

12 Principles For Creating Healthy Community Change

Tenneson Woolf and Kathleen Masters
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In the best of circumstances, behind every action there is a principle – a clarity on the “why” of the “what” we are engaged in. For example, we are holding an open house because we want to build community. We sing together because we know that music connects us in a way that is different from mere spoken words. We stand with immigrant children because love matters.

The best meetings also have several principles behind them. The principles are found in the choices of how we invite people, how we plan, how we set up a room, the kind of time we choose, the format for listening together. When these principles are not clear, it is easy to get distracted or unfocused in what you offer to people. You throw in unclear exercises. Yet whenever you operate from clear principles, you are creating a meaningful, centered, and wanted experience for people.

The following principles come from [Margaret Wheatley's work at The Berkana Institute](#). You may have others, or even want to rename some of these. That's good. All of these come from perspectives that support a living systems approach and a self-organizing approach when working with others.

1. People Support What They Create.

Many of us wish that we had more buy-in from the people around us. Many people experience frustration, wondering what it takes to get people on board. The best way to get people on board is to invite them to create with you. Rather than invite a few people into the room, which might be the speedy way, we invite more people into the room, really welcoming a level of shared creation.

In a really simple way, this principle connects back to the important step of having people check-in to a meeting. When her or his voice is offered at the beginning of the meeting, that person is involved in creating the meeting. It's not a passive listening experience, or worse, an enduring of a meeting only to criticize later.

The early engagement is useful. People have a fundamental desire to create. It is akin to our fundamental needs for food, water, safety, and shelter. People want to create things, programs, initiatives, committees that really contribute. Appeal to their shared desires to create.

2. People Act Responsibly When They Care.

Have you ever noticed yourself thinking that people don't seem to care? Or that they don't or won't take responsibility? It is kind of judgment on our part, isn't it? Perhaps a frustrated response to having a very full plate of responsibilities? Many of us have experience with mandated responsibility – “Do this because I said so!” Yet we know this gets less commitment and results than when people care about what they are doing.

If we ever find ourselves noticing that people aren't taking responsibility, or that we ourselves are not, we have to ask ourselves, "Are people working on something that they really care about?" It is particularly helpful at the start of a project.

Welcome relevance as the foundation upon which to grow. And return to it often. Few people like the experience of dragging people along. It's hard on everybody. Instead, re-invoke care. "Why did you get into this in the first place?" Or, "What is it that you most care about in this project now?"

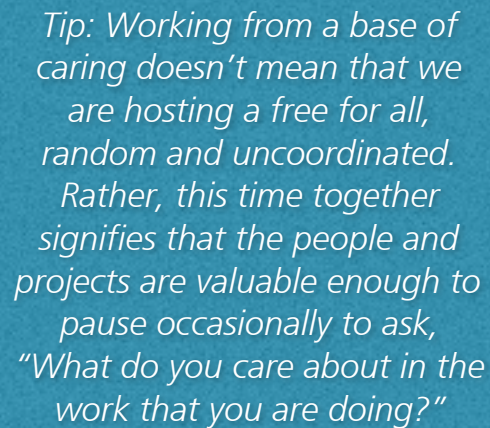
If a person says that they don't care, which doesn't happen often, it's good information. You can adjust with shifted assignments or adapt a simpler plan. In some cases, you might even let go of your plan. It's better to be honest than to drag everybody along.

3. Conversation Is the Way Humans Have Always Thought Together.

It's not the only way that we think together or have experience together, but words do matter. Engagement matters. Invitations to share what you think, what you are hopeful about, what you worry about – these can all be very healthy ways to engage with one another. Conversation is also one of the ways that we remove the silent pressure of one person taking responsibility for all of the movement and action in a group.

Conversation gives us a better chance to discover shared meaning and the actions that arise from there. It is not uncommon to hear people doubt the value of conversation. Or want to rush it. Or end it prematurely. Mostly, this comes from a good intent of people wanting to be efficient and good stewards of time. However, don't kid yourself. Conversation is action. You could think of it like this

— conversation is to action what preparing ingredients are to cooking. It must happen or the meal doesn't happen. The ingredient preparation is not superfluous to cooking. It is cooking.



Tip: Working from a base of caring doesn't mean that we are hosting a free for all, random and uncoordinated. Rather, this time together signifies that the people and projects are valuable enough to pause occasionally to ask, "What do you care about in the work that you are doing?"

4. To Change the Conversation, Change Who is in the Conversation.

One of the primary reasons to engage in conversational leadership is to invite more of a particular system of people into the room. This contrasts many leadership traditions of bringing in only the like-minded or only the people that will agree with us. To engage more of a system, and increase the chances of working more cohesively together, bring additional people into the conversation. This works well when stuck and when it seems like the dialogue is going round and round without getting anywhere.

5. Expect Leadership to Come from Anywhere.

An older model of leadership has us more rigidly defined to particular roles and responsibilities. It showed us where we fit in the organizational structure and would define some of the chains of command that we were accountable to. A newer model of leadership, one that we know from many circumstances, is that leadership is more widely distributed, and sometimes temporary. Someone steps up because they have a particular ability and interest. Our job is to welcome these many expressions of leadership. Our job is to welcome with grace, the offerings that people bring forward.



6. Focus on What's Working.

"All organizations are perfectly designed to get the results that they are getting," say many system thinking practitioners. Some of those results are the things we want. Some are surprises. Some are not at all the things we want.

There is a parallel notion that in all organizations, something is working. It may be the smallest thing – "we have fun parties," or, "we show up on time." To focus on what is working tends to give energy and creativity. It is much different than perpetually focusing on what is wrong, which tends to remove energy and creativity. To invite people to pay attention to what is possible, even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances, is to invite them to awaken again. It is this reawakening that we most need with and from each other.

7. The Wisdom Resides Within Us.

Yes, there is wisdom within us. An inner knowing that matters both at the individual level and at the group level. It is essential. It is what we most need with and from each other. And it is a foundation of Christian community. Yet, our habit is to look to the external. Another expert. Another solution that, granted, worked for others, and that we wish we could just import to our circumstances, yet that we have not done the necessary engaging with one another to make that happen. Right solutions are rarely from outside prescriptions. Best practices, as we say with the Cynefin framework, is limited to simple, simple circumstances. Yet, most of us are trying to find our way through increasingly complex circumstances. This is when we most need to turn to each other to uncover what is hidden.

8. Change Occurs in Cycles.

Many of us relate to the experience of two steps forward, and one step back. Sometimes even one step forward and two steps back. As much as we want to believe that our lives and our work are one steady line of steady improvement, the reality is that it is cycles of up and down. Forwards and backwards. Perhaps "failure" is an over-rated and

over-used concept to describe the natural phenomenon of learning and of change that occurs in far less linear ways.

It is not easy to accept obstacles. At a soul level, most of us, even begrudgingly, know that obstacles are a kind of refiner's fire. We grow through our challenges. Or, at least we have the opportunity to. Rather than dismissing ourselves and each other, we do well to orient ourselves firmly in the disposition of learning. Wouldn't God see it this way anyway? Blessed by difficulty. Blessed to be in a challenging learning place. Less about blaming, even though we feel deep frustrations. More about leaning in, always, to the learning that is showing up in the varied arenas and classrooms called life.

9. Learning is the Only Way to Become Smarter.

Meg Wheatley offered some key approaches to learning when she worked with the U.S. Army several years ago. They had a simple process that was applied to very non-simple situations. Battlefield war and trainings. The short of it, called an "After Action Review," was rooted in three questions:

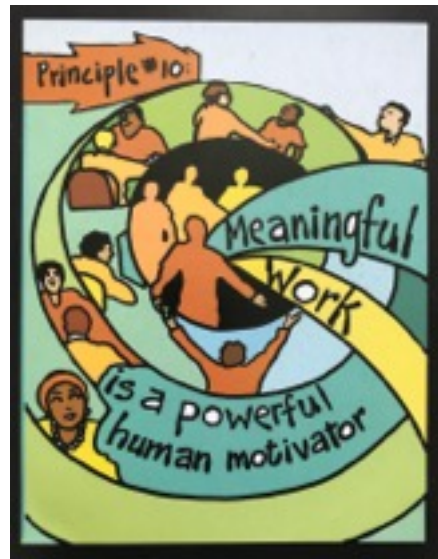
First, what happened? This was a call for description. No judgment. No accusation. Just awareness.

The second question invites interpretation, Why do we think it happened? Notice again, that this question is an invitation to subjective attention. It isn't a default to what we want to know but don't really know. There is room for multiple lenses of learning to be applied.

Third, what have we learned? Always, remain centered in a learning mindset. Learning requires

experiments. Some won't work as we thought they would. Learning requires a disposition toward trying things and significant compassion for each other to be in both the serious and the ridiculous of our human journeys.

10. Meaningful Work Is a Powerful Motivator.



This principle relates to people taking responsibility for what they care about. Some of us have spent a lot of time confused by people not following along with our plans in the way that we think they should. They are good plans, after all. And there is no question that we all care about the mission.

Sometimes, in the middle of an initiative (and many other times), the most useful thing you can do is to help people remember what is meaningful to them. It isn't about imposing upon them your version of what is meaningful with expectation of immediate and exact implementation.

It is about recalling meaning by asking people what called them into the work in the first place. Why ministry? Why church and community? What is

some of the story of why you entered into this work? What was the spark? The call? The voice that you could not deny?

11. Humans Can Handle Anything as Long as We're Together.

Sometimes we might wonder if this is true. Sometimes we might even think that humans are the problem! Yet, we humans do seem to be social creatures. It is natural for us to seek each other out. Yet, sadly, it is common for us to separate under strain and duress. All of us face a future that has both some known elements and many unknowns. Paying attention to our relationships with one another, as central to the work, is critical. Taking time to just be with. To laugh. To play. To think. To learn. To cry. Support and compassion must replace gossiping and scapegoating.

12. Have Generosity, Forgiveness, and Love.

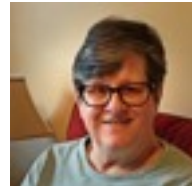
These are the most important elements in a community. These are not checklist items. Generosity? Yup, did that last year. How absurd, right. These are lifelong practices and commitments. They are the lifetime qualities that we become known for in our day-to-day actions. To take this on individually, this is something that many of us can relate to. To be able to enculturate into a program, a congregation, or an initiative — this is big and significant work. It requires a willingness to grow, to be changed by another and surrender to a greater common good.



Tenneson Woolf

www.tennesonwoolf.com

is a facilitator, workshop leader, speaker, and writer. He posts a daily blog, Human to Human, in which he offers reflection on varied aspects of participative leadership practices, insights, and human to human depth. Based in Utah, he has been a practitioner of Circle and other participative forms for 20+ years. His lineages include The Berkana Institute, The Circle Way, and The Art of Hosting.



Reverend Kathleen Masters

www.centerformissioninnovation.org

is Manager of Missionary Training & Continuing Education with the United Methodist Church. Based in Atlanta, Kathleen is working to embed more participative leadership practices with the church's learning and education programs. She and Tenneson worked extensively to create the Participative Leadership Journal from which this article is excerpted.