Planning and Coordination Tables in Halton

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH?

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The purpose of this paper, like others that will follow as part of an occasional series from Halton Nonprofit Network, is to encourage dialogue and provoke discussion around key issues confronted by the nonprofit sector in Halton.

During a brief exercise of not more than 10 minutes at a meeting of the Coordinating Committee of the Halton Nonprofit Network, participants named more than 30 service planning or coordinating tables in the Halton area. This was not an exhaustive list, but at more than 30, people were a little taken aback.

A planning or coordinating table brings together a variety of people, usually has some staff resources, meets regularly and generates plans. Without even attempting to quantify, from the perspective of resource consumption alone, the allocation of resources to Planning and Coordinating in the Halton community is breath-taking. The "busy-ness" that is created is just as mind-numbing as people move from table to table, often seeing the same faces - "if it's Tuesday, it must be housing".

This layer of planning and coordinating activity is in addition to the work that goes on in institutions, governments and organizations on a day-to-day level. We know that people working in the nonprofit sector – and in particular the human services sub-sector, which is the sector about which we have the most information - are deeply, deeply fatigued. Anecdotally, people talk about being over-stretched and under-resourced. Funding levels are generally stagnant or not keeping pace with inflation let alone allowing for growth (in some cases, funding is being reduced). Accountability requirements are increasing but the resources necessary to respond to these requirements has to be carved out of already stretched budgets. Meanwhile, service demands and caseloads continue to outstrip resources. Add shared planning and coordination efforts to that mix, and the result is an almost intolerable drain on human and organizational energy. To use an old analogy, at some point, even camels' backs break.

The situation is, for many, intolerable, but people struggle on: at one level, this reflects deep commitment to the people or the cause they serve, and; at another level, employment alternatives are few and far between in an economy that at best can be described as stagnant.

The image that comes to mind is that of a paint crew, busy at work, discussing how best to apply the paint, who should buy the paint, how we should get the paint to the site, who should designate who to do what section of the painting, the colour of the paint…and none of them look up long enough to realize, first, that there are three other crews at work on the same walls, each with different colours and, second, that the walls have huge cracks that are deepening with every passing hour. Even painting will not stop the walls from eventually crumbling.

So, could we be doing things differently and to greater impact?

There is nothing wrong, at least theoretically, with planning and coordination…

Planning and coordination are, in and of themselves, sensible and useful activities. At issue here is not the basic need to be effective and efficient in using our limited resources and for there to be dialogue, communication and agreement on how to do it. Instead, what is at issue here is HOW we choose to plan and coordinate and whether that planning and coordinating is leading to breakthrough results for our community.

a)   Duplication of Effort within Issues or Populations

When the Committee listed planning and coordination tables with which they were familiar, they uncovered within sub-sectors layers of duplication. For example, within the area of "equity" or "diversity", the group quickly named 9 different tables[1], and there are more. For seniors, they named 4, and for poverty they identified 5 (again, in each case, there may be more). In short, we believe that duplication of effort is rampant.

The challenges associated with this sort of duplication stem from fragmentation of planning and coordinating efforts; school boards create their own planning tables, or governments create their own planning tables, or community agencies create their own planning tables.

The result of these fragmented efforts includes:

- Not being aware of or factoring in what others are doing;
- Not acknowledging the commonality of issues shared within and across sub-sectors;
- Not being sensitive to history, not acknowledging or factoring in previous work on issues, and, not building on past efforts;
- Less than effective or efficient use of resources, i.e., multiple tables dealing with the same issues involving many of the same players in slightly different roles. i.e., today's sponsor of a table is tomorrow's participant at another table dealing with the same issues, and;
- A failure to "connect the dots" across sub-sectors, e.g., equity issues, poverty and homelessness (each with separate planning tables or layers of planning tables) are inter-connected.

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[1] The tables that were identified in this quick exercise were: Halton Equity and Diversity Roundtable; Halton District School Board Equity Initiative; Halton Separate School Board Equity Initiative; Safe Schools Tables; Positive Space Network; Equity Work Group of Halton Newcomer Strategy; Health Equity System Planning Committee (LHIN); Halton Region Diversity Advisory Committee, and; Burlington Inclusivity Advisory Committee. There are probably more.

b)   Why duplicate?

If this does not seem to make rational good sense, why does it happen?

There are probably a variety of factors that could include:

- Segmented service delivery and specialization that leads to "our" experience of an issue or challenge being perceived as unique or different than someone else's experience of the same issue, suggesting we have to deal with it differently (whether this is valid or not is worth discussion);
- Issues of control and containment of dissenting voices and a tendency towards being risk averse, i.e., when an organization sponsors a planning table they have a sense that they have better control over the outcomes, and;
- Competition within sub-sectors, often for scarce resources.

Whatever the source, the results are the same: inefficient use of resources and increasingly unmanageable workloads as organizations scramble to find people to sit around planning tables that multiply at a dizzying rate.

For all the efforts at planning and coordination, are there meaningful outcomes for people and communities receiving services?

It has been the failure to have meaningful impacts in the community around issues such as poverty and homelessness that have led in the past decade or so to the emergence of new service models, including CCIs (Coordinated Community Initiatives) throughout North America. At this juncture, the effectiveness of such activities is uncertain and there continue to be intransigent and deep social inequities throughout communities, including Halton. [2]

Who gets invited to the planning or coordinating table and how they are engaged makes a difference…

If one could look at the membership of all the planning and coordinating tables in Halton, who would you see sitting there? By and large, one would see professionals. It is rare to see "clients"

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[2] In <u>Where We Live Matters </u>(Community Development Halton 2013), an extensive literature review and cumulative decades of experience led to the conclusion that it is the engagement of citizens that makes a difference in efforts of community vitalization and revitalization. We would argue that the same might be true of planning and collaboration efforts. Certainly there are energetic and emergent voices that argue that professionals, and the systems that have built up around them, are incapable of solving the problems we confront as communities.

or just regular folks sitting there. And when they do appear, they are far out-numbered by professionals. It is generally professionals who define the problems and professionals that develop the processes, plans and coordination efforts to address the problems.

> In Western culture, we've refined the practice of problem solving. We learned to identify and label the deficiency-here are the failing schools; these are the broken families; this is the abusive Corporation. We've developed squadrons of professionals trained to break down problems and their component parts, and then to resolve, reform and eradicate them. These are the well-intentioned social servants who are reengineering our schools to produce learning, our hospitals to produce health, our police to produce safety, our legal systems to produce justice. We approach problems one by one and invest in specialized institutions to deal with each of them...

> Unfortunately, the proposed solutions that come from these institutions often have little to do with the people who live in the community; they have to do with the professionals who come to solve the community's problems. The citizens themselves become clients, needy people who are acted upon by wiser outsiders. (Wheatley 2011, 83-84)

But the literature is clear: it is through the meaningful participation of regular folks that change is more likely to occur. Generally, where there has been no real change or real innovation that could lead to breakthroughs it is simply because we are reinforcing old strategies that have not worked as well as we would have hoped.

> ...people's capacity to self organize is the most powerful change process there is…

> All systems go through life cycles. There is progress, setbacks, seasons. When a new effort begins, it feels like spring. People are excited by new possibilities, innovations and ideas abound, problems get solved, people feel inspired and motivated to contribute. It all works very well, for a time.

> And then, especially if there is growth and success, things can start to go downhill. Leaders lose trust in people's ability to self organize and feel the need to take control, to standardize everything, to issue policies, regulations, and laws. Self-organization gets replaced by over-organization; compliance becomes more important than creativity. Means and ends get reversed, and people struggle to uphold the system rather than having the system support them. These large, lumbering bureaucracies - think about

education, healthcare, government, business - no longer have the capacity to create solutions to the very problems they were created to solve. (Wheatley 2011, 9 - 10)

Could planning and coordination tables become effective resources rather than a drain on resources?

In sum, the current proliferation of planning and coordinating tables is a challenge: it is a poor use of resources due to duplication; it is draining the energies of well intentioned professionals, adding to stress and burn-out; it may well not be capable of delivering breakthrough changes for our community, and; it does not reflect the "best practice" of meaningful engagement of the community.

What might we consider doing differently? We could:

- Significantly reduce the energy and resource depletion that multiple tables lead to by focusing efforts on only Halton-wide planning and coordination efforts (sub-sector participation would lead to "take-aways" that could be applied in individual organizations and institutions);
- We could find a mechanism for linking Halton-wide planning tables together in order to ensure more effective understanding of the links among critical issues, e.g., homelessness, equity and poverty, etc.
- We could – and this would be radical – provide for meaningful participation of regular folks and communities at planning and coordination tables.

If we are going to invest in shared planning and coordination processes, let's take the steps to maximize their effectiveness, their efficiency and their capacity to usher in meaningful changes in the life of our community.

Works Cited

Community Development Halton. *Where We Live Matters.* Burlington, Ontario: Community Development Halton, 2013.

Wheatley, Margaret. *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2011.

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