What Do Successful Communities Do?

Dr. David Robinson
Institute for Northern Ontario Research and Development
Laurentian University

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Abstract

There are thousands and thousands of successful communities around the world. There are also communities that are failing, communities in decline, communities that people want to leave. In the background, economic forces drive growth and decline of towns, cities and even countries. Nonetheless, communities that face the same circumstances apply their talents in quite different ways. Their use of the pool of talent, as Adam Smith observed, “have not all been equally favourable to the greatness of its produce.”

A great deal of research has been applied to determining how to make a community more successful. Can we boil the wealth of experience and research down to a short and useful list of “Best Practices?” As it turns out, it is not easy to find lessons that can be transferred easily from a successful community to another that hopes to imitate it’s success.
What Do Successful Communities Do?¹

It is a simple question but it has no simple answer. Every city has many problems and the list of problems is unique for every city. Each of the problems has many possible solutions (see the 3,800 proven solutions from more than 140 countries at Bestpractice.org). When problems are taken as a group, more solutions may appear. Different groups of problems offer different opportunities. The best solution may not be feasible, and feasible solutions may be less than ideal. What works depends on the resources in the community, and every community has many resources. What works depends on the leadership available, on the programs of other levels of government, and on the ideas that are already in the heads of people.

Looking for stories from other communities it is clear that solving problems starts with identifying the problems to be solved. St. Louis, for example, began with

1. an exodus of its middle class to the suburbs
2. an aging infrastructure of roads, parks, and sewers,
3. a government that operated on equal parts paper and patronage,
4. blocks of empty homes and buildings,
5. a city that no longer believed in itself.

None of the problems St. Louis began with are likely to be at the top of the list for Sudbury, of course.

Principle 1:
Identify real problems and don’t whitewash the descriptions.

Projects that led to the 30-year regeneration of St. Louis included

1. Creation of St. Louis’ first historic district with federal government assistance,
2. Developing a Regional Jobs Initiative is trying stronger links among economic development, workforce development, community interests, business, human services, and transportation systems.

¹The Councillors’ Toolkit series consists of simple, but not widely understood ideas from economics and other social sciences that Municipal Councillors can use to make our communities better. They are part of a project at INLRD to develop a manual of economics for municipal government. This topic was suggested by Giselle Chrétien, Chair of the Community Adjustment Committee for Sudbury in 2009.
3. Developing ways to connect people to jobs through better transportation services.
4. Starting a four-year program to test the effectiveness of coordinated job placement, transportation, and career advancement services in linking inner-city job-seekers with employment opportunities in fast-growing suburban areas.
5. Creating a steering committee to find ways to re-energize neighbourhoods and business districts using MetroLink light rail corridor.

The St. Louis solutions are not likely to fit the Sudbury situation, since they are solutions to a different set of problems. One lesson that jumps out is that the rejuvenation of St. Louis grew to involve many inter-related initiatives.

**Principle 2:**  
Be prepared to support many inter-related initiatives.

Since problems take a long time to develop, they will usually take a long time to fix. The regeneration of St Louis was a long project.

**Principle 3:**  
Plan to make a sustained effort over a long period.

The solutions described involved a lot of people. Not one was developed or carried out just by city staff - in fact the initiatives appear to have come from outside of the city administration and the council. St. Louis Council changed over the period of renewal, becoming more and more supportive of citizen action.

**Principle 4:**  
Encourage and support outside initiatives.

Surprisingly, there seems to be very little in the literature about welcoming the people who bring ideas forward. Communities that don’t find solutions have obviously failed to develop the thinkers, the leaders and the ideas they needed. We talk about community participation, although we rarely commit money or skill to the long, hard job of making participatory democracy work.

**Principle 5:**  
Every project should be carried out in a way that helps to develop
new leadership abilities within the community.

Looking back at the St. Louis projects, another point stands out: over time some very creative solutions emerged and won wide support. The ideas were probably not very well developed at first. They were probably not popular at first either. What was it about the City of St. Louis that nurtured these ideas to the point where they became solutions? There must be ways to encourage members of the community to put their ideas forward and to make sure that good ideas are nurtured until they are ready to stand on their own.

This is an idea that almost everyone half-understands. We talk about encouraging young people to speak, and we sometimes even listen. We believe firmly in consulting the community, even though we often limit each member of the community to five minutes in one meeting.

**Principle 6:**
Create organizations to help inspirations grow into solutions. Make the city into an Ideas Hothouse.

Other good ideas that may not travel well can still provide clues about what works. For example, Charleston/Berkley in South Carolina developed a plan to preserve historic and natural resources for future generations; to ensure greater access to parks, recreation areas, and other public amenities; and to increase opportunities and improve quality of life through community-based education and well-managed economic development. This is similar to efforts in Sudbury.

**Principle 7:**
Build on existing assets to make a community more attractive

Tulsa Oklahoma voted to raise $885 million by increasing the local sales tax to provide incentives, improve education and redevelop some community facilities. The first thing that is remarkable about this example is that the campaign to increase taxes was led by the mayor. The second is that the resolution passed in a society that has become religiously anti-tax - so much so that municipalities and even states are going bankrupt because they are unable to raise taxes to cover the costs of basic services.

**Principle 8:**
Be prepared to pay your way if you want to make changes.
Washington’s Urban Family University began with the problem that in some neighborhoods, problems are so severe and entrenched that strategies which focus on the development of the whole family are needed. To solve this problem the Institute created the Urban Family University, which sets out to create urban neighborhoods in which every family has the resources and the support necessary to realize their full potential – individually and as a community – and to ensure that all of the children in these communities will grow up with the close guidance, discipline, and nurturing of caring adults. The model might work for Sudbury. The Institute is developing a training and technical assistance package.

**Principle 9:**
Look for ways to turn problems into assets.

**Summary**

The solutions that we’ve looked are unlikely to fit Sudbury, but the principles that we have identified are likely to apply. There is such a huge range of problems and solutions available to learn from that it is simply impossible to talk about general “Best Practices.” There seems to be no shortcut, no best short list. In fact, reading the stories of many communities, it seems that the only consistently best practice is mobilizing groups around specific issues. It seems to have happened in every case a dramatic project has succeeded.