

Help Rewrite the Future of Our Community

Join the Unstoppable Conversation

Volunteer Alberta has chosen the communities of Flagstaff to participate in a unique opportunity that will impact the direction and future of our communities.

Unstoppable Conversations will be leading us in what promises to be a transformative experience for our community. This process will be unlike ANY other we have ever witnessed or engaged in.

The Unstoppable Conversations sessions are slated for October 2 and 3 at Killam Community Hall.

This is **NOT** more talk, strategic planning, sticky notes, or a pep rally. It is not “expert advice” or more tips on how to “improve” our community.

This is **Definitely NOT** a conversation about regional governance or losing individual community identity.

This session will be one-of-a-kind, no nonsense conversation, the likes of which has already created breakthroughs in multiple communities across the province.

And we would like you to be part of this conversation.

Why should you take time out of your busy life to join the conversation?

You will see what others don't, say what others won't, and do what others can't.

You will walk away knowing you made a real difference and with *at least* two powerful tools that can transform your own life!

Please **RSVP to brenda.mcdermott@daysland.ca**, or call **780-374-3767** no later than **September 15**. For more information on the process please visit **unstoppableconversations.com**.



**Generative Conversations:
Changing the Conversation: Transforming the Future**

*Generative rural community conversations,
building social capital toward the
collaborative development
of the "new" rural Alberta*



Generative Conversations: Changing the Conversation, Transforming the Future

A case for investment in generative rural community conversations, building social capital toward the collaborative development of the "new" rural Alberta

An Overview

Why?

The ground on which Alberta's rural communities is built is shifting, the context around them is changing, and the systems in which they exist are constantly moving. The complexity of the challenges rural Alberta faces is creating a narrative, whether true or not, that seems to say rural citizens feel their communities are overburdened, under resourced and sometimes immobilized.

Part of the reason that rural Alberta has struggled to build community resiliency is that many well-intentioned community development projects focus on the outputs rather than the root causes of depleted communities. Generative Conversations is a people-centred initiative that intentionally addresses these root causes, such as existing mindsets, that may limit a community's capacity for change and resiliency. By focusing on these subconscious restrictive mindsets, Generative Conversations aims to engage community collectively and leave resident capacity within rural communities. This is accomplished by providing support to community leaders that results in transformative change within the community and a newly gained capacity to sustain this change after the "consultants" leave.

What?

The Generative Conversations is a prototype of an emergent community development approach that reveals to communities the assets they already have and allows them to rebuild the generative thinking required to foster vibrant growth and resilience. The initiative starts with a community engagement process that acts as a catalyst for change. Then, through a coaching model, support is established around committed community members to assist them in cementing the positive shift the community has begun to experience.

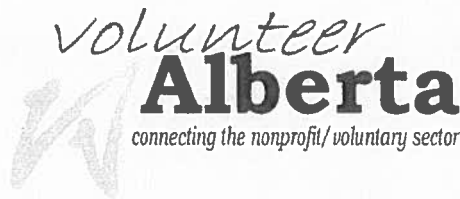
The Process:

There are two key differences between the Generative Conversations Project and anything else tried before; (a) the approach during the conversations and (b) the support provided after. The key features of the project are described below:

1. **Community Readiness:** Volunteer Alberta will initiate a discussion with an interested community and through the discussion and application process together, they will further investigate the readiness of the community to engage and lead the generative

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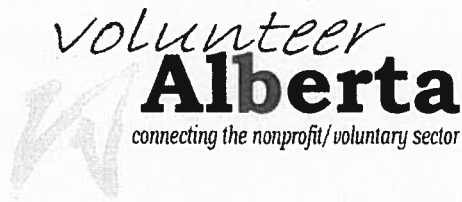


conversation process. The application will be a simple letter of request which will lead to a contract for service, followed by community commitment.

2. **Facilitation:** A two-day process called a "disruptive conversation" that helps the community to reflect on the view it currently has of itself and then moves the community to suspend old assumptions. People from all parts of the community will be invited to participate in the disruptive conversation (citizens, non-profit, business, government, education, etc). The conversation shifts the community to an understanding of new paradigms and directions that allow for the previously unimaginable to become possible.
3. **Community Coaches:** The coaching team brings leadership, mentorship, and a practical, grass roots understanding of the rural community context to this project to support successful communication, implementation and outcomes. They support the identified Community Champions.
4. **Community Champions:** The key to continued growth and success of community initiatives is the ongoing engagement of the members, institutions and authorities that exist within the community framework. Community Champions are key members of a rural community who volunteer to take on the ongoing engagement of its community members and the institutions and authorities that exist within the community framework. Community Champions are identified following the 2-day disruptive conversation and are supported for a year by the Community Coaches. The intention is that through coaching, the Champions retain the capacity to nurture and expand generative conversations and community development.
5. **Backbone Organizations:** Volunteer Alberta has long standing and ongoing relationships with rural communities and supports nonprofit /voluntary sector organizational development and sustainability. They provide learning and capacity building tools to enable and manage continued development of learning communities and communities of practice.
6. **Advisory Team:** This team will be utilized to establish the criteria to determine the communities who will be contacted and to conduct the selection process, as well as other strategic management roles throughout the project.
7. **Strategic Learning Evaluation:** A Strategic Learning evaluation is a type of Developmental Evaluation that assists the project in understanding how communities evolve and move in an emergent environment. A Strategic Learning outcome results

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from an evaluation process that addresses and illuminates multiple dimensions of a public or nonprofit sector innovation.

Through learning, coaching and mentorship the communities in this pilot project will organically develop community based collective impact based on their five locally derived conditions including: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support.

Cost:

This is a funded project but there will be expectations of some community investment determined by ability to pay (and can be in-kind contributions). This will be explored with the community in initial discussions with Volunteer Alberta prior to any formal agreement to participate.

Timeline:

This is at least a 1 year commitment/partnership beginning with the two-day facilitation/disruptive conversations.

Next Steps:

Interested communities are invited to contact Volunteer Alberta to have the initial discussion to bring the Generative Conversation project to their community. After this initial discussion together Volunteer Alberta and the community will begin to assess readiness and continue the process.

Generative Conversations grow people; people grow communities.

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The Bashaw Case

An Out-Of-The-Box Approach for Positively Shifting the Future of Daysland

The following is from a case study done for the Government of Alberta on the remarkable impact our work had on the town of Bashaw. I have provided it unedited from its original source. And I have removed much of the preamble to shorten the read for you:

Excerpt from the Case Study

...The past approaches have generated some conversation and sometimes a plan but left no residual skills for leadership to implement change.

Individual and organizational rural community champions' have identified a common thread:

The need for an innovative approach to generative community conversations that guide collaborative community initiatives to collectively access resources toward mutually beneficial goals.

Over the past year the community of Bashaw, RADF, CLN and iCCAN have all engaged an Alberta innovative team "Unstoppable Conversations" to facilitate generative conversations to unearth motivations and visions far exceeding the more common and sometimes more superficial findings of a SWOT analysis or community forum. The remarkable results of generative conversations are demonstrated in the Bashaw Story below.

Changing the Conversation: Transforming the Future: Bashaw's Story

Bashaw is a small town in Central Alberta (pop. 873). A full service community with impressive physical assets for a community under 1000, Bashaw often demonstrates considerable strength and resiliency, whether responding to changing economic and social conditions or in times of distress or celebration.

Demographically, Bashaw faces challenges similar to other rural communities. While the surrounding agricultural community is stable and fairly reflective of the provincial averages in most areas, the town itself does not fare as well. The average income is 28% below the provincial average. Single parents and transiency are major factors with respect to the social and economic impacts of the communities. The community has been built on volunteerism with a current tally of over 50 non-profit groups and organizations. As each struggle to survive and achieve support for their place and purpose, the community environment becomes more competitive as funding sources diminish.

The community has gathered together many times to assess their strengths and seek ways of overcoming their challenges. The processes used to direct those conversations were delivered at various times with various methods by government or private sources as well as local individuals. Each time a document or plan was created and then was intended to be used as a tool to achieve our desired future. Invariably the plan itself had to overcome enough barriers (funding, leadership, collaboration, cooperation, etc.) to make it a challenge all its own. The ability to influence or the capacity to overcome those barriers did not necessarily exist and the plans became ineffective.

Formerly, community and organizational conversations focused on survival causing citizens to effectively work against each other as they competed for funding, resources and manpower.

An Assisted Process

This past spring members of the community of Bashaw were invited to attend a 'Future of Bashaw' workshop on May 24 and 24, 2012. There was no cost to attend and everyone was welcome either as individuals or organizations. There were twenty intergenerational participants, many who would be considered as leaders within the community. Representation came from diverse backgrounds including the municipality, school administration, social services, senior service organizations, enterprise, adult learning and faith community.

The workshop was facilitated by Vik Maraj and Kevin Gangel of Unstoppable Conversations using a revolutionary process of inquiry and self-discovery that helped community members to see what they could not. The survival mindset was distinguished on the first day of session and became a turning point in the process. One by one the participants began to recognize the resigned, fearful, protective, scarce frame of mind they currently operated from. They understood it was limiting their thinking and that unless their way of thinking was disrupted – no tips, tools, facilitations, motivation or even new resources and money, would ever make a real difference. Once this thinking was seen for the real barrier it was, and had always been, it was effortless to create a new thinking about themselves and the community of Bashaw.

The group saw Bashaw as the place where human potential is fulfilled – and that “you can be anything here”. This took survival completely out of the equation and allowed everyone to see that there was so much here that was yet to be created.

Three powerful collaborative initiatives were explored that not only built on the strengths and assets of the community but needed nothing but the will of the community to begin. No immediate need for new funding sources or expertise was required for any of the initiatives to get started. It was the beginning of a fundamentally new approach to rewriting the future of the Bashaw community.

Unexpected Outcomes

The three initiatives were identified as the first priorities for community revitalization. An overview follows:

1. The Creative Community

It was identified that there were opportunities for the community to build on the arts. Bashaw currently has a critical mass of artists, leadership, individual champions, organizational support and recognition of the value of the arts and heritage. Creativity may be defined as the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others.

A community wide plan will be developed with arts and culture as a focus. There was acknowledgement of the value of the Bashaw School for our children and the economic significance of maintaining the school within the community. It was understood that the community needed to participate more fully in identifying the challenges facing the school and in determining the solutions required to keep it viable. The establishment of a creative learning environment that integrates both the school and community together around the arts will create a 'deep specialization' for both which will attract families and youth to live, work and play in the community.

The working group committed to this initiative immediately developed an extraordinary database of current strengths and assets that would support this initiative, including physical and human resources. It was apparent that the community had the ability to move forward on the initiative immediately. The municipal representatives on the committee agreed to initiate a meeting with representatives of the school division's administration as well as the governing body. A committee presentation was developed and the meeting occurred on August 14, 2012. The presentation used generative language by identifying what the community was creating and how the school division could assist in generating it. The committee was not seeking a yes or no answer to their proposal, instead they acknowledged that they had identified one way of achieving it but accepted that the school division could conceive of another. An invitation was extended to the school division to meet with the committee to brainstorm and distinguish the solution that would be acceptable to both.

The response to the presentation from the Board Chair of the School Division and the Superintendent of Schools was very positive and affirming. They agreed to participate in further discussion and initiated a planned visit of division authorities, to meet with the committee on September 14, 2012. It is anticipated that this meeting will be the start of the necessary steps needed to begin the journey to achieving the community vision.

2. Intergenerational programming

The community recognized the value of creating caring partnership between youth and seniors. Intergenerational programs can contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, by facilitating mutually beneficial relationships; volunteering and community building; increasing social cohesion; integration and collaboration; and strengthening family relationships. The FCSS organization agreed to develop a plan to encourage activity between community seniors and youth with the creation of specific programming for that purpose but also by encouraging the integration of regular activities and celebrations such as preschool graduation, concerts, community dress rehearsals, etc. to be held or additionally planned for the Lodge and other senior spaces.

This initiative began this summer with a one to one program created where the youth interact with the seniors by reading, interviewing for historical articles, painting nails, etc. A mobile Imagination Playground has also been purchased and will be utilized in senior spaces so seniors can watch little ones build and play. This initiative continues to explore further programming.

3. The Unconference

An Unconference is a planned event that connects like-minded people together to create, discuss or plan around the things they are most passionate about. The unconference format creates space for peer-to-peer learning, collaboration and creativity. This event will be used to engage more community members in the planning and act as a catalyst to stimulate community passion and revitalization. This working group has just begun to meet to plan the event intended for late fall.

Each initiative has been planned or implemented with the context that taking more actions to survive or demanding more support does not move us forward. Each working group recognizes that it is their 'thinking' that is the first place to look when barriers arise.

Compelling Understandings Identified for Community

Change fixes the past: Transformation creates the future.

As rural communities struggle to overcome the challenges they face, they are encouraged to think differently or "outside of the box". Very often the term "a culture of change" is used to describe the mindset necessary to move forward. Change does work to make things better, faster, cheaper, etc. It uses the past as the reference point and encourages actions to alter what has already happened or improve what currently exists.

Transformation, on the other hand, implies that you would design your future and invent ways to bring it about. It does not describe the future by referencing the past; it brings forth a future that is entirely new. It requires dialog that will produce new insights and actions achieved through conversation that moves through reflection, speculation, and a shifting mindset.

Through the workshop experience, the Bashaw community understood that 'building a better yesterday' was not going to move the community past the current challenges experienced by all rural communities. It would require a different approach – a new look at the possibilities.

Use Generative Conversation for Transformation

There are two kinds of conversations that communities or organizations can have. The first are conversations that are more like commentary, like a reporter in the stands describing the game. Organizational members will often describe the cause and effects that are influencing their decisions (e.g. not enough money to operate due to economic downturn or reduced grant funding). They have no power over those external influences so they feel incapable of changing the game. In effect, it is those influences, such as reduced grant funding that drives the organizational decisions.

Generative conversations actually make the game happen or the players on the field cause it to happen. This kind of conversation gives the organization the power to impact. In the above example, a generative conversation would drive the organization to create a future that is not influenced by grant funding. For example, they may make decisions based on the strengths they currently have to create a future that either does not require additional grant funding or that generates its' own revenue.

The conversation for transformation is generative communication. We cannot simply talk about transformation without generating it otherwise it does not work. The language used in generative conversations does not describe how a situation occurs; it transforms how it occurs by declaring a new future and then generating it.

The Bashaw community was able to question their old assumptions and confront those perceptions that had prevented them from identifying new possibilities. They quickly moved to an Action Conversation that would inspire others to move forward.

Key to Building Capacity and Leadership

The key to the continued growth and success of the Bashaw initiatives is the ongoing engagement through generative conversations of the community members and those institutions and authorities that exist within the community framework. As the group engaged those members that had not participated in the workshop, they realized that this unique approach is not intuitive. The working groups found themselves attempting to convey a message or a new way of thinking that they had only just begun to learn themselves. They discovered that it is very easy to be seduced into old ways of thinking because it is comfortable and consistent. It will take time and persistent practice before it becomes a natural way of thinking and communicating.

Building capacity in community leaders to nurture and expand generative conversations throughout the community will be key to the success of their rural development initiatives. Ongoing coaching and training, that can be accessed while actively working with projects and programs, will provide a practical learning experience while reinforcing their generative thinking.

As more community leaders become trained in generative conversations, they will create the capacity to generate the future they have chosen rather than the one they perceived has been imposed upon them. A community of practice develops that will be a key support to the initiatives. Interaction on an ongoing basis will be an important element as leaders share best practices and create new knowledge that advances the understanding and application of these conversations.

Conclusion

The key to the continued growth and success of any community is the ongoing engagement through generative conversations of the community members and institutions and authorities that exist within the community framework; inclusive of all those supporting people, service provision, community and economic development.

The following literature review explores the very human elements of transformational change. These elements include: social learning, engagement, relationships, trust, motivation, reciprocity, social capital, mindset, culture and organizational change. The literature supports the concept of generative conversations to create, in communities, the capacity and the environment foundational to transformational change and community development.

Generative Conversations grow people; people grow communities.