore and learn new ways of shifting the system.

Connecting action to the core means inviting emerging leadership to join the core team and steward the core and to create action triangles which help to implement the vision and the framework. Some of these actions will be tactical, some administrative and some will focus on prototyping, piloting and designing new services from which the community can learn more and more.

The process is iterative and cyclical and repeats over time so that the work and learning that goes on is supported by strong relationships and is connected to the core.

Conclusion

Participatory community engagement is not efficient – it focuses on developing work, relationships and learning simultaneously. It results in transformative shift over time – it is the architecture of truly transformation movements – and it produces results and ideas that are surprising, emergent and co-owned by the community. They are therefore sustainable over time.

Participatory community engagement does not proceed along a critical path which narrows options. Rather it seeks to create a variety of wise action, to strengthen what works and learn from what fails. It needs and ongoing shift in the way community is invited, engaged and included in the work, it needs a strong core team that can hold the practices and principles of the core and it needs a learning and experimental environment that accepts the uncertainty of the work but supports the higher shared purpose.

In short it is a framework for sustaining learning over time and improving outcomes in an ever spiralling cycle of improvement and engagement.