

# THE CONTEXT EXPERTS

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How to increase the authenticity of community engagement and eradicate tokenistic community engagement through the meaningful involvement of context experts.

Community engagement is now considered the rule, not the exception. Anyone working in the field of community change knows that community engagement is a necessary element of any effective initiative. But what does it mean to do it well? For me, the biggest criteria for community engagement done well is ensuring authenticity in the process.

Authentic community engagement is the intentional process of co-creating solutions in partnership with people who know best, through their own experiences, the barriers to opportunity. Authentic community engagement is grounded in building relationships based on mutual respect that acknowledges each person's added value to developing solutions together.<sup>1</sup>

This co-creation of solutions is aligned with the movement we're seeing in the field of community engagement to move away from 'doing for' the community, and instead, 'doing with' the community. We see examples of this in the increased use of technologies such as participatory budgeting, in municipal community projects that require matched community resources, and process improvements that include community partnerships from the time an opportunity is conceived. We see it at a fundamental level when organizations choose to invest in developing relationships with the community rather than engaging in a transactional way.

Writer and teacher Jack Richiutto has summarized that there are "two things [that] make community engagement authentic: education and empowerment." Authentic engagement is about truly listening and being eager to learn from the community about the ideas they have for solving community issues or the opportunities they may see for improvement.

The flip side, inauthentic engagement, is when practitioners are "simply interested in seeing the exercise as a way to create the appearances of listening

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- Jack Richiutto

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<sup>1</sup> Definition from <http://voicesforracialjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/VFRJ.Authentic-Community-Engagement.09.11.14.pdf>

while working to convert as many attendees to their conclusions”.<sup>2</sup> Inauthentic engagement is about remaining in control; it’s about tokenistic gestures.

Tokenistic community engagement is often an unfortunate outcome of community engagement that’s been mandated. Many sectors, including engineering and healthcare, require community engagement to be a part of every development process. It’s mandated for positive reasons – the understanding that community input is essential when the end result will directly impact the community – but the execution is what can often be problematic. If you are in a situation where community engagement is mandated, spend time figuring out your ‘why’. Why is it important to hear from the community? What wisdom and lived experience do community members have? Being intentional with the purpose of engagement for each of your initiatives will help ensure that ‘the way you’ve always done it’ doesn’t get in the way of the need for authentic engagement.

Tokenistic community engagement typically comes from a place of fear, or a place of indifference. I’ve been part of civil engineering project processes where design and community engagement took place concurrently, but there was little interest from engineers in changing the design based on community feedback. In these cases, community engagement is just a checkbox.

I believe the engineers were coming at the design challenge with good intentions. They had done the scenario planning and knew that the design proposed would ease traffic congestion even though residents were in favour of a different solution. You see, the engineers and residents had different goals. The engineers wanted to ease congestion, while residents wanted to maintain walkable access to shops and the beach. Whose goal is higher priority?

In any initiative, there will be different stakeholders who have different perspectives on the problem, different goals, and different kinds of expertise to lend to generating a solution.

#### Questions to ask to promote authentic engagement:

- Who are the experts on this topic? Who *wants* to be involved? Who has unique skills or insights to offer regarding the engagement that cannot be garnered in any other way?
- How will the influencers and connectors in the community be identified and engaged?
- Which decisions are we inviting the community to engage about?
- How will the process represent authentic engagement in shaping decisions?
- How will engagement activities be structured for optimum community learning, dialogue and creativity?
- What structures will we use to leverage as much input from and interaction among as many people as possible?
- Are there important post-decision ways the community can add value to the ultimate and ongoing success of the effort?
- What success indicators will be used to assess the value of the effort?

<sup>2</sup> Ricchiuto, Jack – The Art of Authentic Civic Engagement, June 23, 2014:  
<http://www.jackricchiuto.com/oqonhg945zrpeby0qlxc8opxdvc0an/2953?rq=Authentic%20Community%20Engagement>

## CONTEXT EXPERTS

I first heard the terms ‘content experts’ and ‘context experts’ from Brenda Zimmerman at Tamarack’s 2015 Collective Impact Summit and they’ve since become staple terminology in the field of community change. Zimmerman used these terms to describe the difference between people who know a lot about the subject matter versus people who know a lot about the experience and local environment.

- **Content Experts** are professionals, staff in your organization, service providers, and leaders with formal power who have knowledge, tools, and resources to address the issue.
- **Context Experts** are people with lived experience of the situation, including children and youth. They are the people who experientially know about the issue.

Engaging context experts is a critical process in all community engagement, whether you’re working on a 5+ year collective impact initiative, ongoing municipal service improvements, or a one-time project. Similar to any community engagement effort, the engagement of context experts can be done well or done poorly.

The remainder of this paper will focus on how we can engage context experts authentically in our community engagement efforts, by providing several stories showcasing meaningful engagement of context experts, and a distillation of lessons from these stories to keep in mind as you design your future engagement initiatives.

## “IT STARTS WITH YOU” CAMPAIGN – WHITE RIBBON CANADA

White Ribbon is the world’s largest movement of men and boys working to end violence against women and girls, promote gender equity, healthy relationships and a new vision of masculinity. Starting in 1991, they asked men to wear white ribbons as a pledge to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women and girls. Since then White Ribbon has spread to over 60 countries around the world.



*It starts with you, It stays with him* is an online-based social media campaign developed by White Ribbon and Le Centre Ontarien de Prevention des Agressions to inspire men to promote healthy equal relationships with the boys in their lives.

The campaign included an Ontario-wide survey aimed at men 18 years and older to ask them about their perceptions of and exposure to violence against women and the other core White Ribbon tenets. 1,064 men participated in May 2012, with the results analyzed and the summary shared out as an infographic to educate the wider population about these issues.

White Ribbon Canada also partnered with Community Story Strategies to bring together two groups of men to share their experiences of violence against women, gender equality, and healthy relationships. The first group of men came together from across Toronto in 2011, and connected with each other across a range of cultures, ages, and experiences to each create a digital story. The second group of men came together with the support of the Social Services Network in Markham. The men were from the South Asian diaspora, and completed their stories at the end of 2013.

Stories were created during a digital storytelling workshop or series of workshops, where participants were coached through the process of creating their own digital story. Participants learned about the basic elements of a story – setting the context, introducing the characters, the story build-up, the climax, and the resolution including what changed and the impact it had – to write the script of their story. They record themselves sharing their story and pair the audio with pictures and video clips to create their 2-5 minute digital story. You can see all of the digital stories on the [campaign website](#).

The digital stories were then analyzed for similar themes and an [educator's guide](#) was created for use in schools as an aid to teach and mentor boys to value women and girls and treat them with respect. The themes that emerged through the first group's stories include: Fatherhood, Violence against women, Violence, Role modeling/Mentorship, Anger, Racial Identity, Family, and Homophobia/Transphobia.

In the classroom, educators can choose a theme, watch the videos together with their students, and then respond to the discussion starters for each video. Robert, a teacher who uses the educators guide, recognizes the value of using these real life stories to educate. He says we need to “get more and more people talking about the same issue at the same time for as long as possible. I know that dialogue with each other within communities is the easiest way to teach and educate and reduce harm.”

When we define authentic community engagement as being that which empowers and educates, this campaign from White Ribbon Canada is a powerful example. The context experts participating in creating stories are given the opportunity and support to share their experiences, and the process proved to be empowering for them as participants. The context experts themselves, through the dissemination of their stories in schools and online, are educating students and allowing them to learn from real life stories and experiences.

Similarly, the process of creating the educator's guide is respectful of the context experts. An alternate, less

#### **Participant experiences of the digital storytelling workshops:**

“You can feel isolated and not know that there are other guys who care and it's easy to feel alone... Hearing what we share and what we all care about collectively is really empowering. From this group of guys I think there's going to be energy and action.”

– Tuval

“I thank digital stories for allowing me to find that person to share those details and those hard parts so that people realize it's not an easy road everywhere. And learning through these difficult pieces is key to leading a better life.”

– Rolfe

“To be here touched my life in a profound way and heightened my awareness to it. Having been here and seen this opens your eyes to what's out there. Anyone who came here and got the depth of experience and depth of sharing will walk away with a very different perspective on how violence against women is perpetrated every day.”

– Jim

authentic process (but likely a more common one) could have been to use research and already existing education material to create the educator's guide, then add in the digital stories to support the material.

Starting with the context experts, learning from their experiences, synthesizing the commonalities and differences, and turning it into educational material allows for a more impactful process and outcome.

## “SPEAK NOW” – HAMILTON SPEAKERS BUREAU

The Speak Now Hamilton Speakers' Bureau was formed in 2014 to create a more realistic picture of what poverty looks like.

Speak Now shares personal stories and experiences of poverty and social exclusion to tackle negative stereotypes and promote informed dialogue about the implications of the cost, health and human impact poverty has in our community. Speakers have firsthand experience, knowledge and understanding of poverty and social exclusion and share their personal stories and insight with audiences throughout Hamilton.



Participants are provided with instruction in public speaking, media engagement and diversity training. Once training is complete, participants are given opportunities to speak at public forums, panels and other functions to share their perspectives and knowledge. Honorariums are provided to speakers as well as a training stipend. In addition, speakers have the opportunity to increase their ability to advocate and become more knowledgeable about local issues surrounding poverty and social exclusion.

Speak Now is part of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and has been a key program in their efforts to shift attitudes around poverty. The Roundtable made 'Shifting Attitudes' one of their priority areas because they understood that eliminating poverty would not be possible if the leadership, working groups, partners, and wider community of Hamilton did not fully understand the issue. Celeste Licorish, former coordinator of the Speakers Bureau, explained that, "People have a lot of perspectives about poverty and what it means to be poor, but a lot of it isn't grounded in fact." Putting faces and stories around the issue increased the momentum, willingness and priority of tackling the issue.

The training is important, as the process is designed to empower individuals to share their experiences. People with lived experience are often invited to the table to be involved in an initiative, but the conditions are not created to allow that person to be comfortable to share. It's important to consider the power dynamics in the room: How many people are there to speak as context experts? Have you taken the time to establish trust amongst the group? Will messages be received with rebuttals or with understanding?

During the training, the creation of each speaker's story is a powerful experience both for those involved and those who listen. For the individual, the practice of piecing together their story can be incredibly empowering, as it is a tangible memento of their strength and resilience. For those who listen, it is an incredible opportunity for personal growth and learning. These stories provide the human feeling of the

experience that reports and policy solutions simply cannot capture.

There were 21 graduates at the end of the 12 week training in the first cohort of speakers, and over the course of the next 18 months these speakers worked with over 250 organizations and spoke to over 8,000 people.

With their training and experience, many speakers have since gone on to be involved in roundtables and working groups focused on living wage, employment, health and wellness, housing and homelessness, payday loans, daycare, social isolation and income security.

## **“EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE” PROJECT – BELGIUM FEDERAL PUBLIC SERVICE**

*Story contributed by Kirsti Battista, Tamarack Institute*

The “Experts by Experience” project was developed as an innovative strategy within public service to combat poverty by inviting context experts to be the “missing link” between the social welfare administration and the poorest citizens in Belgium.

Experts by experience were called upon to find new ways to reduce the divide between Belgium’s poorest citizens and the rest of society, to help actualize their rights, and exercise their citizenship. At the core of this theory is the understanding that context experts are uniquely positioned to contribute to “better frontline reception and better identification of the needs and sources of misunderstandings between administrations and people living in poverty.”<sup>3</sup>

Belgium's Federal Public Service (FPS) for Social Integration is the body responsible for the preparation, implementation, assessment, and monitoring of inclusive federal policy in favour of social integration. The organization was motivated to take on this project through an existing desire to dialogue with stakeholders, to develop partnerships, and implement and monitor social policies that guarantee fundamental social rights for all.

What was most innovative about their approach was the desire not just to draw on this expertise in an ad hoc way, but to turn “experts by experience” into a new occupation with a defined role in public service. In traditional stakeholder engagement, governments generally begin with the assumption that their services are already sufficiently accessible, and that small tweaks to their current programs and services, based on standard stakeholder input, will help them achieve improved outcomes.

By contrast, embedding context experts into administrative offices that develop and implement policies allows them to shed new light on problems with service delivery and systematic faults in administrative processes, as their experience and training allow them to observe what changes from the “inside” might better support people living in poverty.

Experts by experience were chosen to participate in the project based on their life experiences of being disenfranchised, having been on welfare, and/or living on the margins. Because experiences of poverty are

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<sup>3</sup> “Experts by Experience in Poverty and in Social Exclusion” (2010), authors Casman, Vranken, Dierckx, Deflandre and Campaert

wide ranging, they were asked to not only mobilize their own experiences with poverty, but to draw on the experiences of others to inform their own stories as they took part in the pilot.

For this project, individuals were given specific training for three years prior to their entry into the public service through a part-time training course. They trained to develop their skills and bring themselves up to the level that is necessary for working in government administration. Mentors and coaches were also available to them as they prepared for and initiated their employment.

The experts by experience were integrated into business-as-usual activities, rather than “peripheral” work, which is sometimes separated from regular department duties. They were recognized as fully fledged colleagues in their work responsibilities, and were asked to show how their expertise could lead to structural innovations to address the gap between public office administration and supporting the poor.

They were given five principle areas of action and intervention to focus on:

- To improve the reception and the information provided to the target public;
- To guide, accompany, and stand in for the users in their administrative activities;
- To improve, in general terms, the quality and accessibility of the services carried out by their department for the target public;
- To encourage interdepartmental collaboration, thereby strengthening the general objective of combatting poverty; and
- To relay the target public’s needs and expectations at the political level.

The “Experts by Experience” pilot project showed positive results and was accepted as best practice both in Belgium and at the international level. Overall, the rationale for training and hiring experts by experience makes good sense, as the gaps which separate the poorest from the rest of the population can be more properly addressed when context experts are trained to communicate and support the intended beneficiaries.

Poverty will not be ended without the participation of those who have lived or are living the experience of poverty first-hand. These context experts are necessary partners in determining new ways of working that will lead to more social inclusion and less poverty, and more vibrant and healthy communities.

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These stories all showcase the inclusion of context experts in a way that is empowering and that educates, ultimately leading to more effective solutions.

Michael McAfee, President of PolicyLink, shared at the recent “Neighbourhoods: The Heart of Community” event (Montreal, June 2017) that “the price of participation is contribution.” As we reflect on these stories, we can draw on some of the following lessons to consider when designing community engagement processes in the future:

“**The price of participation is contribution.**”  
- Michael McAfee

## 1. ELEVATE THE VOICE OF THE CONTEXT EXPERT

Historically, the engagement of context experts has been more akin to dipping a toe in the water rather than jumping right in. This has led to the context expert needing to become loud in order to be heard, and to become his or her own primary advocate, or to shy away or feel frustrated and disengaged with the engagement process.

Your role here in designing authentic community engagement is to elevate the voice of context experts and advocate for their involvement in the work. Do this early in your planning, not when an issue arises.

## 2. PROVIDE CONTEXT EXPERTS WITH OWNERSHIP AND THE ABILITY TO SHAPE THE SOLUTION

It's important to understand the difference between buy-in and ownership.

- **Buy-In:** Someone else has developed the idea, made the decision, designed an action plan and then asks and needs the staff/citizens to approve it and/or implement it.
- **Ownership:** Front line staff/citizens develops the idea, makes the decisions, designs the action plan and acts on it.

Buy-in is the opposite of ownership and a danger signal that tells you that your development and implementation processes are missing the essential ingredient of involving everyone who needs to be.<sup>4</sup>

A lot of community engagement includes the community giving feedback (and buying-in) to a proposed solution. This can be an effective and appropriate engagement process in the right kind of situation – whereby the proposed solution has already been largely determined and cannot change, it's a simple problem, or there is high community agreement in how the problem should be solved.

In situations where there is significant interest in the issue or if you are trying to solve a complex problem, authentically engaging context experts to provide ownership of the solution is critical.

## 3. HONOUR AND RECOGNIZE THE TIME AND TALENT OF CONTEXT EXPERTS

Are *content* experts being compensated for their involvement? If so, recognize the importance of the contribution of *context* experts equally, and compensate them accordingly.

Celeste Licorish shared that it was important for the Speak Now Speakers Bureau to honour and recognize time and talent by providing compensation as well as in-kind payments such as bus passes that participants expressed as valuable. Speak Now required a one year commitment, which proved to be mutually beneficial as context experts could choose and agree to their level of commitment and were provided the opportunity for compensation for that duration.

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<sup>4</sup> Zimmerman, Brenda – Leadership in Complex Times, September 2014:  
[http://tamarackci.ca/files/collaborative\\_impact\\_oct\\_2014\\_without\\_video.pdf](http://tamarackci.ca/files/collaborative_impact_oct_2014_without_video.pdf)

When getting commitment from context experts, recognize that different people will contribute differently. Each person brings unique strengths, values and expertise that comes with the diversity of their life experiences.

#### 4. REMOVE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Barriers to participation include those that are physical, structural, procedural and emotional. Consider:

- Are meeting days and times most suitable for context experts?
- Are meeting venues accessible?
- Do documentation and resources use plain language?
- Is there flexibility within your agenda?
- Have you allowed time for relationship building and story sharing?
- Have you considered the power balance within the room?

Remember the sage advice from writer and changemaker Margaret Wheatley, who wrote, “Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.” Take time to build relationships, especially when the group is going to be working together over a period of time. It may feel slow at first to take time for relationship building, but doing this can shape the entire course of your work. Where there may have been polarized opinion, people will be more eager to listen and understand.

“Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.”  
- Margaret Wheatley

Similarly, allow for emergence in your agenda. Being too scripted and too strict on sticking to an agenda, especially early in your work, is not conducive to story-sharing and relationship-building.

#### 5. AIM FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES, NOT TRANSACTIONAL ONES

The traditional structure of working together with context experts may look something like this: Content expert interviews context expert to get an understanding of how the solution should be developed; content expert develops a draft solution; context expert responds to the draft with feedback; content expert revises solution.

Instead of working together in a transactional and iterative way, develop the process and work toward a solution more cohesively. This includes how you establish your goals, commitment, expectations, process, and creation of a solution.

Understand that both the work you are doing and how you do it needs to benefit the context expert. Don’t just see the context expert as a source of information, see them as a partner who has a stake in your work. Use an asset-based approach to figure out the strengths that each person brings and determine together how they can contribute meaningfully.

There are certain fields of community change, including poverty reduction, that have taken a pioneering role in involving context experts in their work, piloting innovative ideas, and sharing their results and lessons learned with the wider field.

The Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward is one group who have taken a lead in ensuring people with lived experience are included in the decisions that impact their lives and their communities. Their Creating Community Tool for Engagement offers three challenges to every organization:

1. Create change through knowing each other – build relationships, be willing to be uncomfortable, value experience, and shift power;
2. Reduce barriers – identify what makes it hard to participate and do your best to remove/reduce those barriers; and,
3. Build community – how can your organization foster community?

How will you change the way you engage? What can you do to increase the authenticity of your engagement? How will you elevate the voice of the context expert?

These are wonderful questions and challenges that will only make our work more effective to realize the change we want to see in the world.

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## ABOUT LISA ATTYGALLE

Lisa is an artist and communications specialist who is passionate about engagement, customer loyalty, and the use of technology.

In her role at Tamarack, Lisa works with cities and organizations to improve the way they engage with their communities. This includes helping them with their engagement strategies, key messaging, communications plans, use of technology, social media and branding. She also heads up all of Tamarack's technology and online spaces, and constantly advocates for simplicity in infrastructure, frameworks and design.

Prior to Tamarack, Lisa was a Senior Marketing Automation Strategist at Quarry Integrated Communications, where she worked with clients to personalize their online marketing and design the best possible experience for users. She now loves applying the principles of marketing, advertising, customer loyalty, and user experience to community initiatives.

Hailing from Australia, Lisa worked as a communications officer on major water infrastructure projects as the liaison between Government, Engineering and the Community. On the side, Lisa is a visual artist and also a co-owner of Seven Shores Community Café in Waterloo, Ontario.



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