HARWOOD
The Institute for Public Innovation

Aligning Your Work to Your Community

September 14, 2017

Authority: I can talk with people in the community I want to impact about their concerns, aspirations, and the issues they wrestle with and they would believe I understood them.

Aligning Your Work to Your Community

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What We'll Cover

- What we mean by aligning work to your community
- The ingredients that make up your community context
- Examples of good alignment
- "Tests" to help you get better alignment now

Alignment: Three Key Questions

- Do you understand the context of the community in which you're operating?

- Does your work take the community's context into consideration?

- Does your work deliberately help strengthen the conditions that will make the community work better?

The Community Context: Three Main Ingredients

- Public Knowledge
  - Shared aspirations, challenges, new conditions needed

- Community Conditions
  - Norms, networks, relationships, structures that make communities work

- Stage of Community Life
  - Waiting Place, Impasse, Catalytic, Growth, Sustain & Renew

Public Knowledge

- Public Knowledge
  - Shared aspirations, challenges, new conditions needed

Our Community

Caro Community Assessment

CASE STUDY :: PART 1
COMMUNITY ATTACKS SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A signature effort of the Community Trust has focused on the achievement gap of vulnerable children at the former Caroline Street Elementary School. There the Community Trust has sought not only to strengthen the elementary school, but to develop new afterschool programs and mobilize residents in hope of supporting all kids so they can succeed. Only 40% of students read at grade level and about one-third are proficient in math. The test scores of Anglo students are about 50% higher than those of Hispanic and African-Americans students. The graduation rate for the school-district as a whole is significantly below the state average, and the state average lags well behind the national average.

About a year into its work, the Community Trust learned that deep budget shortfalls in the city would lead to a number of school closings, including Caroline Street. The school was forced to merge with two other schools from adjacent neighborhoods, and together these three schools now feed into the new Division Street School. The other two schools also have experienced achievement gaps in reading, math and English.

A series of large town hall meetings were held across the three neighborhoods to listen to parents and residents. In the meetings parents demanded better schools, expressed worry about sending their kids to a bigger school farther away, and said that school leaders weren't listening to them. A recent citywide public opinion survey reported that the majority of parents were dissatisfied with their local schools.

In a recent local newspaper story, the school superintendent was quoted as saying: "We finally reached out to parents and residents and listened. I feel like we learned a lot and this was an important step forward for us. I hope other leaders in the community listen to what was learned."

First Alignment Test: Public Knowledge

- Does my work help realize people's shared aspirations in a meaningful way?

- Am I helping to address any of the challenges people raised?

- Could I be, and if so, how?

#turnoutward

Community Conditions

- How the community works (or doesn't work)
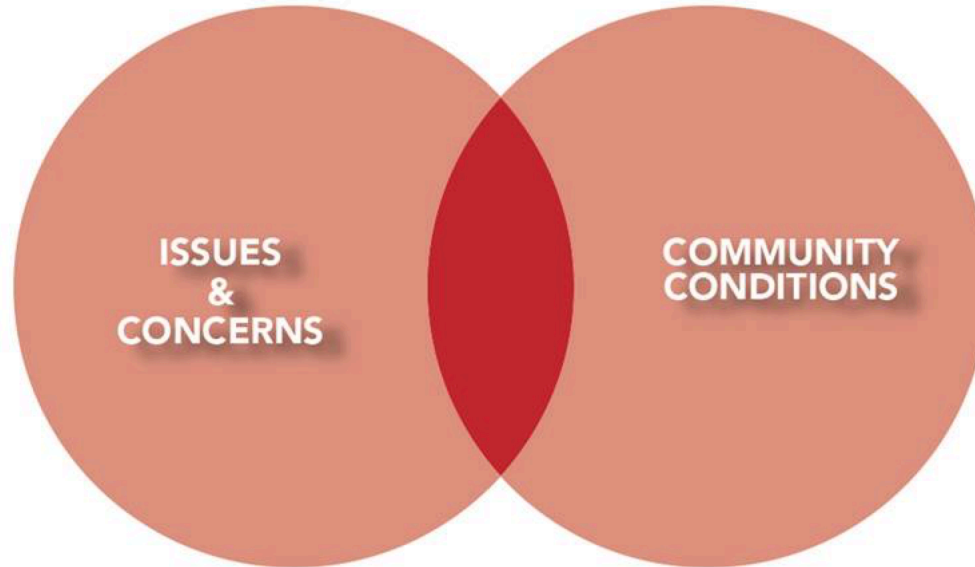
Key Community Conditions

Boundary Spanning Organizations – that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges and marshal a community's resources to move ahead.

Strong, Diverse Leadership – that extends to all layers of a community, understand the concerns of a community as a whole and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

Informal Networks and Links – that connect various individuals, groups, organizations and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages and community norms from place to place.

Community Norms for Public Life – that help guide how people act individually, interact and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.

Community Trust Case Study

1. Create an anti-bullying program at Division Street School …Information is sent out…

2. Identify classroom parent representatives to build stronger relationships …

3. Launch an afterschool program …

4. Develop computer literacy and ESL programs for parents…

5. Nurture community gardens …

6. Create a new parent association for the school that focuses on building relationships

7. Engage teachers at Division Street School to forge stronger relationships…

8. Start a new series of in person discussions among residents in the neighborhoods…
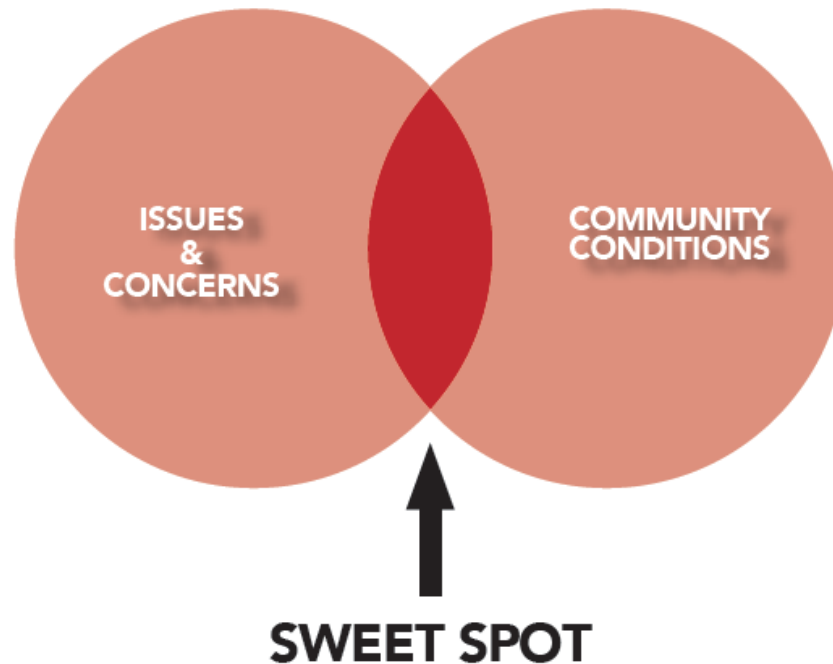
Abundance of Social Gatherings

Informational Networks & Links

Conscious Community Discussions

Organized Spaces for Interactions

Public Knowledge Will Teach You About Community Conditions

Our Community

Caro Community Assessment

The Spark

What kind of community do you want to live in? When is the last time you were asked that? Over the past five months, Caro Area District Library has asked this of many local residents. We want to know their aspirations, what they see as challenges to those goals, how we as a community could take action to achieve these goals, and who they trust to accomplish these things.

Why is the library asking these questions? By gathering public knowledge of the Caro community's aspirations, we can then design programs and services that aid the community in reaching those goals. The library's mission is to 'Cultivate Curiosity.' We want to cultivate a better community at the same time. Also, sharing is one of the fundamental principles of libraries. We will be sharing the public knowledge we have gathered through this process with as many other organizations in the greater community as we can. Then, they can all make decisions with the citizens' interests in mind. That is also why we are sharing this report with you. When we turn outward with our decision making, the whole community benefits.

We were lucky enough to receive a grant from the Library of Michigan and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, utilizing funds from the Institute for Museum and Library Services. The "Library Transforming Communities" program is nationally recognized by the American Library Association as a force for positive change within communities.

The Community

Over the course of 15 community conversations and several one-on-one interviews, we were able to compile public knowledge on the aspirations of the greater community. We spoke to more than 170 individuals about their goals for Caro. We wanted to make sure that we did not speak only to library users, so we made an effort to reach out to groups and individuals that we do not normally see here. The Caro community does not end at the city limits nor at the boundary of any particular township; therefore we did not limit participants by any specific geographic area. If they feel like they are part of the community, they were invited. Two particularly enlightening conversations were one we had with high school students and one we had with a K-8 group.

The Conversations

The Sweet Spot of Public Life

- Good work in the community addresses issues and improves conditions at the same time

ISSUES & CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CONDITIONS

SWEET SPOT

Alignment: Three Key Questions

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- Do you understand the context of the community in which you're operating?

- Does your work take the community's context into consideration?

- Does your work deliberately help strengthen the conditions that will make the community work better?

Second Alignment Test: Community Conditions

- How is my work helping to create the conditions needed in this community?

- How could I help address challenges people have raised in achieving their shared aspirations and address these conditions at the same time?

Community Rhythms: The Five Stages of Community Life
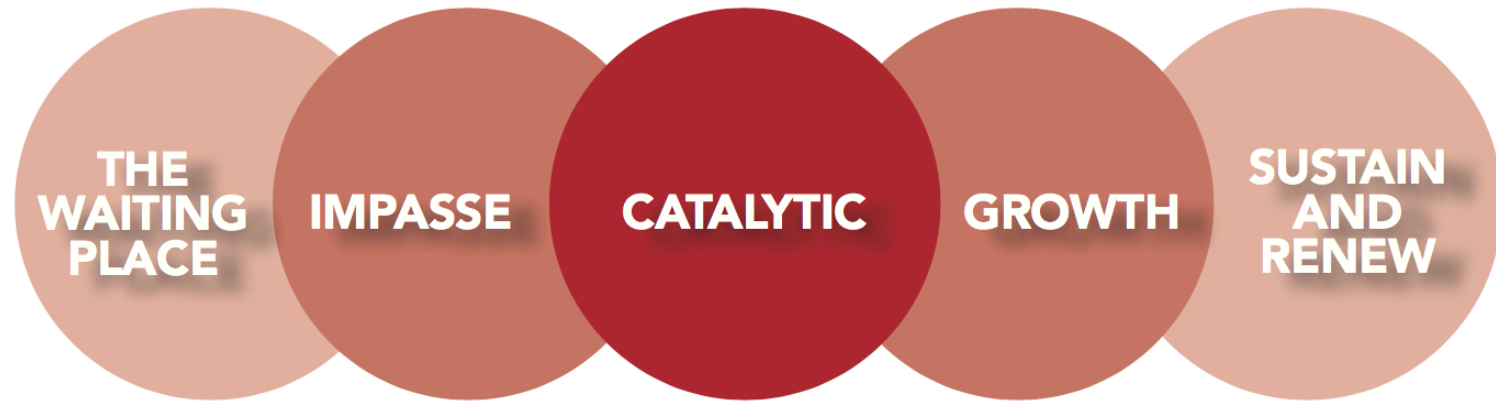
Your Stage Matters

STAGES OF COMMUNITY LIFE :: DO'S AND DON'TS

THE WAITING PLACE

Be Careful Not To
- Inflate expectations by announcing grand plans
- Start visioning exercises that fail or don't have enough community support for action
- Try to engage people by making them feel guilty they are not involved
- Rely on one-shot projects

What To Do
- Create forums for conversation and interaction where people feel they belong and crystallize feelings of frustration
- Connect community actions to realities in people's lives
- Demonstrate small signs of progress
- Keep working, despite feelings of limited progress

What To Think About
- Do you really know how committed your partners are?
- What small things could help us move forward?

IMPASSE

Be Careful Not To
- Inflate expectations by announcing grand plans
- Convince yourselves there are strong networks and organizations to support new civic work
- Shut out citizens because they are frustrated
- Try to develop action plans too quickly

What To Do
- Let people share their concerns and discover common aspirations for something different
- Identify taboo issues that contribute to impasse
- Find language that helps people imagine an alternative future
- Look for windows to pull people into small efforts

What To Think About
- What issues are citizens most immediately concerned about – are those issues being worked on?
- What is being done to bring people back into public life?

CATALYTIC

Be Careful Not To
- Coordinate activities too quickly, stifling innovation and action
- Rush to visioning exercises before the community is ready
- Do too much, too fast

What To Do
- Try lots of small things with room for failure, emphasize learning
- Build Boundary-Spanning Organizations that can generate change
- Encourage informal conversations, networks and new engagement norms
- Develop a new cadre of leaders
- Tell authentic stories of progress over time

What To Think About
- What is motivating folks to work together?
- Where are the Boundary-Spanning Organizations in the community? Who supports them?
- What are we learning?
- How do we know if our work is grounded in the community's aspirations?

GROWTH

Be Careful Not To
- Miss parts of the community left out of progress
- Let "official leaders" drive the action
- Neglect the need to continually strengthen networks, leaders and organizations that can keep the community moving forward
- Ignore underlying community issues

What To Do
- Use community-wide engagement activities to coalesce and spring forward from the Catalytic stage
- Do bigger projects, building on natural progress and collaborations that have come before
- Reinforce positive norms for working together and continue to develop Boundary-Spanning Organizations and new leaders

What To Think About
- Who is doing the hard work? Are citizens involved?
- Are new people getting involved in the efforts?
- How are the new efforts connected to the work done before?

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Third Alignment Test: Stage of Community Life

- Are you following the guidance for your stage? If not, how does your work need to shift?

- Are you focused on the right conditions given your stage? If not, what adjustments can you make?

Putting It All Together

1. Aligning your work to your community means knowing your community context and making sure your programs and strategies fit that context.

2. There are three main ingredients to knowing your community: Public knowledge, community conditions and Stage of Community Life.

3. Each of these by itself can help you get better alignment. Used together you can get even greater alignment.

4. Find opportunities for better alignment and act on them. Start where you can make progress now.

Making It Stick

Identify an opportunity you have to better align your work with the community.

1) Draw on the public knowledge you've gained already.

2) Identify the shared aspirations, challenges and the conditions that need to be addressed.

3) Identify in the next month at least one opportunity you have to better align your work to your community. Create something new or adjust something you are already doing.