

Case Study #4

Building A Network: Three Communities, Three Models, Three Success Stories



Introduction

You have identified that your community has an issue, a concern or a problem. You know that in order to even approach solving it, you need several stakeholders, interest groups, institutions and sectors involved. You need co-operation, collaboration and communication to make it work. You need to build a network.

It sounds easy. Get everyone into a room together and the problem will solve itself. It might just do that. However, in our experience just getting the right people together in that room is a challenge in and of itself. How do you build a working and creative network to begin with?

We have found that there is no one way to build a creative and effective network. In three of our communities across the province, successful networks have been built in very different ways. Of course there are common elements among them, but the way in which each network developed offers us a variety of strategies to observe and borrow from. Each strategy has key elements which are necessary to make it work.

What is very clear is that creative, productive and sustainable long-term solutions to community issues and concerns can be found in building innovative community networks.

A. Starting with an issue

In rural areas across central and eastern Quebec, English-speaking communities (ESC) are small and often widespread. Access to health and social services in their own language, although mandated by law, is difficult and often exacerbated by the size of the community, distance and isolation. Effective solutions to the problem have been difficult to find. The ESC and the institutions have had few, if any, ways of communicating between themselves. The needs of the community have not easily been expressed and the institutions have had too little information or internal motivation to pursue the needs of the ESC community. The problems were both too big to resolve or invisible. Often, they are caught up in regional issues that affect everyone, like distance and sparse populations, and the institutions are challenged even in finding solutions for the majority language population. These are the concerns of the three communities we studied. Each built a network to address their issues. Each one of them approached the process differently. And, each is succeeding.

B. Our Community Groups

The Lower North Shore — Coastersⁱ

The Coasters' Association is a non-profit organization which was formed in St. Augustine in September of 1990 and founded in La Tabatiere in February of 1991. In addition to the Anglophone and Francophone population, they represent the native population, including a variety of languages and cultures. The Coasters' is composed of a group of volunteers (called the Board of Directors), representing every community on the Coast from all walks of life. The Board of Directors assists with identifying issues and implementing programs that affect the daily lives of our communities.

Among the Coasters operational objectives are:

- to protect and further the interests of the population of the LNS;
- to ensure that the population receives adequate services and communications of all kinds;
- to be a resource for citizens and organizations interested in helping improve : education, **health & social services**, transportation , employment & economic development, language issues, communication, tourism, youth, heritage and cultural, etc.

The Gaspé Coast — Vision Gaspé/Percé Nowⁱⁱ

Vision Gaspé/Percé Now is a non-profit organization founded in November 2003 after a two year long community-based process, funded by Canadian Heritage, to assist the ES community from Cap Gaspé to Cap d'espoir on the Gaspé Coast to assess community needs and establish community priorities. Vision's mandate, as stated in their Letters Patent, is:

1. To foster understanding and co-operation among Anglophones who reside in the territory from Forillon to Cape Cove. (This territory therefore includes parts of the municipalities of Ville de Gaspé and Ville de Percé, situated respectively within the MRCs of Cote de la Gaspé and Le Rocher Percé);
2. To bring together Anglophones in the interests of preserving their history, safeguarding their rights, promoting economic development and **preserving their access to health and social services;**
3. To forge links with our francophone and aboriginal neighbours so as to advance mutual understanding, common goals and joint projects.
4. To receive donations and other contributions of a monetary nature, of value as fixed or mobile assets, to administer said donations, bequests and contributions, to organize campaigns whose goal is to raise funds for charitable causes.

Amiante, Lotbinière and L'Érable — MCDCⁱⁱⁱ

Established in November 2000, MCDC (Megantic English-Speaking Community Development Corporation) was the overall result of various initiatives undertaken in previous years to solidify and revitalize a diminishing English-speaking population. Due to a decline in the mining industry and an aging population, the community found itself in a palliative care mode.

Prior to the creation of MCDC, various community leaders sought help from Holland Centre for some direction and assistance. In 1994, what transpired from these discussions was the organization of drop-in afternoons to benefit senior services in the region.

With very positive and encouraging results from this first initiative, members of the English-speaking community began to question the possibility

of creating other services. Once again, in 1998, the leaders turned towards Holland Centre for more insight. With new ideas emerging from these discussions, a working group was created to unite more elements from the English-speaking population. Furthermore, the working group focused on the following question: *Could the community be doing other things?*

The answer was obvious. In essence, what needed to be done was to establish a non-profit organization that would develop various initiatives to benefit the community. Finally, in November 2000, MCDC was created and now acts as the **driving force to foster and develop new initiatives and services.**

Each of these groups is currently a participant in the Health and Social Services Network Partnership Initiative (HSSNPI), administered by the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) and funded by Health Canada.

C. Their Stories

Coasters and the Lower North Shore Coalition for Health

It helps if you know everybody from one end of your territory to the other!

Kim Buffitt

When the Coasters' Association, a fifteen-year veteran in the ESC building business, began the process of developing a network for health and social services on the Lower North Shore, they knew who should lead the drive. Kimberly Buffitt had been a community-based worker for a long time. She's been involved with the School Board, the local community development agency, the health board and the Council of Mayors. In particular, she had worked on issues with the schools and youth along the Coast. She knows everyone who is anyone and she'd used her skills and experience to help support in the writing of the complex and difficult funding application that got them the funding.

Kim has a strong, outgoing personality who has developed, over many years of community service, an equally strong personal network. When Kim calls,

people pick up the phone. When she asks for a meeting, they invite her over. Kim is a community player who works by working with - she enlists partners as naturally as others sing or paint or build boats. Kim's natural abilities and her community experience fit right in with Coasters job description. And the Coasters' Association, with its already well-developed reputation and organization in the region, gave Kim a strong base to work from.

The first task was to bring all the potential partners in the network together in one room. Key leaders in each of the agencies, institutions and stakeholders' groups, from the Agence de Santé to the Sureté, from the School Board to the Council of Mayors, were contacted by letter and asked to participate personally. If that was not possible, then to appoint a designated representative who had the power to make decisions.

At the same time a community survey was undertaken to assist setting priorities for action. Five key priorities came out of a series of community focus groups. Topping the list was a concern for the young people in the community. Armed with that knowledge, the potential partners met together for the first time. At the end of that meeting the Lower North Shore Coalition for Health had a name and an idea of how to proceed.

One of their first projects was in the local school at the village of St. Paul's River. A health planning tool called *Voices and Choices* was implemented to motivate children to attend school and engage in learning for success. Using a successful model established in other schools across North America, undisclosed prizes were offered as a motivator.

The young people were asked what they dreamed about - their biggest "if I could have anything" dreams - in conversations not linked to the program. A rock concert, they said, they would really like to go to a rock concert. But they really did not think it was possible.

On awards day, they enthusiastically expected small prizes. What they got was a trip to Quebec City and tickets to their favourite band's next concert. Enlisting the help of CBC Radio, Air Labrador, the Coasters' Association, CHSSN staff and a whole lot of volunteers, Kim and her new network showed a bunch of very hyped kids that dreams really do come true. If they worked hard and wanted something, they could make it happen, even if they came

from a small, isolated and economically deprived community. In the mean time, a community learned new lessons about how to work together as a community to solve their own concerns. Everybody won. New plans are in the works for this year's big prize.

But building a network is more than a successful one-time event. The folks at the Lower North Shore Coalition for Health (LNSCH) know that. They are building on their first small successes, developing trust in the community, listening hard, and building their knowledge base. The first success brought a clamour to duplicate the program in all the schools. But they are moving along with studied caution. Not every program is suitable or appropriate for every community. They need to be able to guarantee delivery before raising heightened expectations. They know that only concrete action and visible success will get them where they want to go. Now they are ready to move out from one community, building their network as they go, adding new members from the villages and communities to the west. With a variety of initiatives in several communities, LNSCH completed their strategic plan and The Voices and Choices needs assessment is to be done in other high schools on the Coast. In addition, a new survey, targeting those communities is being rolled out.

Vision Gaspé/Percé Now

When opportunity knocks you'd better be prepared to answer the door!

Cynthia Patterson

Vision Gaspé/Percé Now (Vision) is a relatively new organization (late 2003). It had its genesis in a comprehensive consultation process to set community development priorities for the ESC in the eastern end of the Gaspé Peninsula. Aided by the Holland Centre through their Community Dissemination Project and funded by Canadian Heritage, St. Andrew's Anglican Church and the Greater Parish of Gaspé initiated the two year consultation which birthed the organization. Vision was the product of this consultation. A group of volunteers committed themselves to take on the job of making those community priorities happen - to bring about action rather than continue a litany of complaint.

At the end of the initial stages of consultation (they continue to work on a highly consultative model), access to health and social services in English topped the list along with concern for the exodus of youth from the region and the care of seniors in their declining years.

With the end of the project funding from Canadian Heritage and with little expectation of ongoing program funding, the newly formed Board continued its work, hosting community events, building relationships with individuals, volunteer organizations and institutions in the region from Cape Cove (14 kms south of Percé and the southern most point of the Greater Parish of Gaspé) to Little Gaspé at the tip of Forillon National Park. It had no paid staff, not much of an office (a converted storage room in St. Paul's Church) and a board of very busy community volunteers.

Even so, when then interm Agence de Santé Publique announced with little notice that in the context of Bill 25, it had prepared a paper on health care needs in the region and was sponsoring a community consultation, Vision took action. Within days the paper had been read with "shock and awe". In a region of almost 18%, there was no mention in the paper of the presence of this minority community within the territory, nor of its particular healthcare needs. A brief containing statistics analysis, and setting out recommendations based on community priorities, was quickly written and presented to a rather astonished panel, including the then acting, now permanent, Director.

Opportunity came with the prospect of Health Canada funding through the HSSNPI, and the Board leapt on that opportunity - leaping on opportunity would appear to be its hallmark! Working with their mentors from Holland Centre, a project plan was formulated and the application written. When funding was approved, the Board got to work and set up a hiring committee and brought on board Cynthia Patterson, a community organizer with a long history of leadership in the community and the professional experience to get the job accomplished.

Not to let an opportunity pass them by, the Board asked Cynthia to begin immediately, a week before her scheduled start date. An associated Health Canada funding project to allow health care institutions to gear up services to English speakers had a deadline for applications the following week. Could

she help? Again within days, Cynthia was in the offices of the Director of the CSSS and the Agence, in effect putting together her first partnership project by bringing together health and social services representatives to work collectively on a proposal based on Vision's recommendations. The result was a successful application for \$247,000 of funding to increase access to services for the English-speaking community. The credibility of Vision and its ability to get things done took a big leap forward in the community and with the health and social services institutions.

Yet another opportunity presented itself when Fraser Recovery, a non-profit group in Quebec City which focuses on programs for teen and youth abusers of alcohol and drugs, approached Vision. They too had received funding through HSSNPI, specifically to address alcohol and drug abuse by young people in the Gaspé and Magdalen Islands. Youth issues were part of Vision's project too. Could they work together?

The answer was yes. More than that, their work together would be the first building block in the development of Vision's network. Rather than beginning with a gathering of institutions, stakeholders and community groups to build a network and then address issues, the issue came first. Responding to Hugh Fraser determined the network structure at its very start.

The gathering of school officials and teachers, parents, the CLSC, psycho-social sector professionals, the CEGEP, the substance abuse treatment program counselors from L'Escale and municipal representatives, to meet with Hugh Fraser and his team solidified quickly and gave birth the Youth Substance Abuse and Recovery Network which now has a growing and successful program.

Further, the NPI coordinator realized a network doesn't need to be a large single structure, but rather it could bring together partners who have concerns and mandates focused on particular issues. So began the concept of **network clusters**-a collection of mini-networks with particular goals. Building on this experience, opportunities to address other priority issues are being worked on in the same way, and the networks are growing.

MCDC

We help ourselves by helping our partners do their job, and by making them look good!

Suzanne Aubre

The Megantic English-Speaking Community Development Corporation (MCDC), established in 2000, grew out of a needs assessment community consultation with English speaking seniors in the Amiante, Lotbinière and L'Érable region around Thetford Mines in the south central part of the province. The ESC in the region is now very small - the smallest of any of our studied groups - but has a rich heritage dating back to the beginnings of settlement in the region.

With such a low profile and distant from the centres of ESC organization in Quebec City and the Townships, the need for such an organization was very real and recognized by both government and community institutions. As its small, but successful programs grew, especially for seniors, so did its reputation. It quickly became the "go to" agency to connect with the tiny, scattered ESC, where traditional institutions like the schools and community groups were breaking down in the face of the English exodus, de-industrialization, and rural depopulation.

Traditional community structures for the ESC have broken down or face very real and significant challenges. The English school system, once divided on religious lines, and now on the basis of language, primarily serves those in the French speaking community who have the right to an English education. The churches, Anglican, United and Roman Catholic, that serve a smaller and smaller ESC, struggle to care for their flock, and must increasingly focus on evangelizing French speakers. The traditional lodges, the Masons, the Oddfellows and the Orange Lodge, and of course their associated women's groups, are closing rapidly. And the Royal Canadian Legion, the long-standing institution for both anglophones and francophones in rural communities is facing similar challenges.

As MCDC continued to develop and grow its programs and took on professional staff in the person of Suzanne Aubre, informal connections in the institutional community were further established. This has been creatively assisted by Ms. Aubre's abilities and connections to the majority francophone community institutions. She helps MCDC to be the bridge to the English-speaking community.

So, when the time came and HSSNPI funding became available, MCDC was in a position to call together their institutional and community contacts, especially in the public sector, and began the process of building a formal network. Their long standing practice of working closely with the French speaking community, with key board members, like Peter Whitcomb and Aline Visser, already involved in majority community organizations and institutions, gave them a real advantage.

However, there is also a particular challenge. Their territory covers parts of three different sub-districts of 2 distinct health regions. It is uncommon for professionals and administrators from different regions or areas to work together on boards or tables de consultations. They have a hard time convincing their very territorial bosses that it isn't a waste of time. This kind of interregional "table" is a new and creative result of their work.

MCDC is also challenged by its small numbers. They don't demand attention from the majority institutions, they request, that way they often get what they need. Working so closely with the majority community pays off. Making it easy and productive for their partners is a strategy that works.

D. From Stories to Models

Three different communities, three different approaches to building and sustaining a network. They can be seen as three different models, dependent on the resources and situations of their particular community. Each works and has lessons to offer.

The Relational Model

In the Lower North Shore, where 16 tiny villages are spread out and linked by sea, air or snowmobile, the **relational** model seems to work. For more than 200 years these communities have been linked by their common language - 12 of those villages are English-speaking, their isolation, and their connection to the sea. Everyone knows everyone else, most people in the village will be related to each other by blood or marriage, often many times over. Calling up the person who runs the clinic, the principal at the school, the police person, the mayor, is only a question of calling a friend or a neighbour. Working together can be a challenge sometimes - like it is in most families - but it can

be very fruitful too, as common goals and concerns are intuitively understood. When everyone is on side, watch out!

The Coasters have had a long history on the Coast, and are well-known as an excellent community "player". A good deal of trust was already in place. They know through focus groups and other consultations, what the priorities of their communities are, and they are slowly building up a highly effective network, beginning in St. Paul's River and moving out into other communities as they gain confidence and experience.

They are also aware that every one of their villages is different too, and that what works in one, may not work in another. The **relational** model is close to the ground and able to adapt itself depending on local resources and needs.

The Organic Model

In Gaspé, Vision is a new face for the ESC. They have built themselves and their network on a strategy of pursuing every opportunity possible - the **organic** model. They have vision, but are prepared to change the plan to meet an opportunity.

A comprehensive and inclusive consultation of the community after many years of frustration has been to their advantage. Their community is less spread out and more visible than some ESC. They are no longer the dominant force that they once were, but they have relatively strong traditional ESC institutions like the church, the schools and business still operative. They have people, numbers that warrant, and though aging (25% are over 65), there is still youthful vitality. Yet they are still small enough and inter-related enough to know all the players in the community.

They know their community well, they know their people well and know just who to call upon to bring a set of skills or experience to the effort. This type of network, based on a creative response to opportunities which come its way, is growing in a different way. Clusters around specific issues and concerns are growing organically - as opportunities present themselves. These clusters often overlap and provide additional opportunities for sharing and creativity as people meet before or after and

chat about issues and ideas. Their work is focused, the meetings shorter and very efficient.

A challenge identified is that the time-frames community groups have to achieve results is often much shorter than the time-frames in which institutions make their decisions. This can be difficult for community groups which may be pursuing certain results, only to have their key contacts change mid-stream. Then it is back to the drawing board, and sometimes near the program end date for the community. When this happens, follow-up to the work can pose challenges.

The best strategy for a sustainable **organic** model network is **guided organic growth** based on a clear community-based vision. It works best when it dovetails into other community projects. An **organic** model is very responsive to communities in the midst of rapid change and alive to opportunities.

The Integration Model

MCDC serves a very tiny and rapidly aging ESC where the traditional institutions have broken down. It has followed a network building strategy that stresses their ability to offer the majority language community access to the ESC and ways of serving them that give both sides what they need. By following an **integration** model they have brought together a variety of institutional players into one room and provided an easy bridge into a small and difficult to serve community.

The **integration** model builds on existing relationships and targets the public sector institutions first, using one contact to find another and so on. Where community members and board personnel are highly integrated into the majority community, they can use their local connections to establish just who is needed to bring to the network table.

E. Sustaining the Network

Although each of these communities follow a different model in building their networks, they also have a number of things in common that have contributed to their success. Once established, how do we keep the progress in place over time? How do we sustain the network over time?

What can we learn about sustainability from our three communities? Here are the things that seem to be key.

- a strong consultative culture
- a well-established knowledge base
- engage with institutions, both public and private, with confidence built on your knowledge base
- concentrate on building and sustaining relationships
- work on building trust in the community and with their partners in the network
- be creative with the resources and tools at hand
- start small, achieve success, and move out from there
- respond to opportunity

F. Key Lessons — Learning from Our Common Experience

1. Success breeds success, a network that successfully address issues of concern to the community and make the work of network partners easier and more accomplishable has a good chance of continuing its good work. Endless meetings, little accomplishment and not addressing community priorities will make everyone frustrated and want to go home.
2. Good, well-tended relationships will pay off over the long-term. Some call it politics, but maintaining functional, creative and effective relationships breeds success over time, even if (especially if!) there are a few bumps in the road.
3. Build a structure that works for your community. Whether you choose one of the models above, or combine elements of each, make sure it is grounded in **your** reality not someone else's.
4. Know your community well and address its needs. Community consultation on a regular basis will keep you grounded in the community's reality. And report back to them on a regular basis. Communicate the network's accomplishments. Tell the success stories. Make your network a

part of the web that holds your community together in good times and in bad.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to Susan Hutchinson, Kimberly Buffitt, Suzanne Aubre, Cynthia Patterson, Russell Kueber, Richard Walling and Jennifer Johnson for their generous assistance.

ⁱ This information was taken from the organization's website on February 12, 2006.
www.coastersassociation.com/tourism/history.html

ⁱⁱ Taken from the Letters Patent of Vision Gaspé Percé Now.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from the organization's website on February 12, 2006.
<http://www.mcdc.info/history.html>