

A Community Engagement Tool

Consulting Your Partners: Innovative Approach

Elicits In-Depth Information and Builds Connections In One 4-hour Session

When the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) began to plan a consultation with its 130+ on-the-ground community partners, it had a number of familiar goals, including eliciting information and feedback, developing relationships, uncovering synergies, etc.

But one goal would dominate the planning process: to avoid the “same old same old” feel of community consultations and engage participants in a new and stimulating experience. The result was a truly innovative combination of high tech, visual and performing arts, and old-fashioned conversation. It elicited a huge amount of quality input, engaged participants with each other, and received rave reviews.

Here’s a summary of the approach.
It might work for your next consultation.
For more info on HRPR: www.hamiltonpoverty.ca

Purpose of the Gathering

As part of a three-level social change strategy, the HRPR works with more than 130 “Community Solution Partners” – organizations and collaborative efforts that are each contributing in distinct ways to the goal of “Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child.” These community organizations are working in all sectors, on a wide spectrum of social issues, and offering a multitude of different programs.

The Roundtable has a number of challenges related to these partners:

- ▶ to stay on top of their news and developments
- ▶ to encourage them to break through “silos” and connect with each other
- ▶ to facilitate joint problem solving among them and help them align resources
- ▶ to help drive change by disseminating knowledge and best practices to them and among them
- ▶ to link partners and their efforts with the strategic poverty focus of the Roundtable

Bringing the Community Solution Partners together from time to time is an important way HRPR achieves these objectives. But HRPR also recognizes the time constraints all agencies are working under and sought in this case to maximize the benefit and minimize the time commitment for participants.

The planning committee turned to technology and the arts to craft an innovative approach that would engage participants and create excitement for the vision of making Hamilton the best place to raise a child.

Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

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Four Basic Components

The event took four hours (from 10 AM to 2 PM on May 8, 2008) and included lunch. It was held at Mohawk College in Hamilton.

Participants (about 70 in all) were divided into three groups and rotated through four different program components, so that all groups experienced all components:

1. Conversation Café
2. Decision Support Lab
3. Dialogue and performance with musicians from Design Hope
4. Speaker's Corner Video

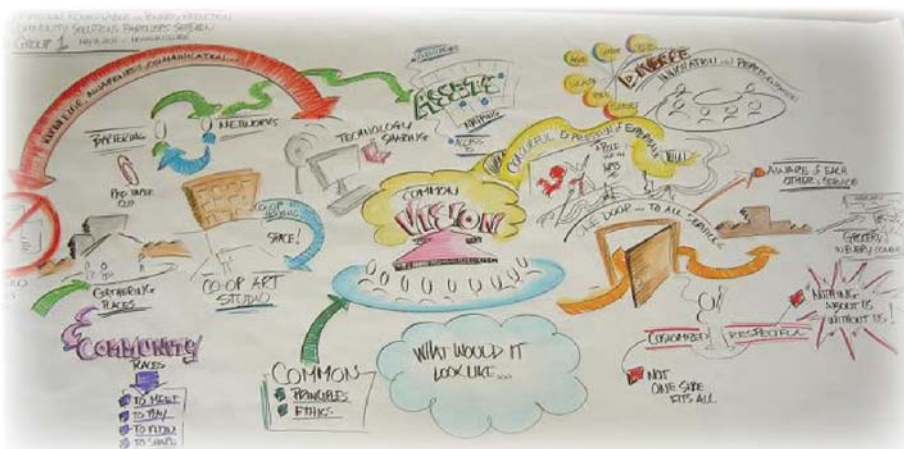
(See Appendix for the agenda.)

Component #1 -- Conversation Café:

This component used visual arts to supplement a facilitated conversation. In addition to traditional note-takers' written summaries, graphic recorder David Hasbury made a visual documentation of the discussion. A number of questions guided the discussion:

- ▶ What are the top 2 or 3 things your organization is doing today to Make Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child
- ▶ What do you see as specific achievements related to poverty reduction in Hamilton
- ▶ How can we work better together to address poverty (this was a question that the Minister of Community and Social Services was also seeking input on at the time, to inform a provincial poverty strategy) and what creates the possibility of moving this agenda forward

The Conversation Café discussions surfaced a wide range of information and created an atmosphere of dialogue and collaboration among participants. Extremely rich input was elicited for the Minister's consultation on a provincial poverty strategy, covering values to lead the process, approach, strategy, and concrete examples of initiatives to move people out of poverty. David Hasbury's graphic records (see an example below) were displayed during the May 12th provincial consultation on the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy and the HRPR Director interpreted them to the Minister.



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What We Liked About The Graphic Recording Component

- ▶ it accesses images, not just words, for those of us who process information visually
- ▶ it promotes exchange among the group as the artist records input
- ▶ it creates excitement among participants
- ▶ it produces a visual record of the ideas raised

Component # 2 -- Decision Support Lab

This technology tool, developed at Mohawk College, allows all participants to provide input electronically (and anonymously) at the same time. The results are then quickly tabulated and fed back to participants.



Each participant sits at a computer terminal in Mohawk College's Decision Support Lab and responds to a series of questions. The HRPR event asked participants to imagine that it is the year 2013 and Hamilton's poverty has been reduced by 25%. A banner headline from the Hamilton Spectator front page of that date was projected to reinforce the vision. A series of questions then led participants to

- ▶ identify actions that had contributed to that result
- ▶ outline the role the HRPR had played, and
- ▶ name three people in their agency who had had influence over that imagined breakthrough.

The results of the decision lab were a veritable treasure trove. Hundreds of strategies and measures defining poverty reduction for Hamilton were submitted. Participants identified actions at all three levels of government, ranging from public transit, to employment, housing, child care, living wage, public health, immigration, taxation and other elements that would contribute to poverty reduction. Participants also suggested directions for the HRPR on its potential role and strategies in areas like leadership, government, communication, immigration, business, advocacy, inclusion, employment etc. Impressions on what influence the HRPR had already had were also recorded. The volume of input far exceeded the amount elicited in a traditional meeting format. (To see the full report for more details send your request to: hrpr@hcf.on.ca)

What We Liked About The Computer Lab Component

- ▶ it quickly elicited a wealth of information from each participant
- ▶ it “leveled the playing field” among participants with different comfort levels about speaking up in a group
- ▶ it is collaborative: others’ input is seen immediately
- ▶ it allowed people to express criticism without fear of censure from the group

Component #3 – Musicians from “Design Hope”



This component brought in music and performance as a vehicle for social change. “Design Hope” is a volunteer group of socially conscious designers, songwriters and other community members who raise awareness and thousands of dollars annually for the homeless. One recent project was the creation of 16 songs and a CD called “Hope.”

In this session, two of the Hamilton “Hope” musicians shared their experience of being involved in social change and discussed how the arts can contribute to making Hamilton the best place to raise a child. They performed for participants and their CD was sold at the event.

What We Liked About The Music Component

- ▶ the dialogue about using arts as a vehicle for change was interactive and experience-based
- ▶ the performance was inspirational and affirming for delegates
- ▶ links were made between the musicians and social agencies
- ▶ 40 CDs were sold, raising \$400 to feed 100 Hamiltonians

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Component #4 – Speaker’s Corner Videos

This component took place over the lunch hour.

Participants were forewarned that there would be an opportunity to profile their poverty-reduction success stories on video. Two video studios were set up in the College’s small meeting rooms and attendees, if they chose to participate, were interviewed by communications specialists from Mohawk College. Each participant had two minutes to describe how and why their organization is making Hamilton the best place to raise a child. This component was a great idea, and we ended up with about 5 videos. But we had technical problems and it wasn’t as successful as we would have liked.

What We Liked About The Video Component

- ▶ it captured additional info about partner activities
- ▶ it created some excitement at the event
- ▶ it produced video clips that partner organizations and the HRPR could use after the event –
- ▶ tools that would be difficult to produce on their own

Feedback about the Day from Participants

Both informal feedback and written evaluation forms were very positive. Participants felt they had learned a lot about the work going on to reduce poverty in the community. They enjoyed using the new technology at Mohawk’s Decision Lab. They felt the different components allowed people to participate more equally than in traditional meetings. They were inspired by the musicians and were struck by the deep commitment of their colleagues and the HRPR to poverty reduction in Hamilton.



The Session's Impact

- ▶ 63 partners attended from the voluntary sector, school boards, labour, business, all levels of government
- ▶ all partners provided updates on their poverty-reduction activities; valuable data was collected
- ▶ 41 new community leaders and potential partners were identified
- ▶ HRPR took the pulse of partners related to its work and identified areas of potential influence
- ▶ partners' poverty-reduction work was translated into graphic form
- ▶ partners provided input to Minister's consultation on the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy
- ▶ recommendations for policy change were formulated for all levels of government
- ▶ 40 "Hope" CDs sold, \$400 raised to feed 100 people

Kudos to the Planning Committee

This innovative event was the brainchild of a creative and collaborative planning committee. They helped design the session, secure resources like speakers, graphic artist, musicians, the lab and meeting spaces at Mohawk College, etc. – all while keeping the cost reasonable. On the day, they acted as co-hosts and ensured that things went smoothly. The planning committee demonstrated "collaboration in action," and modeled the Roundtable's commitment to collaboration in decision-making.

Thanks to Planning Committee members:

Paul DeCourcy, Arts Hamilton

Marg Kowalski, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

Deirdre Pike, Social Planning and Research Council

Jay Robb, Mohawk College

For More Information contact
Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction
www.hamiltonpoverty.ca

- ▶ Resource Written by: Nancy F. Johnson, Johnson & Associates
- ▶ Design: Creative impact Communications

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May 8, 2008
MOHAWK COLLEGE
AGENDA

- 9:30 – 9:55 am REGISTRATION & REFRESHMENTS
- 10:00 – 10:10 am WELCOME ADDRESS
Liz Weaver, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction
- 10:10 – 10:20 am INTRODUCTION OF THE AGENDA
Deirdre Pike, Social Planning and Research Council
- 10:30 – 11:15 am SESSION “A”
- Group # 1: DESIGN HOPE
- Group # 2: DECISION SUPPORT LAB
- Group # 3: CONVERSATION CAFÉ
- 11:20 – 12:05 pm SESSION “B”
- Group # 1: CONVERSATION CAFÉ
- Group # 2: DESIGN HOPE
- Group # 3: DECISION SUPPORT LAB
- 12:10 – 12:55 pm LUNCH and Speaker’s Corner
- 1:00 – 1:45 pm SESSION “C”
- Group # 1: DECISION SUPPORT LAB
- Group # 2: CONVERSATION CAFÉ
- Group # 3: DESIGN HOPE
- 1:50 – 2:00 pm CLOSING REMARKS