

MORE ON THE PUZZLE OF BUSINESS/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Ian Leader, Local Works, July 2017

New Zealand ranks right up there in the list of most generous countries. We give freely of our money and time. However, there is a growing trend towards new models of ‘giving’ which move away from the traditional mendicant model of fundraising and philanthropy. The old benefactor/ beneficiary charity approach no longer ticks the box for many organisations who are wanting a relationship and some form of reciprocity.

A Two Way Street

The first step to achieving these new-style partnerships is the acceptance that businesses and communities can and should profit through the relationship. This ‘profit’ may take many forms and is by no means just about money, encompassing all four components of the Quadruple Bottom Line – economic, social, environmental and cultural.

To paraphrase the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, business cannot succeed when society fails; and this is equally so for the community when their local businesses fail. It is a two-way street which requires not-for-profit and charitable organisations to be as responsible for the health and well-being of their commercial counterparts, as businesses are for the not-for-profit.

Considering the majority ([97% according to MBIE](#)) of NZ businesses are small, under five years old and local with a fairly high rate of attrition, wouldn’t it be great for fundraisers and non-profit managers to approach local business owners with an intention to explore opportunities for mutual benefit and sustainability? Or, as per [my last article](#), sit down with some business people to create a solution that plays to everyone’s strengths, and doesn’t necessarily come with a price tag? Interestingly, when compiling the ‘Business Experience of Community Engagement Report’, we found that that businesses aged five years and under were more likely to want to engage with community organisations than their older counterparts; so maybe there’s something in this...?

A more collaborative, Quadruple Bottom Line approach in no way is meant to downplay the importance to all concerned of generating sufficient revenue to remain viable. However, adopting a mission-driven, rather than a pure budget-driven approach to relationship development will open the door to some very different conversations and exciting possibilities and opportunities for all concerned. A mission-driven approach also invites participation from a wider range of players and organisations from across all the sectors.

The Jigsaw Puzzle Approach

Achieving multi-sector engagement in this way can be very different and challenging for parties at all levels. However, thinking of our community as a jigsaw puzzle in which

each of our organisations hold a piece of the puzzle, and that we're all working to put our pieces together for mutual and common good, the concept becomes much clearer.

A jigsaw illustrates how a business/ community/ government/ philanthropy relationship needs to operate to ensure we can all continue to thrive into the future. It graphically expresses the need to build a collaborative approach to community and economic development with joint ownership and shared responsibility.

The jigsaw approach is all about playing to your strengths, and being very clear and honest about what each participant brings to the table and wants to achieve from the relationship. Having a set of clear intentions and an agreed pool of resources such as skills, knowledge, facilities, networks and time goes a long way in finding a solution that works for everyone. It also identifies gaps and thus opportunities for seeking other participants.

The jigsaw analogy also demonstrates beautifully how more and more pieces can continue to fit into the puzzle as the relationship develops and all those wonderful unforeseen and unintended consequences arise.

A Sea Change

All this requires a major shift in thinking, from 'giving back' to 'being a part of'; from donor to partner; from beneficiary to reciprocity; from need to achievement. It is an ongoing process too where participants, irrespective of their profit motive, start to ask, "How can we engage with you? What can we do together?"

Significantly, as mentioned above, by removing the emphasis on pure pecuniary outcomes, working in a jigsaw mode gives all parties equal value, able to make equal contribution to the prescribed goals. No more benefactor/beneficiary, just a bunch of people and organisations focused on designing and delivering a solution for a shared issue or opportunity.

Changing Focus - Poverty to Prosperity

Continued change in the fund-raising model is inevitable as a mendicant approach to charity becomes less and less relevant to the ways we live and work. The 'jigsaw' approach to philanthropy, community and economic development is far more considered and transparent. It requires a genuine desire to work together for better results, and some real honesty regarding each party's motivations for participation. It asks for an agreement and commitment from all parties to agreed goals and objectives. It often involves a lot of lateral thinking, and certainly asks all participants to proactively contribute to outcomes. And in all cases, thinking and working in a jigsaw switches the focus from silos and stereotypes, to one of abundance, mutuality, sustainability and good health.

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