

When a Collaboration Stumbles: The Opportunities Niagara Story

Introduction

In August 2008, Opportunities Niagara staff and key members of the initiative's Leadership Roundtable met with a Vibrant Communities coach to review the progress they had made in the last five years. In a region composed of 12 municipalities, Opportunities Niagara's aspiration had been to "untie the knots and connect the dots." Its members had worked to identify barriers to prosperity (the knots) and unravel them by connecting people who could effect positive change.

The August session was encouraging. Participants felt that Opportunities Niagara had succeeded in stimulating a much higher level of multi-sectoral collaboration within the region. The poverty agenda was now very much a part of public discourse, both in Niagara and across the province. Certain Opportunities Niagara projects – a transportation initiative and a housing project in particular – were providing tangible benefits for some low-income residents. Opportunities Niagara had established a reputation as an effective community connector and collaborator. The Regional Government was about to announce a comprehensive poverty reduction program and was poised to ask Opportunities Niagara to play an important role in the implementation of some 20 new initiatives.

The meeting ended on a positive note. Opportunities Niagara's framework for change – a statement developed in 2006 for how it would help bring about long-term poverty reduction – was renewed. Members would continue their connector role and add in a consultancy division to help ensure financial stability. A program plan to support the change framework was completed and a response to the Regional proposal was drafted.

Five weeks later, Opportunities Niagara closed its doors and declared bankruptcy. Vibrant Communities convener organizations across the country were distressed by the news. What went wrong? If such a thing happened in Niagara, could it happen elsewhere? What lessons could they learn in order to strengthen their own initiatives?

Five people who were very involved in Opportunities Niagara were asked to reflect on a series of questions about collaboration. Their responses help shed light on the specific difficulties encountered by the initiative and provide lessons for other convener groups and people interested in the sustainability of collective efforts.

Peter Papp was Opportunities Niagara's Director. Peter Hammond was past Chair of Opportunities Niagara's Board of Directors and is former Board Chair at Community Care – St. Catharines and Thorold. Betty Lou Souter was an Opportunities Niagara Board member and is CEO of Community Care St. Catharines and Thorold. (Opportunities Niagara was first housed at Community Care and operated under its direction from 2002 to 2006.) Brian Hutchings is the Commissioner of Community Services for the Niagara Region. Rick Tarajos was seconded from the Region's Community Services in December 2007 and worked as Opportunities Niagara's Community Engagement Manager until the project closed its doors.

Why collaborations fail

The life cycle of collaborations, like most other organizations, involves stages of birth, maturation, decline and renewal. At each stage of the life cycle there are “traps” that can prevent a collaboration from moving constructively to the next stage. Social innovation theorist Brenda Zimmerman has suggested that after collaborations move from an initial trial and error phase and adopt patterns and approaches to their work, they often experience the “parasitic” trap. In this scenario, problems involving operational elements make it difficult to sustain or expand the collaboration's efforts [Zimmerman 2007]. Zimmerman singles out charismatic leadership as the most common trap. Ongoing research by Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement suggests several other dangers to which collaborations are prone, as discussed below.¹ How participants navigate the parasitic trap will determine whether they go through a phase of “creative destruction” and renewal – which Opportunities Niagara members were attempting to do when they met in late August – or become a spent force.

Social innovation research and Tamarack's experience with collaboration suggests at least five key elements to the parasitic trap: lackluster outcomes, limitations of the model, insufficient resources, a weak support environment and fragile leadership (this last element includes a consideration of charismatic leadership). Any or all of the elements can be at play when a collaboration struggles to sustain itself.

Assessing the outcomes

Sometimes the outcomes generated by a collaboration do not appear to justify the time and energy that are being invested to achieve them. This is most likely to occur when a collaboration has not been clear enough about the outcomes it is attempting to achieve, or loses its focus. Sometimes a

collaboration achieves strong outcomes, but is not able to get recognition for them. This may be due to a weak evaluation and tracking system or an inability to communicate subtle or complex outcomes in a clear way.

All five people interviewed felt strongly that Opportunities Niagara had demonstrated its role as an effective project broker, coordinator and multi-sectoral collaborator. Its projects generated extensive local media coverage and the outcomes generated were clearly of benefit. Says Peter Hammond: “The Regional Government in particular regarded the initiative as being able to bring together diverse groups of people who wouldn’t normally or naturally work together.”

However, the brokerage role that Opportunities Niagara Director Peter Papp was noted for was not well understood by the general public or funders. Says Brian Hutchings: “The project’s outcomes were delivered by other organizations, leaving Opportunities Niagara with no tangible results of its own. That became a problem. When it became clear that funders were unable or unwilling to fund the social brokerage role, Opportunities Niagara began competing for program dollars. Doors that had previously been open for collaborative discussions were suddenly closing.”

To some extent, Opportunities Niagara may have been a victim of its own success. As it began to demonstrate proficiency in brokering, public awareness building and creative programming, the demand for involvement increased. Opportunities Niagara experienced significant mission drift and failed to develop the focused, systematic and sustainable processes required to track the concrete results of collaboration. Says Peter Papp: “We needed to focus on key business areas, stay within the limits of our balance sheet, and not try to be all things to all people.”

Limitations of the model

The model upon which a collaboration is based represents a complex interplay of governance, programmatic and role choices. Alignment of these factors is critical. Some models work well at a certain scale but are difficult to sustain or to expand to a larger scale. Others take up so much energy in sustaining themselves that the model gets in the way of achieving cost-effective outcomes. Some models provide concrete outcomes that stakeholders find easy to relate to, while others produce outcomes that, while important, are hard to sell.

Social brokerage was a difficult concept to communicate and fund. “Brokering and collaboration do not lend themselves well to elevator chatter,” says Betty Lou Souter.

Says Rick Tarajos: “Participants wanted to be a concept group that could raise the profile of longstanding social equity issues. Some of these – like living wage – need to be extensively researched and approached with caution so that business and government remain engaged in the conversation. The Job Bus project demonstrated the value of low-cost transportation for getting people off Ontario Works and onto a job site, but once its worth was proven it needed to be handed

over to another organization. Expectations and financial commitments were not fulfilled and Opportunities Niagara found itself drifting into the area of program and service provider.”

Opportunities Niagara needed advocacy and brokerage funding as well as money for specific projects. In addition, the initiative moved into shaky financial territory when its participants made the decision to move to a stand-alone model in 2006.

The decision to go it alone was based on the belief that the initiative could benefit by having its own charitable number and that it was ready to establish itself as a separate entity. Unfortunately, in-kind support from funders was limited and, despite using every resource available to lower costs, expenses overtook income.

Says Brian Hutchings: “Opportunities Niagara was originally formed to take on an advocacy and awareness role and it needed to be embedded within a community-identified, trusted agency. Instead, its brokerage work became mixed up with program and service delivery. People became confused about the organization’s purpose and began to see it as another competitor for funds.”

Talking about poverty in a region that advertises the glamour of wine, the Shaw Festival and fabulous golf courses is never easy. Brian appreciated the fact that, early on, Opportunities Niagara was able to raise social equity issues. However, as the initiative became more focused on programs and funding, the Regional Government itself shifted into a poverty awareness and advocacy role.

Says Peter Papp: “Sometimes when government moves into an area traditionally served by social organizations, there is a tendency for potential partners in the work to step back. Particularly in this troubled economic period, everyone needs to work together. Unfortunately, the tendency in Niagara is to compete for dollars and employers. The inclination to be mutually supportive across our 12 member municipalities is often overcome by local concerns.”

Insufficient resources

There are situations in which a collaboration may be judged very effective and well recognized, but the resources to sustain it are simply not available. In other instances, resources might be available but the members of the collaboration have not been effective at tapping into them. This might occur because of inadequate sustainability planning, or simply a failure to effectively implement the plan.

Opportunities Niagara’s work plan for 2008-11 had included establishing a technical assistance service that would help other community entities to become better brokers for their own poverty-focused projects. A fee-for-service consulting arm seemed feasible, but it came late and lacked a solid business plan. By the summer of 2008, Opportunities Niagara was having difficulty meeting its expenses. For family reasons, Peter Papp had had to scale back his hours of work and

was unable to maintain a sustained fundraising effort in 2008. Says Peter Hammond: “If you’re doing programs, you don’t have time for fundraising. Without sustainable funding, you can’t pay for programs. It’s a Catch-22.”

Brian Hutchings believes that the technical resources consulting role would not have saved Opportunities Niagara. “Selling services would have put the initiative more squarely into the service provider role. The Director’s remarkable ability to bring people together created confidence and excitement, but the initiative also needed someone who could bring in the funders and close the deals.”

Weak support environment

It usually takes broad public and multi-sectoral support to address complex social issues. A collaboration may have success in building that support at first but later find that public interest starts to wane. This may occur because of general public fatigue with the issue or because a new, more compelling issue grabs the public’s attention. In other cases, public interest may remain high but other organizations, collaborations or initiatives begin to compete for public and multi-sectoral attention.

Public interest in Opportunities Niagara remained high throughout its five-year run. With a regional government and 12 separate municipalities, the region clearly needed an organization that could bring people together around the issue of poverty reduction. Even organizations that could have taken on a brokerage role and be potential competitors (e.g., the Business Education Council of Niagara or the Niagara Understanding the Early Years project) saw Opportunities Niagara as an organization that could assist partnership development.

Says Betty Lou Souter: “There was no issue fatigue or competition for Opportunities Niagara’s mandate. It was a blow to the Region’s poverty reduction strategy and many other local agencies and organizations when the initiative shut down. It was the perfect arms-length vehicle through which the Region could have delivered its prosperity program.”

Brian Hutchings takes a slightly different view. “Opportunities Niagara helped create excitement and energy around poverty reduction. It began its run with a lot of energy and attracted many high-level players to its discussions. Bankers, health care officials and provincial ministry representatives gradually became disengaged when the initiative failed to generate a solid vision for its work and their roles.”

Fortunately, the province’s recent work to establish an Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy coincided with the Niagara Region’s research and planning efforts to launch its own region-wide poverty reduction plan. Brian continues: “There is little doubt that Opportunities Niagara contributed to the current public interest in poverty reduction, but there were many people and organizations doing a lot of good work on the issue.”

Fragile leadership

Collaborations must be able to attract and retain the interest of persons of influence; otherwise, as the work of the collaboration continues, influential members may start to be replaced by people of lesser influence or the original members may become less engaged in the work.

In some cases, the success of a collaboration may depend on a charismatic personality. If that individual moves on to other work or is unable to play the range of roles upon which the collaboration has come to depend, the collaboration is put at risk.

For Opportunities Niagara, both of these elements – failure to maintain influential members and a heavy reliance on one person – were in evidence. Rick Tarajos feels that some of the problems may have been exacerbated by the size and makeup of the initiative’s Leadership Roundtable (LRT). In many Vibrant Communities, leadership groups have representation from people living on low incomes and membership can reach 100. They operate as idea incubators, provide input and feedback on proposals and get involved in operations, as required. When Opportunities Niagara became an independent organization, its LRT shrank to the size of a traditional board of directors and it essentially functioned as one.

Says Rick: “Opportunities Niagara’s decision making was carried out through a structure that was more about governance than collaboration. We needed to complete an in-depth analysis of each of our projects and commitments before we moved into action, and to make sure we had all the human resources capacities required to do the job well. When one person is tasked too heavily and there is insufficient discussion of the roles and capacities of staff members, an organization puts itself at risk.”

Peter Papp himself agrees that the initiative depended too much on one person. Says Peter: “The key decision about whether Opportunities Niagara would continue was thoroughly debated and coincided with an unfortunate series of events that had put the organization at financial risk. The timing of the bankruptcy announcement – just as the Region was unveiling its poverty reduction plan – was harmful to the many relationships, connections, projects and investments that had become the foundation of poverty reduction efforts in Niagara.”

A continuation of the role and the work

The original purpose of Opportunities Niagara was to create a neutral space where would-be collaborators could be brought together from across the region to work on poverty reduction issues. Its dissolution has confirmed the community’s understanding of the importance of the brokerage and convening role as distinct from – and complementary to – the contributions of funding bodies and service agencies.

The Regional government will be investing \$1.5 million in its poverty reduction plan. Says Brian Hutchings: “We’re in the process of hiring an Opportunities Niagara-type agency to help get our community agencies talking about how they can work together. Our plan is to take a neighbourhood-focused approach to poverty reduction and we’re identifying the right set of players that can help us achieve significant progress.”

Conclusion

Members of Opportunities Niagara feel that four of the five elements of the parasitic trap played a role in the demise of their venture. Some key outcomes were subtle, difficult to communicate, and not pursued or tracked in the systematic way required to demonstrate their value. The initiative’s focus eventually drifted toward providing programs and services, rather than brokering and facilitating collaborative action. The stand-alone model increased risk and put more pressure on one person to play a very wide range of roles. Sufficient resources for Opportunities Niagara may have been available in the community, but the sustainability plan was flawed and was not pursued vigorously enough to provide results. The membership of the Leadership Roundtable gradually shrank to the size of a traditional board of directors and the wider community support became fragile.

One respondent reflected that the initiative’s core funding problems had been an ongoing concern, but that in the past, things had managed to work themselves out. This telling statement describes the fine balance convener organizations must master in order to be successful. It lies somewhere between faith and practicality – somewhere between the best laid sustainability plans and the serendipitous nature of timing and personality. Collaborators need to watch for and respond to signs of both progress and instability in their work. Had Opportunities Niagara been more attendant to the warnings of its balance sheet, might it still be in operation?

Garry Loewen and Anne Makhoul

Endnotes

1. Tamarack will soon publish a paper entitled “The Resilient – Not Sustainable – Collaboration” which explores the challenges of maintaining collaborative efforts over a long period of time.

Reference

Zimmerman, B. (2007). Presentation to the Communities Collaborating Institute, Waterloo, September.

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