

Connected Communities Work Tip Sheet for Early Engagement with Employers/Anchor Institutions

Connected Communities Work (CCW) focuses on designing collaborative pathways with employers and community players. For this approach to work, there must be willingness/incentive for the employer to engage.

Thus, applying the Connected Community Approach (CCA) to workforce development requires developing a strong, trusting, and lasting relationship with the employer partner.

The following are some of the “tips” C3 has learned through its experience. These tips are helpful, firstly, in identifying a good potential employer partner, then getting the relationship off to a good start, maintaining the relationship over time, and finally, dealing with inevitable hiccups along the way. These tips are all offered with an eye to ensuring sustained change in the employers’ behaviour(s) for the benefit of the employment pathway so that local people get good local jobs.

1. **Before you start:** Aim to understand their specific role as an employer on the workforce pathway, and their needs, and then determine how (whether) working with the community will truly respond to their employment needs.
 - a. This requires starting with an attitude of learning, optimism, and confidence in your *big audacious goal* of creating a strong and sustainable employment pathway.
2. **Do your research:** Seek to understand/determine if the employer is likely to be able to work collaboratively and will invest in the long(ish) process that will be required to achieve the shared goals/outcomes.
 - a. Invest time figuring out whom to approach to establish the initial relationship, if a relationship with the community has not already been established. Thus, before you approach the employer:
 - i. Watch, listen, research, show up where they are, at their events or where they are speaking or appearing or have a strong presence;
 - ii. Make yourself known to them, and their colleagues and peers, at such an event by asking a thoughtful question about something of interest to them.
This will improve the likelihood of a successful first meeting.
2. **Understand their motivation and profile:** Get to know the employer organization in a strategic sense by:

- a. Reading what their mission statements, masterplans, strategic plans or other publicly available documents say about what their aspirations or challenges are, and;
 - b. Talking to and/or watching how others interact with their leadership to get a sense of how they are perceived in the community: i.e., get a sense of their integrity, trust, respect for and by community.
3. **Start strategically:** Identify whom to approach first:
- a. Ideally, in systems change, you will want to be working with the most **powerful person** responsible for operations in the organization (i.e. the CEO rather than the Chair of the Board).
 - b. **Solicit advice** from trusted colleagues in the industry/sector to get their advice on who actually makes the decisions or has the most influence (it may be that you start with a person who is a ‘mover & shaker’ within the organization who can ultimately introduce you to the “right” person).
 - c. **Schedule a ‘get to know each other’ meeting:**
 - i. The first meeting with the ‘right’ person should be focused on building trust. Thus, ideally you would start with an informal meeting before the first formal meeting.
 - ii. Either have someone introduce you to that person to set context for your interest in speaking to them (this establishes your credibility), or
 - iii. Simply show up where they are:
 - 1. What meetings/gatherings will they be participating in the coming weeks? Is it appropriate for you to attend (e.g. community business association meeting; a public event at which they are speaking):
 - a. determine if you can find a way to speak to them there at coffee break, or
 - b. get to the event early so you can establish contact before the event gets underway.
 - 2. **Note:** Call them directly *only if you’ve done your research* and it suggests that this is the best approach.
 - iv. Work out what their particular interest is in working with community:
 - 1. Research what interests them as professionals: thematic areas or service delivery? policy change? being seen to be making a difference? keeping a low profile but making a difference?
 - 2. When you speak to them, use the context of their apparent interest (i.e., what you’ve learned through your research) to position your presentation of your work to attract their interest.

- a. Make sure you are prepared to shift direction if your initial judgement about their interest was wrong. Remember: this process is one of learning, adapting/course correcting and emergence.

4. **Early Meeting(s):** What questions to ask:

- a. Your objectives in these early meetings are to ascertain the right approach with respect to the 'solution to their employment or community partnership challenge/problem' and to quickly assess the steepness of the hill you are going to have to climb to get them engaged.
- b. A good strategy is to start by telling them a little bit (but not too much – less is more) about what your objectives are in using the CCA and ask for their advice.
- c. Ask for advice: most people will give advice willingly, and it will help them to feel more engaged. In the best (and most common) case, they will be more open to a broader conversation if their advice is sought early.
- d. Watch carefully to see what, if anything, piques their interest about what you are saying. Make a note of those and be prepared to build on them over time.
- e. If you can't readily "see" their interest, then ask what, among the things you've said, resonated most with them and/or what frustrations and/or disappointments and/or successes they have had in work with community in the past. Again, make a note of those items and be prepared to build on these insights over time.

5. **Start your work with them:** Once you know the key people in the employer organization, you can move onto discussion mode. To get the ball rolling, you can ask them:

- a. to envision how they would like to be working with community: "In the best-case scenario, what would our relationship look like?"
- b. how do they see your role as being useful to make that vision a reality? (this may not be a one-time question, you may want to ask it again over time as they see the potential of the relationship more clearly and thus more deeply)
- c. if there are other members of their team that they think you should speak with?
- d. what sources of information about their work/their challenges do you think community players should become familiar with? (think: strategic plan, community partnership policy, etc.)
- e. would they be willing to bring their support for this initiative to politicians? Other employers? (This may be possible to ask right away with an enthusiastic partner; more often, as with a more tepid or timid partner, you may have to wait until the relationship is more fully developed).
- f. Seize the moment and ask if you can use their name when you are setting up meetings (i.e. with another key player along the pathway where their power might

more easily get you a meeting). This would indicate a very strong commitment to the relationship with you. If they seem very keen, you can also pose these questions:

1. "Would you yourself like to participate in any of these meetings?"
2. "Is there any group or members of the team they would like to meet directly?"
3. "Do you know of other employers that might also benefit from the approach that we are demonstrating here? Would you introduce me/us to that person/organization?"
4. "Would you be willing to put forward a joint proposal with us for funding this ongoing employment pathway development?"

- g. **Check in on their level of comfort:** As the relationship grows, you can check in with them from time to time and ask:
- i. "Given what you know now about this pathway process, what would you do differently? What would you keep? What would you amplify or do sooner?"
 - ii. "Would you be willing to write or video-record a testimonial to that effect?"
 - iii. **Note:** be ready to act on their responses; do not ask these questions idly; have a follow-up in hand/mind.

6. **Ensuring you are on the right path:** What **you** are looking for as you build relationships with employers include the following factors or characteristics of the employer organization:

- a. Their **qualities**, as individuals, but also as organizations, such as their:
- i. power
 - ii. influence
 - iii. willingness to act
 - iv. integrity
 - v. staying power
 - vi. accessibility
 - vii. curiosity/willingness to learn alongside of us
 - viii. friendliness/generosity of spirit
 - ix. clarity of communication
 - x. willingness/ability to take the long view
 - xi. resources
- b. Their **needs** and how aligned they are with the Connected Communities Work approach:

- i. Firstly, as noted above, develop an understanding of their needs and aspirations so you can determine *how* to enable them to better achieve them through their partnership with you.
- ii. Secondly, try to get to the core of their motivation to be involved with the community:
 - 1. what is their *degree* of need, what are their pain points in relation to the work we are doing?
 - a. That is, how hard is it for them to find and keep qualified dependable, and possibly local, employees? How big a problem is that for them?
 - b. How committed are they to designing processes that promote equity and to shifting their behaviour accordingly; why is that important to them?
 - c. What reward systems are in place for working locally/hiring for equity?
 - i. Has the institution committed to a community benefits agreement?
 - ii. Are there milestones they are trying to achieve?
 - iii. Is there a government incentive to achieve certain outcomes?
 - iv. Is there a strategic or policy directive indicating the need for this kind of collaboration?
 - d. Specifically, what are the problems they need to solve in their sector or industry and how can collaborating with us potentially help them?
- c. Decide how **critical** their role is to you achieving your goals?:
 - i. If there is a great deal of work involved in establishing and nurturing a relationship, in particular one between/among “new” kinds of partners; be aware that unless their role is critical to meeting our challenge, you may have too few resources with which to start and maintain the relationship.
- d. What **their reputation** is as a collaborative partner:
 - i. Look for evidence of their effectiveness at partnering in the past.
 - ii. Don’t start with (or stick with) a reluctant partner *if* you have an alternative:
 - 1. It is smart ***not*** to start along the pathway with someone you will have to drag along or where precious time and resources will be spent repeatedly “convincing them” of the value of this approach.
 - 2. Your story should be sufficiently compelling and attractive that they themselves are **intrinsically motivated** to join and then stay with

you on the journey once they see possibilities for resolution of their problem for themselves:

- c. Your job is one of making it attractive to them to collaborate to meet their own needs as opposed to constantly convincing them that they **should** collaborate.

7. **Assessing their readiness to engage:** What are the indicators that employers are ready to start building a pathway? They:

- a. Get back to you promptly;
- b. Follow through on what they say they will do;
- c. Are straight with you;
- d. Introduce you to others;
- e. Offer to host meetings themselves;
- f. Take the initiative to make things happen without your prompting;
- g. Keep you in the loop if things are changing with them;
- h. Refer back to earlier conversations or meetings (demonstrating continuity); and
- i. Are getting better and better at understanding what you are saying
 - i. a new partner may not “get it” out of the starting block
 - ii. when they begin to articulate from their perspective why you and they are working together, and what value is in it for them, you are on the road to sustainable systems change with them.

8. **When things go sideways:** What do you do when you are up against a challenge and things are not going as planned in the relationship?

- a. Firstly, **stay calm** when things go sideways:
 - i. try not to take things personally, this is an enormous task you are undertaking, and, if one tactic doesn't work, you will identify another that does.
- b. Then: **take a break**; walk away, literally, or figuratively:
 - i. if you are with the/a critical partner in a non-productive situation,
 1. gently **excuse yourself**, in no way conveying disappointment or frustration with them or the situation (especially if it's early in the relationship), promising to get back to them;
 2. **regroup**; give it a day. For instance, put one night's sleep between the challenge you encountered and your next step so that you can develop fresh tactics to re-engage the employer in a positive way.
- c. **What now?:** Determining next steps could involve:
 - i. discussing the challenge with a trusted colleague to gain a clearer perspective on what went wrong;

- ii. thinking through alternatives to achieve the same objective you had been pursuing when you met the challenge;
- iii. ending the relationship: one option is always to walk away completely from the relationship, making sure you close the loop with them – don't let them (mis)interpret what happened
 - 1. you want to leave on a positive note because they may come back to you, you may *need* them again, they could/will be ambassadors (good or bad) for your case if they are influential in the field.

Remember: they are place-based and will likely be in the roles they (or their successor) are in for some time to come.
- 9. Try to keep your eye on engaging people/their organizations in **long term change**.
- 10. You are, in effect, **working cross culturally** insofar as you are working between different corporate cultures, and all the expectations and behaviours that are, quite legitimately, associated with each. Adjust your expectations as to the **pace of change** in their behaviour accordingly.

As noted above, Connected Communities Work focuses on designing collaborative pathways with employers and community players. For this approach to work, there must be willingness/incentive for the employer to engage. Hence, time and care must be taken to establish a strong, authentic and trusting relationship that will endure over time.

Caveat:

Remember, that, while working collaboratively is by far the preferred route to achieving sustained change, the community has power that can be used to try and compel reluctant anchor institutions, or others such as property developers, to hire from local/Black, Indigenous, People of Colour communities (especially when these players rely on (a) government approval/funding or (b) positive reputation).

The community's power is inherent in its ability to mobilize. Mobilizing to compel the institution to act may be the strategy of choice if local employers are unwilling to work collaboratively with the community to contribute to hiring locally and building a local employment pathway.

Be aware, however, that your role as Workforce Integrator is to design strategic collaboration. Thus, for Connected Communities Work to be effective, the employer must see you as an ally: you cannot simultaneously take a collaborative *and* adversarial approach.

Conclusion:

We hope these tips will be helpful to you as you plan your strategy to create local employment pathways to achieve sustained changes in institutional behaviour so that local people can secure and keep good local jobs.

As these tips show you, the Workforce Integrator requires dexterity and sensitivity in the creation and management of new relationships.

Be prepared to set the course for collaboration with the employer institution, and then to learn, teach, and course-correct along the way, responding to deeper and deeper levels of understanding among and between the partners that will ultimately result from your work together.

And never forget, without this hard work, the community will not be able to benefit from the goodwill that is often inherent in these large employer institutions, but who cannot achieve them without the guidance and support from you - a trusted Workforce Integrator.

Good luck!
