
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



Thinking Creatively

A guide to help groups put their creative energy to work

A SPARC of BC Publication

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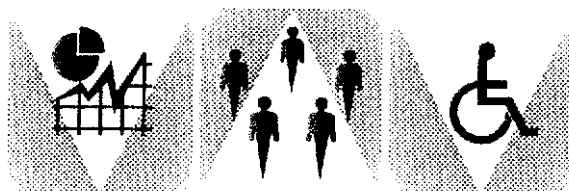
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**Social Planning and Research Council
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SPARC of B.C. is a provincial voluntary association which conducts research and planning and provides public information and education to help people cooperatively 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.

To order more copies of this guide or others in the series, contact:

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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

Thinking Creatively involves the use of deliberate strategies for putting our creative energy to work. It gives groups more tools to work with during the community development process. Successfully using these techniques will help groups overcome the kinds of blocks in thinking that keep them from finding new ways to deal with old problems.

Main ideas in the guide

- ▶ Thinking something different
- ▶ A skill for everyone to enjoy

Ask yourselves...

- ▶ When did we last stop to consider new ideas and new ways for taking action in our community?
- ▶ How open minded are we when someone comes up with a new idea?
- ▶ What are some of the ways we were creative in the past?
- ▶ Does anyone in this group think that they are not creative?
- ▶ How do we deal with stumbling blocks to creative thinking?

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?

For several months, a Montreal anti-poverty group (consisting of immigrants, refugees, community workers and organizers) tried to come up with a shared group vision. After a lot of talking, they decided to express themselves differently. The result was a mural which captured the creative energy and emotions of the group and illustrated their hopes for the future. This mural was carried to community events and gatherings for years to come.

It happened like this. With the help of a couple of artists/organizers, thirty community people (including children) spent the day coming up with drawings which symbolized their ideas. From these, the group developed a common theme.

A recent refugee drew a hand reaching out, symbolizing the many gifts that he had to offer. This became the centrepiece of the mural. Behind the hand were placed those drawings which symbolized what the community wanted to put behind them — like poverty, unemployment and pollution. Drawings symbolizing what the community wanted to create — like cooperatives, cooperative housing and a community economic development centre — were placed in the foreground.

The mural, and the process of putting it together, affirmed in a very dramatic way the gifts and resources people the community had to offer. In the words of one of the organizers, "It was a magical moment."

Why is this important?

Groups skilled at thinking creatively will be better able to find new ways of using the resources they have, cooperating and collaborating to stretch existing resources, and providing services with fewer resources.

Creative thinking also gives groups the wonderful opportunity to move beyond the usual to the unusual, and from the tried and true to new frontiers of community.

Group members develop the habit of thinking creatively which enriches the community development process.



Something to think about

Creative thinking means developing new and different ways of thinking.

Everyone can learn creative thinking techniques.

Thinking something different

Nobel Prize Winner Albert Szent-Gyorgi said discovery means looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different. Creative thinking techniques have been developed to help groups do just that. Manuals, text books, video tapes, and cassette tapes abound - each about different ways to increase our creative potential. Usually groups and individuals explore a few approaches before they find a technique that suits both the group and its members.

A skill for everyone to enjoy

We all have the capacity to think about things in a number of different ways that makes us open to new possibilities and change. Thinking creatively means making a deliberate effort to develop this capacity and taking advantage of the power it yields. The creative thinking process has two requirements: an openness to explore new ways of thinking, and a willingness to look critically at mental blocks and avoid them (DeBono, 1992). In some cases it means approaching problems in a new way - a difficult task for all of us. It also means being willing to look at quite different solutions which may also be somewhat scary.



It's tougher than you think

Trust and confidence must be established along with clear direction on process if creative thinking is to succeed as a useful community development tool.

Community members sometimes resist a gentle push to stretch beyond “the way things have always been done”. Some find creative thinking strategies uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Others do not believe that such techniques provide any real benefit. And still others find themselves stuck in a position where the possibility of new solutions seems too remote.

Poorly handled resistance can effectively block any efforts to collectively exploring new ways of doing things.

Tip...common blocks to creative thinking

*It's not important.
I don't have time.
I already have the answer.
I'm not creative.
von Oech (1986)*

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.

Tip ...creative thinking

- ▶ *Find the day-dreaming, imaginative child that you still are at heart! The creative experience requires freshness and innocence.*
- ▶ *To think creatively you must also relax, suspend judgement, and be accepting.*

Exercises for *building techniques*

What is it?

These approaches are designed to build on previous ideas and push thinking beyond typical blocks.

Why use it?

Too often groups stop the creative process before it really begins. They do not have enough time, energy or patience to explore new ideas. Using structured techniques like stacking or multiplying gives groups an opportunity to think longer and harder about new ideas.

How is it done?

Here are two different ways to build on ideas

Stacking: (Build one idea on the back of another.)

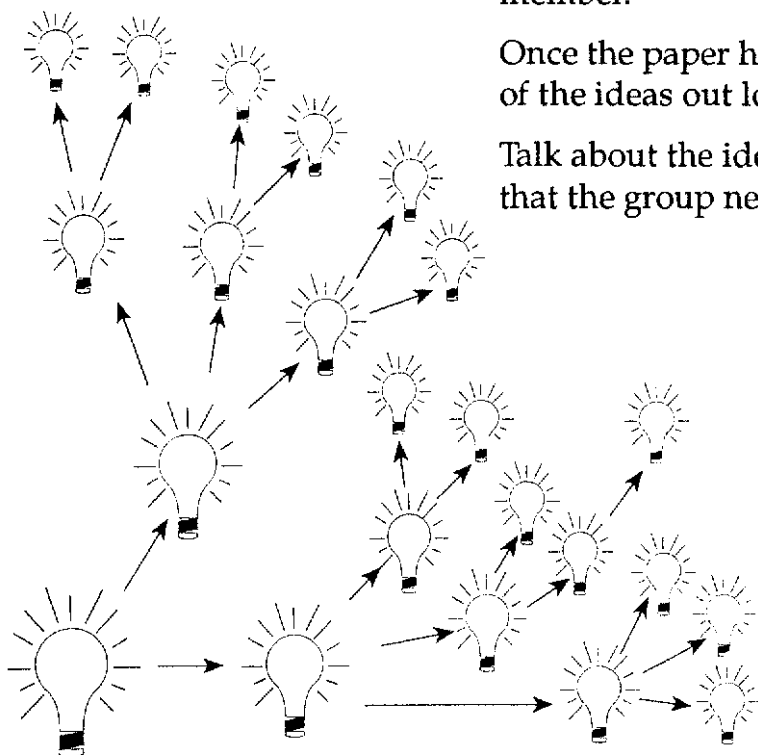
Ask one person to start by writing an idea on a sheet of paper.

Pass the sheet around the group.

Have each member write an idea on the page and fold the paper so that only the last idea is visible to the next member.

Once the paper has been circulated, ask someone to read all of the ideas out loud.

Talk about the ideas and the process. Are there any ideas that the group needs to explore further?



Multiplying: (Build on ideas)

Round #1

Divide the group into pairs.

Ask each pair to come up with one idea.

Round #2

Now ask each pair to join another pair to make a group of four.

First instruct the pairs to share the idea they came up with in the first round. Ask the foursome to come up with an additional idea. There will be a total of three ideas at this point — one idea from each of the two original pairs and the new idea from the group of four.

Round #3

Ask each group of four to join another group of four. The group size will now be eight. The new group now shares their previous ideas and creates or builds on one that has been previously suggested. (There will be a total of seven ideas at this point - four ideas from the original pairs in round # 1, two ideas from the foursome in round #2, and one idea from the group of eight in round #3).

At the end of round #3 ask the group to come back into the large group format and report back on their ideas. You may want to list them on a flip chart or chalk board.

Ask the group to think about the ideas. Are there some they like more than others? Which would they like to explore further as a group?

An exercise for *something new under the sun*

What is it?

This approach is designed to help groups break through thinking blocks by comparing their situations to other situations in their lives and in their communities.

Why use it?

Often we can find fresh solutions by simply looking at things from a different point of view, or by thinking about what others have done in the same or similar situations.

How is it done?

Put the issue that you are talking about on the table. For example, a local affordable housing group's concern was that they repeatedly had project proposals defeated by local residents.

Ask the group to think of groups whose experiences have been similar and talk about how these groups resolved their issues.

Get the group to think carefully about each situation. What is it about the situation that makes it the same as ours? What about this example can be applied to our situation?

An affordable housing group might talk to other groups that had been successful in building affordable housing complexes. Choose examples where the groups had met with resistance from people in the neighbourhood. List the strategies used by the other groups, including strategies that did or did not work.

Who Else Has
Done Work In
This Community?

- church (group)
- seniors complex
 - group home
- housing co-op

It is sometimes useful to look at the strategies of groups and organizations from other sectors, like for profit groups looking at the private sector. For example, if private sector developers had been successful in getting apartments and condominiums built in spite of neighbourhood resistance, it may be useful to observe the strategies they used.

An exercise for *brainstorming*

What is it?

Brainstorming has become one of the most popular (and unfortunately sometimes overused) techniques for encouraging creative thinking. It is included here simply to remind people of some of the basic principles behind this approach.

Why use it?

Brainstorming, when used correctly, is a quick and easy tool to getting groups rolling in a new direction. Since most people are familiar with brainstorming techniques, it is widely accepted. It is simple enough to be used even with those who have very little time or creative thinking experience.

How is it done?

Start with a very clear question so that the answers will be focused and relevant. What are the ways we can work with this neighbourhood to gain support for this affordable housing complex?

Establish a time limit for the exercise. Ten to fifteen minutes is generally adequate, but don't cut the activity short because you are afraid of pauses or breaks.

Put your question on the board, flip chart, on a hand-out, or simply say it out loud.

Start the process by asking the group to respond to the question. List ideas quickly. Don't worry about silence. Repeat the question.

When the time is up, take a short break and rewrite the responses so that group members can respond.

Setting ground rules

the more ideas the better — The basic idea is to generate a lot of ideas in a short period of time. There will be lots of time to sort through and select the best ideas for your group.

be silly and sassy — Encourage the group to suspend as much as they can any fear of making a mistake. This very short period of time is designed to let the ideas fly!

avoid criticism — If people are going to be truly creative they must know that their ideas will not be criticized. Again there will be lots of time to clean-up, sort through, or analyze answers.

Tip...tagging on

▶ *to keep ideas flowing take an idea that has already been stated, say it again and again, add on to it, say it a different way, put a new spin on it and see where it goes.*

An exercise for *knocking down creative blocks*

What is it?

This exercise challenges participants to address the ideas that often block creative thinking.

Why use it?

One of the biggest obstacles to creative thinking can be the mental blocks that people put up that stop them from pushing their thinking further.

How is it done?

On a sheet of paper write down a dream, wish, or a creative idea. For fun, let's use the example "I want to be a community organizer."

On a separate sheet of paper list all the reasons that keep you from fulfilling your dream. If the same thought appears over and over again, write it down over and over again. In another column write the positive ways of getting around each stumbling block. For example, if you said "I don't have time" argue back "I could better organize my time" or "I don't need much time" or "I watch too much TV," and so on.

When you have finished, tear up the sheet containing negative thoughts.

Reasons...	
- I don't have time	- I could organize my time better
- I watch too much TV	- I could watch less TV

An exercise for an *idea festival*

What is it?

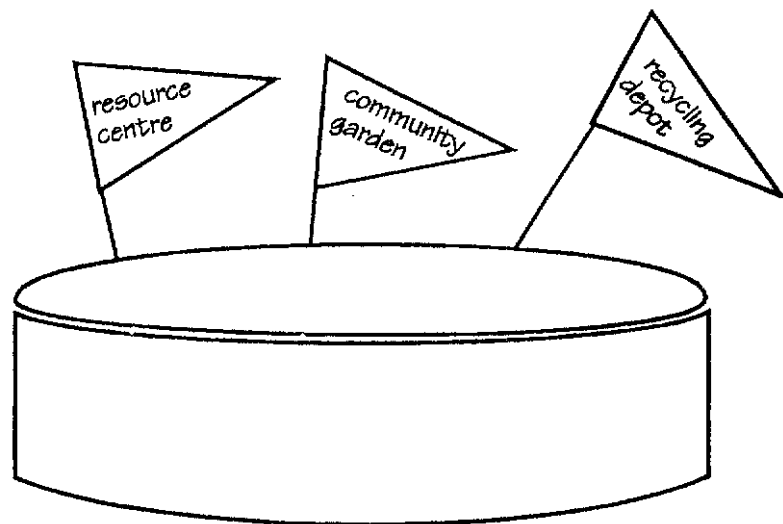
A good way to release the creative energy within in you is through a creative experience. This exercise is a fun and creative way to spur creative thinking and develop a sense of community.

Why use it?

A number of fun community activities can be used to get the whole community involved in finding solutions.

How is it done?

Hold a community celebration, a pot luck dinner, dance, or social. Make the price of admission an idea. Post the ideas on the bulletin board. Ask people to draw their ideas on a mural. Hold spot dances (the people standing on the spot need to offer an idea). Decorate an idea cake (people can write their idea on the cake) copy the ideas down, serve the cake, and on, and on, and on. Have fun with it and let the community own it.



For more information

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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!