



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: FOUR LESSONS FOR CHANGEMAKERS

Paul Born

Just about every week

we read about another serious problem facing our community. We are frustrated as poverty increases and angry as racism hurts our neighbors. We feel helpless as our young people face increasing mental health stress. People in our communities are looking for ways to create a better world. Yet it seems we are just growing further apart.

We need to look for more effective ways of tackling what seem to be stubborn and intransigent community problems. Recognizing the importance of engaging citizens in decisions that affect their lives is an essential step to large-scale community change.

By strategically uniting community assets—what is strong in a community—around a common agenda, leaders create the conditions for a breakthrough that heals the brokenness in their communities. Fortunately, we can use our skills in community engagement, collaborative leadership, and social innovation to do just that.

Breakthrough community change happens when people want better outcomes and work together in their community. They learn about community engagement, bring community leaders together, create a common agenda, and work together to implement a campaign and achieve a collective outcome.

Breakthrough community change happens when diverse individuals from business, human service organizations, and government talk to each other and then reach out to individuals with lived/living experiences of the challenges a community seeks to overcome. By identifying community assets and fully engaging the whole community, everyone realizes how powerful they can be together.

Breakthrough community change seeks to harness the collective wisdom and intelligence of a community. When we embark on a journey to large-scale change, we develop new skill sets in collective impact, community engagement, collaborative leadership, asset-based community development, evaluation, and social innovation. Armed with this new knowledge, we are more prepared to help people in our community to envision and achieve better outcomes.

Breakthrough community change is about changemakers.

FOUR PATHS TO FOLLOW

Both personal and community learning journeys are necessary for change. Everyone who seeks to expand their understanding of breakthrough community change begins from their personal reference point.

You may be focused on the issues and want to learn all you can about them, such as how they emerge over time and what has been done to mediate them. You may be process-oriented and want to learn more about organizing and the actions of large-scale change. You may approach this work from a spiritual point and want to learn about finding the inner strength required to sustain a long and difficult journey to community change.

Wherever you find yourself, start learning and be surprised by the discoveries you make along the way.

I suggest four paths that you may want to follow on your learning journey.

Learn Together

The first thing most people do when they embark on something new is to talk to others about it. The response from friends is critical to validating an idea and approach.

I recommend forming a learning circle with a small group of people who also are looking for new ways forward and a whole community approach. You might start a learning circle with people inside your organization, or you might reach out to leaders you trust in the partner agencies. Forming a book club can be a good start. You can meet with like-minded people, read various books, and discuss them.

The idea here is that you want to begin expanding your knowledge about how community change happens, how to agree on a common agenda and develop an openness to others' ideas. Once you can explain to others how a common agenda effects community change, you can broaden your circle. Often people will reach out to community leaders and hold dialogues that explore ideas like collective impact and discuss the preconditions for success.

Breakthrough community change happens when people want better outcomes and work together in their community.

Challenge Your Mental Models

A mental model is a description of your thinking system. When we explore our mental models, we can often expose personal biases that have been directing our lives for years. Mental models help to explain how we “see” the world. They evolve throughout our lifetimes and are frequently difficult to change. They are formed by our experiences, education, family history, and culture.

Our mental model about how communities change comes from our experiences and education. You may be influenced by your parents’ involvement in your community or by how your faith community emphasized service as imperative to faithfulness. You may have grown up giving food to the food bank or donating to the local homeless shelter. Our understanding of community change is often highly influenced by our informal and formal education. Taking time to understand your mental model of community is important in your journey.

Early in my career, as I was explaining the idea of community change to a colleague, he dismissed my idea and said, “I believe the only real change happens when we help someone to change through therapy.” He was not interested in talking about the conditions that cause problems for people. He felt that only individuals could be healed, not systems or communities of people. “Communities are only healthy because the people in them are healthy,” he said.

I was shocked by how forcefully he made this claim. His mental model was entrenched, and it prevented him from seeing the potential for a better world. At the time I did not know how to engage him to consider a broader view.

My first book, *Community Conversations*, describes what I learned about whole community change. In observing how communities engage, I was struck by the power of group dialogue to gently challenge mental models. I found that when people heard each other's stories, they began to accept different ways of thinking about the problem. As I observed group dialogues over time, I found that communities could unthink, unlearn, and let go of their mental models long enough to engage in ideas about systems and whole community change thinking.

When exploring a new community change approach, I find it very helpful to start a journal. I keep notes about what I am learning and describe discoveries about my mental models. I love creating mind maps that allow me to brainstorm new ideas. Most of all, I love to write about the questions that are arising for me along my learning journey. My journal helps me to ask myself why I am working the way I currently am.

Make the Time

Finding the time and coordinating the schedules of busy people can be difficult. Yet it is essential to learn about new community change approaches and ideas. Here are three ideas that have helped many on their journey:

If you have a staff position that provides time to work on community development, start by committing 10 percent of your time (a half-day a week) to learn, meet with people, and volunteer. Once you form a collaboration and you move into the common agenda phase of the work, consider moving this time allocation to 20 percent, or one day a week.

Start by reading books and listening to podcasts with others in the community. Find conferences or seminars to attend, and invite others from your community or your organization to join you. The most important measure of your collective learning is the number of questions that arise for each of you. Ask “why?” together as often as you can.

Increasingly people are joining collaboratives as volunteers. They may have an employer who will not give them time off to work on community change ideas. It is important to ensure that the learning journey is compatible with the schedule of volunteers.

When people heard each other’s stories, they began to accept different ways of thinking about the problem.

Engage Your Upper-Level Leadership

Involve your board of directors, your boss, your funders, and your senior management team early in the journey toward whole community change. Find ways to help them learn with you and become engaged. This is not something you should leave until you have a plan. My experience is that the earlier you engage the people you report to, the greater the chance of them looking forward to the plan you will present later. Try providing them with ongoing updates and sending them articles or links to great podcasts so they will be engaged along the way.

My Wish for You

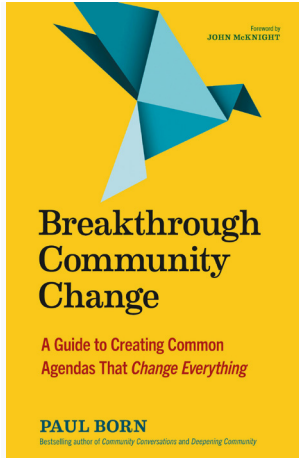
Most importantly, have fun learning together! In my coaching practice, I often say, “We should consider this journey more like hiking through a forest, as opposed to running on a treadmill.”

Be creative. Consider organizing experiential bus tours for your community to learn about the issue more deeply and to hear from the people most affected. Engage as often as possible with the people who are going to benefit the most if you are successful, especially those with living/lived experiences, and with people who are from completely different sectors. Plan for good food and long breaks. Take walks together.

Remember, at this stage of your community change process, you are learning together and building trusting relationships as you unthink and release old mental models and **embrace new ways of thinking and working together.** 🌱



Info



Ready to dig deeper into the book?
Buy a copy of [Breakthrough Community Change](#).

Want copies for your organization or for an event?
We can help: customerservice@porchlightbooks.com
800-236-7323

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Born is the cofounder and former CEO and co-CEO at Tamarack Institute, a leading authority on the ideas and practice of community engagement, collective impact, and community innovation. He is also the founder and past CEO of Vibrant Communities, now active in over 500 municipalities with campaigns to end poverty, deepen community, build youth futures, and tackle climate change. In 2019 Born was appointed as a member of the Order of Canada; he is also a senior fellow at Ashoka, the world's largest network of social innovators. He is the author of five books.

SHARE THIS

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.



Porchlight

Curated and edited by the people of Porchlight, ChangeThis is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest book releases and ideas at porchlightbooks.com.

This document was created on April 5, 2023 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover art from Adobe Stock.