

Communities Are People Too

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Humans are interesting and diverse creatures with all sorts of challenges, problems, and issues. We struggle to overcome our weaknesses to become better than who we are currently. That is the struggle and the nature of the human condition. Thankfully, we can get better, we can learn from our mistakes, and we can improve upon yesterday. I believe communities are no different than people. They have personalities, attitudes, and behaviour patterns like people do, and they also have all the challenges, problems and issues that people have. I believe that understanding this is important to making communities enduringly stronger and more resilient.

People's problematic conditions are sometimes resolved with therapy and treatments, and sometimes those challenges require prescribed medication. For instance, people suffer from addiction, anxiety, and depression. For each of these, there is usually some combination of therapy and medication intended to help the one suffering overcome the condition. The medication helps a person overcome the physical impositions of the condition, while therapy helps to overcome the psychological and emotional challenges that foster the condition: replacing bad habits with good ones and bad thoughts with constructive ones.

We don't treat communities as we treat people, but we should. We often simply prescribe something to them, and anticipate that will make it all better. The prescription is often a new plan of some sort, or some money from another level of government. The money and the plan simply mask the condition for a time, but eventually the prescription runs out, and the symptoms, and the problem, return. That is because the prescription is a small part of the real treatment required to cause change in a community. Real change often requires some therapy to help change habits, behaviours and attitudes as well.

I know it might sound crazy, but think this through with me. Communities that suffer from anxiety have clear symptoms. They plan and plan and plan. They often have more plans than they know what to do with. Often when pressure mounts to implement a plan they have completed, anxiety sets in and they decide they need to review the plan, often essentially starting over. They don't ever get on with doing something, because they are always in the planning stage. Acting produces anxiety. Planning doesn't.

Or imagine a community that suffers from addiction. They don't know they are addicted, until they go through withdrawal, until that thing they are addicted to is taken away. Usually it's a major resource, or industry, or tax base. We have all seen it. The community is doing great and no one thinks there is a problem until the mine closes or the price of oil crashes, and that devastates the community. Community members talk about how it will all be better when the mine reopens, or when the price of oil goes back up, just like an addict thinks they can turn things around if they just got one more hit. But it doesn't make it better. It never does. Addiction can be treated in people, and I believe it can in communities as well, if the community really wants to change.

And then there is depression. Communities can get very depressed and actually believe they are meant to fail. They can wind up making choices and living their lives in ways that make outsiders believe they want failure. Perhaps they do. I won't name names, but I happened to speak in two different regions in the same week a while ago, and I was comparing their economic success. A very experienced woman came up to me and said, "You know what the difference between us and them really is? When *they* fall

on hard times they say, 'Don't let this get you down. We will be back on our feet in no time', and when we have success, we say, 'Don't get used to this. It won't last'." That was telling. She demonstrated to me that her region felt like they were meant to fail, and waited for it. I'm sure they actually helped generate some failure when it couldn't be found. Money and plans alone won't fix that situation. That requires a little therapy.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.