

ROBUST REVITALIZATION: CONNECTING PEOPLE, PLACE AND RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

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The Robust Revitalization Approach to Neighborhood Change

Robust revitalization embodies a **context-based, collaborative, comprehensive, equitable** and **sustainable** approach to neighborhood revitalization. This approach requires broad community involvement where the success of the effort depends upon the combined investment of time, energy, creativity and resources by all the stakeholders of the neighborhood – from current residents to others who work, attend school, play, or otherwise invest in the neighborhood. The following detail describes the types of issues and dynamics at play in robust neighborhood revitalization and can be used as a framework to help anyone prepare for their own revitalization initiative or to adjust a revitalization effort in progress.

Context-Based

- Using democratic principles in a neighborhood revitalization effort, puts residents in charge from the beginning, to the extent of their capacity to organize and lead the effort.
- If resident capacity is lacking, incorporates leadership training to cultivate a democratic, resident-led neighborhood initiative.
- Flows from recognition and understanding of the history, culture and collective values of residents and other stakeholders, who have shaped the neighborhood in the past and will continue to influence neighborhood change in the future.
- Defines neighborhood boundaries through consensus of residents and other stakeholders using historical accounts of the neighborhood's development and natural and man-made features that help define its edges.
- Adapts neighborhood revitalization best practices based upon a series of analyses of the specific neighborhood.

A note on context: Every community and neighborhood begins a revitalization process with the givens of their local context. Robust revitalization takes into account that each community has a unique combination of interested people, history and culture, creative energy, motivation, capacity and resources. This model provides a framework for organizing the effort and is meant to be followed to the greatest extent possible, as it makes sense within the local context.

Collaborative

- Brings together - from the beginning - representatives of the broad range of residents and other stakeholders to share ideas, identify opportunities to use everyone's talents and resources, and encourage synergy.
- Maintains a fully inclusive process through ongoing community dialogue, consensus-building and action.
- Parties of a true collaboration will always seek common ground, encourage broad participation and keep the effort moving forward, while addressing objections and concerns in a respectful and effective manner.

Comprehensive

- Encompasses the broad categories of social (the people), physical (the place), economic (the money), and political (the politics) issues.
- Includes individuals, community organizations, and institutions, which include large businesses in the community (per Kretzmann and McKnight's Building Communities from the Inside Out, 1993).
- Includes all sectors - public, private, and nonprofit.
- Takes into account the neighborhood's place in the larger geographic mix of the city, county, region, state and country.
- Includes research to understand the neighborhood's characteristics, dynamics, assets and challenges, including but not limited to the following categories:
 - History
 - Culture and values
 - Demographics
 - Social conditions and networks
 - Educational experience and opportunities of residents
 - Land use and zoning
 - Housing and real estate market
 - Property conditions
 - Infrastructure conditions (streets, sidewalks, water, sewer, drainage, lighting...)
 - Capital improvement program (funding for infrastructure improvements)
 - Urban design and architecture
 - Historic preservation
 - Public buildings and community institutions (libraries, schools, hospitals...)
 - Transportation networks (pedestrian, bicycle, mass transit, ride sharing, vanpools, traffic calming, automobile...)
 - Economic development (job training, employment opportunities, neighborhood business activity...)
 - Environmental quality and resources (air, water, soil... – pollution/clean-up?)
 - Safety and security
 - Recreation and greenspace
 - Arts and cultural resources
 - Community assets (people skills/talents; financial, in-kind and time contributions)

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- Partners analysis (current and potential)
- Political environment and power analysis
- Time frames for revitalization include short-term (1-2 years), mid-term (3-7 years), and long-term (8-20 years).

Equitable

- Includes analysis of culture, values and power dynamics of the neighborhood.
- Is respectful of the existing cultural fabric of the neighborhood.
- Takes into account the motivations of residents and other stakeholders.
- Institutionalizes ways to include diverse people and interests in a neighborhood revitalization initiative - from the beginning and throughout the process.

Sustainable

- Uses an organized approach where the community:
 - Identifies all stakeholders and potential collaborators (process ongoing).
 - Creates a neighborhood analysis.
 - Builds a consensus vision.
 - Determines the neighborhood's broad priorities (passions).
 - Identifies and cultivates existing and new resources (ongoing).
 - Develops outcomes/goals, neighborhood indicators for those outcomes/goals, strategies, SMART (Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound – per Doug Smith's Make Success Measurable, 1999) objectives, action steps, and an evaluation plan.
 - Takes action.
 - Reviews and measures progress and impact on the neighborhood (evaluation).
 - Celebrates what's working and analyzes what's not working.
 - Adjusts to new information and change.
 - Refocuses on the vision.
 - Develops revised outcomes/goals, neighborhood indicators, strategies and SMART objectives as needed.
 - Continues the cycle....
- Taps into residents' and other stakeholders' motivations for becoming involved and institutionalizes opportunities for them to use their creativity, capacities and other assets.
- Builds the leadership skills and technical capacity (neighborhood research, techniques, tools and best practices) of residents and other stakeholders to accomplish revitalization and ensure ongoing neighborhood self-management.
- Stays focused on the vision, which will continue to generate energy for and commitment to revitalization efforts.
- Helps people internalize and take ownership of the vision by including graphic representations of the vision in all revitalization presentations.

- Uses strategies that:
 - Ensure that it makes economic and emotional sense for people to invest time, energy and money in the neighborhood.
 - Create and sustain a broad range of housing choices to attract residents with a mix of incomes.
 - Include mechanisms to influence people's investment choices, which drive both the neighborhood and regional markets.

Robust Revitalization Community Involvement Roles

Listed below are six important roles that neighborhood revitalization participants assume by virtue of personality, capacity and interest. They range from most intensely involved with a high degree of responsibility in the revitalization effort to least intensely involved to stay minimally connected within a community:

- **“Activist/Agitator”**: Initiates ideas and works relentlessly to build interest and support where there is little or none. These catalysts for change think outside the box, spark creativity in others, and challenge them to do bold things. The activist/agitator might be adored, or considered a pain in the backside, but if a community will stay open to hearing and seriously considering the ideas of this highly energized independent thinker, fresh ideas and new opportunities can emerge - sometimes through brainstorming beyond the initial concept - that benefit a neighborhood, and often, the larger community.
- **“Process Architect”**: Takes responsibility for shepherding the entire process to fruition. Process architects are involved in the initial design, organizing and ongoing implementation of the neighborhood revitalization process (from community engagement and the consensus-building community dialogue process through neighborhood analysis, visioning, implementation and evaluation). People who gravitate toward this role are often natural leaders and this role provides additional leadership skill-building opportunity. No revitalization effort will be context-based, equitable or sustainable unless residents and other local stakeholders are meaningfully involved as process architects.
- **“Neighborhood Champion”**: Maintains a positive and supportive attitude about the neighborhood. Regardless of the challenges to accomplishing revitalization or the audience, this individual will always be the voice for what is working in the neighborhood and what positive change is possible. The neighborhood champion is not necessarily looking for the limelight or a leadership role, but is providing that consistent, positive energy and thinking that is so important for moving revitalization efforts forward.
- **“Bridge Builder”**: Participates regularly and/or provides leadership role in community dialogues to build relationships, trust, consensus and networks through

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round tables, forums, study circles, small- and large-group consensus-building meetings, etc. Bridge builders are invaluable for their abilities to listen, communicate well, be empathic and help others focus on the critical issues. During times of crisis these individuals, who are often the most highly-respected and trusted people in the community, are called upon to facilitate communication between factions with competing interests to help them find common ground and agree on actions that keep the revitalization momentum going.

- **“Neighborhood Engager”**: Participates in specific neighborhood revitalization events, as well as informal exchanges with neighbors. Neighborhood engagers are vital to attaining and maintaining a high level of participation in both planned revitalization activities and impromptu neighborhood encounters. These are the folks who talk to each other on the street, across the fence, on the bus to work, etc. They are likely to take responsibility for their piece of the revitalization puzzle – as a block captain, for instance. Neighborhood engagers want to interact formally and informally; they bring the critical mass of participation to the revitalization effort. Their vital contribution helps develop and sustain the neighborhood's institutional memory, keeps the revitalization community network strong and active, and shows policy makers, potential resource partners, and each other that the revitalization effort is broad-based and powerful.
- **“Connected Observer”**: Completes surveys that come to residence, reads newsletters to stay informed, etc. Connected observers are interested in protecting their own investment and may want to satisfy their curiosity about what's going on in the neighborhood, but don't have interest in going to meetings or special events. For instance, they might agree, if asked, to be interviewed by a neighborhood association member, or they may observe what's happening on their block, but would not necessarily call about something they saw; their input would have to be sought. Connected observers are vital to help keep a finger on the pulse of the broader neighborhood.

Each of these types of individuals is essential to the success of a neighborhood revitalization effort. Together, they bring the breadth of skills, motivation and interest needed. They also provide a balanced and holistic community involvement climate so all the steps in the revitalization process go forward with participation at every level of intensity and every step of the way. Within each of these categories it is important to have depth, as well as breadth, in numbers to make leadership development and succession planning possible.

The **practical challenges** to ensuring this high degree of involvement are to:

- set up a system to seek the involvement of a **large variety and number** of individuals so that all the roles are covered with **depth**,
- create ways for individuals to **self-select** the type of involvement that is most **comfortable and motivating** to them, and

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- build into every step of the process **opportunities** for individuals performing each of these roles to **participate in a meaningful way**.

While all of these people are essential to success, they will not always agree on approach or action steps; there will be optimists, pessimists and, in some cases, antagonists. At any point, individuals may take on a negative personality type:

- **“Obstructionist”**: Sometimes an obstructionist’s motivation is issue-oriented. In those cases, the person could also be filling one of the previously-defined roles and have an agenda or point to make concerning just that issue. Occasionally, an obstructionist brings a negative spin to every discussion in which s/he participates. Regardless of topic, s/he will offer why it cannot be accomplished – a glass half-empty attitude. While it is helpful to have someone play the devil’s advocate in discussions, some obstructionists are not helpful in this regard, as you can count on a negative comment in every instance. This predictable negativity may occur because the obstructionist enjoys being contrary, is unable to shake a negative outlook, has an agenda of disruption, or lacks the ability to discern the difference between helpful critical feedback and unfocused complaining. Whatever the obstructionist’s motivation, the challenge for people working toward revitalization is to stay positively focused on the neighborhood vision and outcomes, working methodically through each obstacle in a respectful but decisive manner.

The **art** to robust revitalization is working with the combination of issues, personalities and interests to **find common ground, encourage broad participation** and **keep the effort moving forward**, while addressing objections and concerns in a respectful and effective manner.