
Strengthening Communities

A Series of Community Development Skills Guides

- ▶ Discovering Why Are We Here
- ▷ Living Our Values
- ▷ Thinking Creatively
- ▷ Making Choices
- ▷ Building Community Alliances
- ▷ Planning and Facilitating



Discovering Why We Are Here

A guide to help groups identify reasons for working together

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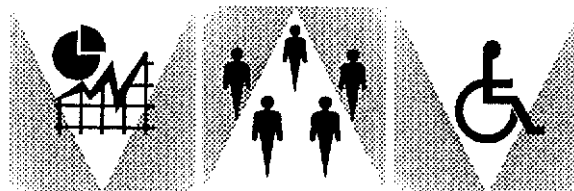
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**Social Planning and Research Council
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SPARC of B.C. is a provincial voluntary association which conducts research and planning and provides public information and education to help people cooperatively plan for the social well being of their communities. For this Guide series, SPARC has drawn from its more than 25 years of experience with community work.

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Before you begin...

What binds your group together?

How We Define Community

We don't. People do that themselves in the many ways they create communities — by getting to know neighbours, sharing common interests, joining different clubs and associations, taking classes, making friends at work, maintaining strong ties to extended families, and joining with one another to address an issue.

Can you describe your community development process?

How We See Community Development (CD)

Community development involves community people taking democratic control by participating in planning, bottom-up decision making, and community action. The process and outcomes of community development reflect common values, conflict and compromise, and the shifting of power to the community.

Have you talked about the values that guide your CD process?

Some Community Development Ground Rules

Community development is a way of working together based on shared concerns and respect for one another. Its values — equality, caring and sharing, social justice — guide what we do and how we do it.

Being welcoming (inclusive, open to others, friendly), sharing resources in an equitable (fair) way, being willing to compromise or reach consensus, basing decision-making in the community, and involving the public are all part of the community development process.

Do you take the time to think about the way you are doing your community development work, and why?

Learn While Doing

Community development involves action (doing), reflection (thinking about, talking about, and understanding what your group is doing) and action (doing it again but doing it better, with more understanding), and so on...

Opportunities for improving skills are often found during times of reflection.

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A word about using the Guide...

Plan your learning activity the way your group learns best. Some groups may just want to talk informally about the ideas in the Guide. Others may want to proceed in a more structured way. The *Planning and Facilitating Guide* has lots of useful ideas to help you plan.

The Guides are set up so that you can easily work through them in a logical and meaningful manner, simply following through the Guides section by section. It is probably a good idea to give everyone a copy of the Guide you are working with.

- ▶ Begin by sharing and comparing each others' experience and understanding of the topic. (*Other people's stories.*) Are there any common themes? What are the differences and similarities?
- ▶ Next, look at some of the theory. (*Why is this important?, Something to think about, It's tougher than you think.*) What do others say about this topic? How does this compare with what the group has already discussed? Does this change your thinking?
- ▶ Try a couple of the exercises. (*Getting down to work.*) You will find an exercise to correspond to each of the main ideas in the Guide. Use examples from your own community development activity to put what you've learned into practice.

You can also consult the Guides for ideas or activities as you work through a community development activity.

Tips...

- ▶ These are your key to quick skill ideas

Introduction

Discovering Why We Are Here gets to the heart of people's goals and aspirations for the future of their community or neighbourhood.

It simplifies taking action on broad concerns by helping people focus more clearly on what really motivates them, and what they want for their community. It helps groups manage internal conflict which can arise when group members attempt to reach agreement on a common course of action.

Main ideas in the guide

- ▶ Seeing the World Differently
- ▶ Discovering Our Reasons in the Past, Present and Future
- ▶ Saying What We Mean
- ▶ Learning to Listen

Ask yourself...

- ▶ Why am I here?
- ▶ Why is the person next to me here?
- ▶ What things have happened over time to bring each of us here? What do we see happening in the future?
- ▶ Are there any reasons I/we haven't shared with the group?
- ▶ Do I sometimes feel I haven't been given a chance to talk about my reasons for being part of the group?
- ▶ Have we considered our reasons for working together from several different points of view?

These questions are explored in this guide.

Other people's stories

We can all learn from the experience of people in other communities. What are the stories in your communities?

A group of neighbours in one city block got to know one another informally. They got together at a collective lane sale organized every year or so, attended a neighbour's annual Christmas drop-in, and, at the City's request, took part in a living-room discussion about future land use and development.

People seemed to share enough ongoing interests to go a step further — forming a neighbourhood association which would include everyone on the block.

That year the invitation to the annual Christmas drop-in included a short questionnaire. It asked if people would be interested in being part of an informal association for "mutual support and assistance, celebration and concern for the well-being of the neighbourhood and the city as a whole."

The questionnaire also suggested seven reasons for organizing and invited comments and additions.

The response was enthusiastic. Security and child safety were priorities. So were sharing tools and equipment and monitoring local development pressures. Some people were also interested in learning more about issues. They wanted to do so through informal activities supported by knowledgeable resource people.

At the first organizing meeting, people were invited to expand on their reasons for wanting to work together. Each person was asked to complete one sentence: "My reason(s) for wanting to form this association are..."

This one activity revealed motivations, feelings, values and principles as well as the issues which brought the neighbours together. From this, the group built two agendas — an action agenda based on the priority issues, and a group development agenda based on activities which made membership in the association enjoyable, personally satisfying, and informative.

Why is this important?

We need to understand one another before we can work together effectively.

Finding Common Ground...

Individuals in a community form or join groups because they want to “get something done” about an issue or concern. They believe there is a better chance of doing so if more than one person is involved.

People and groups wishing to work together successfully need to be clear about the reason(s) they have come together.

Too often community groups limit this part of community development to simple answers like “youth is my issue”.

Others need to understand what in an individual’s past has brought him/her to the table, and to understand that person’s hope for the future. Group members will also need to know each other better before deciding if they share enough common ground to continue working together.

Group members will need to look at issues from many different perspectives. They will need to tell stories, listen attentively, and argue earnestly if they are to truly understand one another and why they should work together.

Understanding one another in this way gives group members more opportunities to find common ground.

The theory behind this practice is discussed in the section “Something to think about”. Practical exercises to get you started can be found in the section “Getting down to work”.

Tip on...knowing when you have not reached agreement

- ▶ *each time you think you have agreed on an action, someone takes you off course*
- ▶ *solutions offered by members of the group do not seem to match the issue that brought you together*
- ▶ *people keep on pushing a point of view regardless of the topic*

Something to think about

The past, present, and future influence why we are here.



Discovering our reasons in the past, present and future

Community members join together for a variety of reasons. Those reasons have developed over time. This holds true whether the group's goal is to put on a community event or celebration, to address a specific concern, or to plan for a healthier more caring community. Whatever the case, people's desire to work on an issue is made up of a mix of their past experiences, the views and beliefs they hold about present conditions, and how they see the future.

Working together requires a commitment from all group members to think about the issue in terms of their own past experience, their present concerns, and their dreams for the future.

People see the world in different ways.



Seeing the world differently

People in a community often see or view things in different ways. Each person's perception is shaped by their own life experience. Their perceptions affect how they think about the world in general. It is natural that each person will have different ideas about what is going on in their community, why it is happening, and what might be done. Some people may share common perceptions about an issue. Others will not. Exploring why we are here allows us to see differences and similarities and still work towards a common future.

Saying what we mean takes time, some reflection, and people who will listen.

Saying what we mean

Getting people to say what they really mean can be a challenge. Often people are not sure what they mean. It may take some time for people to be able to express themselves clearly. A little discussion can help shed new light on an individual's reasons for being part of the group. Patience is often required from the rest of the group's members while individuals explore with others what they really do mean.

You can only learn why others are here by listening.

Learning to listen

Listening to others is a big part of discovering why we are here. Listening is an active state which requires a commitment from all those involved. For some, it means developing new skills — like sitting quietly, not interrupting, and not passing judgement. Listening in this way enables group members to help one another to clarify their concerns.

Tips on...listening

- ▶ *be silent*
- ▶ *give the speaker your full attention*
- ▶ *don't interrupt, even to ask questions*
- ▶ *let people finish their own sentences*
- ▶ *don't argue*



It's tougher than you think

If you know some of the barriers to effective community work, you are half-way to overcoming them.

Be patient

One of these barriers is time. It takes time for people to explain their point of view in their own way. It is easy to become impatient with this "warm-up" process.

Be sensitive

Talking about past experiences is personal and can touch on sensitive issues. If not handled well, it can be risky for the individual and the group.

Resolve conflict

If people have conflicting reasons for wanting to act, the group may find it difficult to continue harmoniously.

Be honest & forthright

People often come into groups for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons will be spoken about, but others will not. Those not spoken about are "hidden agendas".



Tips on...getting agendas on the table

- ▶ many of the exercises in "Getting down to work" will help bring out hidden agendas by encouraging people to look at issues from many perspectives.
- ▶ another strategy is simply to ask (and keep asking) if everyone is "sharing their agendas"

Getting down to work

This section contains some straight-forward exercises to get you started. These exercises can take as little as an hour or as long as a day to complete. Use your own community development project to make the work more practical. Choose the exercises which are best for your group and issue (the *Planning and Facilitating Guide* gives tips on how to plan these activities).

Most of the exercises are highly participatory — one of the best ways to learn about community development.

An exercise for *discovering our reasons in the past*

Telling Stories

What is it?

Story telling, sometimes known as oral history, is one way for people to talk about their past in non-threatening and creative ways. Story telling has been used to share skills, and to encourage people to study history. It has also been used to preserve the history and cultures of people whose stories have traditionally been overlooked.

Why use it?

In the community development process, story telling is used to create a shared understanding of the past so that communities can work together effectively to shape their future. Communities are strengthened when people's own view of their experience is accepted.

Oral history is also being used to develop a sense of pride within groups with shared experiences, and a sense of respect for people with different experiences.

For this process to be successful, it is important for people to tell their stories in their own words and in their own language. It is also important that other members listen carefully to the stories without judging them.

How is it done?

Doing histories means asking people questions about their lives. Sometimes this may involve designing research questions, taping stories, transcribing stories, and so on.

For this exercise, try to keep things simple. If the group is large, break into smaller groups of three and four (see the *Planning and Facilitating Guide* for working with small groups).

Give each person in the group a chance to tell their story. Instruct the rest to listen in a quiet, attentive, non-judgemental manner. Encourage the listeners to note points which interest them.

Here are some sample questions:

- ▶ What kinds of experiences have you had in your personal life and/or in your community life that have brought you here?
- ▶ How have these experiences affected your life?
- ▶ Do (or did) you have control over these experiences?

Once the members of the group have told their stories, ask each of them to reflect on their own stories, and on those told by others. What is it that group members share in common? What experience(s) makes each member's story unique?

How can this information be used?

Stories let us get to know and understand each other better. They provide a starting point for groups looking for common ground. (Stories can also introduce the idea of talking about values and in-depth visioning).

An exercise for *discovering our reasons in the future*

Visioning

What is it?

Visioning is a process which invites people to look into, dream about, or imagine a preferred future. Visioning most often asks people to be optimistic about what they would like to see happen.

Why use it?

Visioning helps people to see that they can take some control over their future. Visioning gives people an opportunity to dream out loud about the future of their community. Once refined, visions give community groups a common goal to work towards.

Since people's visions tell us some things about why they are at the table, visioning is also a great way to uncover hidden agendas.

How is it done?

Do this exercise alone. Think about the future in terms of the issue which brought your group to the table. Move beyond predictable outcomes to the most desirable one that you can imagine.

Think about the things in your community that you would like to change and how you would change them if you could.

Invite everyone to share their visions. This can be done in a way that is comfortable for everyone in your group. For example, some people may choose to tell stories, others will draw pictures, and others may use metaphors. Again, listening is an invaluable tool in the visioning process.

How can this information be used?

Visioning is useful to help clarify why each person is at the table. Some of these questions may be helpful in this analysis.

- ▶ What does your vision tell you about your reasons for being here?
- ▶ What hopes for the future does your group hold in common?
- ▶ Are there significant differences between the visions that different group members hold?



Exercises for *seeing the world differently*

Community tour

What is it?

Taking a walk, organizing a bus or car tour, or riding public transit for a day can give your group a different perspective on your community. It may mean going places you do not typically go or trying to look at everyday things in a different way.

Why use it?

Once you have been involved in a community for a while you start to see things a certain way. It is important to step back every once and awhile and look at things from the perspective of someone new in the community. This may give you greater insight into your group's issues.

What do you need?

Time, some type of transportation, creativity, and an open mind.

How is it done?

If your group is working on youth issues, try seeing your community from a young person's point of view.

Think about where you would go to spend time with your friends and what activities are available for you as a young person.

Walk through neighbourhoods. Find out where the youth are shooting baskets or playing street hockey. Think about whether or not youth have the same rights to sit in malls as do senior citizens.

Try to see your community from a parent's point of view, and so on.

How can this information be used?

When your group gets back together, list everything that each of you saw or felt. Has the tour given you new insight into your issue? Does this change the way your group will work together? Are you better able to understand why each person is at the table? Do you share enough issues in common to work together as a group?

Making sense of the big picture

What is it?

Breaking down complex issues into more manageable bits gives a group more insight into how each member is thinking about an issue.

These exercises help group members identify factors which directly relate to the issue as well as those which are not so obvious at first glance.

Why use it?

If we rely on single words or phrases, like "youth is my issue", we limit our understanding of why we got together as a group. Taking time to look at many sides of an issue gives us more insight into how people in the group are thinking about that issue. It also reminds us of the complexity of reasons people have for being part of the group.

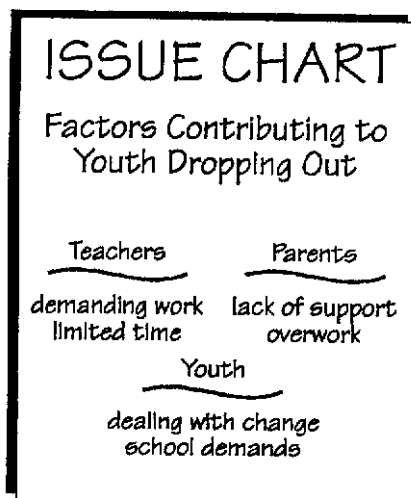
How is it done?

This exercise can be done in two ways.

a) Layering Your Reasons

Start by writing your group's reason for working together across the top of the page (e.g., youth dropping out of school).

Next, list 5 or 6 different factors (or sub-sets) which relate to or contribute to this issue. At this point, the contributing factors will likely be quite general (teachers, parents, youth). Finally, dig a bit deeper. Ask what it is about teachers, for example, that may contribute to youth dropping out of school (demanding work, little time).



b) Making Connections

Start by writing your group's issues across the top of the page (e.g., youth dropping out of school).

Think about, talk about and list the factors that affect your issue (poverty, poor teaching, family dysfunction, etc.). In a second round list the things that happen as a result of your issue (unemployment, loss of self-esteem, etc.).

ISSUE CHART	
How Youth Dropping Out Affects and is Affected by Community	
<u>Things That Affect the Issue</u>	<u>Things This Issue Affects</u>
poverty poor teaching family break up community dysfunction	unemployment love self-esteem

How can this information be used?

Groups able to see the big picture have a clearer idea of how their issue fits with other aspects of community life. This understanding helps groups decide which part of that picture they are prepared to change and which they can not or will not change.

This process is also helpful as a reminder to groups not to seek simple answers to complex questions.

It allows groups to see how their issues link with other issues in the community.

Tips on...agreeing

- ▶ *if you still can't agree on the reasons, try to focus your concerns by setting priorities. Use the exercises in the guide Making Choices.*
- ▶ *if you don't share common reasons to be part of the group (and are lucky enough to find this out early on), don't be afraid to move on.*

For more information

Basic tools: A Collection of Popular Education Resources and Activities. CUSO Education Department. Ottawa: Cuso Education Department, 1985.

Designing an Oral History Project: A Workbook for Teachers and Community Workers. Cohen, C. & the Oral History Centre. Unpublished, Cambridge, 1987.

Envisioning the Future: A Mindbook of exercises for Future-Inventors. Ziegler, W. Denver: The Future-Inventions Associates, 1989.

The Universal Traveller: A Soft-System Guide to Creativity, Problem Solving, & the Process of Researching Goals. Koberg, D. & Bagnall, J. Los Altos: Crisp Publication, 1991.

The Series

Use the Guides...

...to direct an activity

...to get back on track

...when all else fails!

Discovering Why We Are Here

Help your group figure out what it is about, and why.

Living Our Values

Help your group be clear about what is near and dear to its heart. It will make working together a lot easier and a lot more effective.

Thinking Creatively

Help your group put its creative energy to work.

Making Choices

Ideas are a dime a dozen. Help your group sort through the list and choose what is best for your own work.

Building Community Alliances

Help your group figure out who else to work with and why.

Planning and Facilitating: A Guide to Help Use the *Strengthening Communities Series*

For the old hand and the faint of heart! A step-by-step guide to facilitating groups the CD way.

Although each booklet stands on its own, most will find that the booklets *Discovering Why We Are Here* and *Living Our Values* are a good place to start.

Apart from that, the choice is yours!