

# The Communities Matrix

*Is your community sinking, treading water, or sailing merrily along?*

BY MIKE STOLTE



*How do you measure a community's progress, really? To many who work in community economic development, the measurement of community progress is of vital importance. You must know roughly where you are starting from, to figure out where you are going. It's a crucial part of planning and managing local change.*

*Yet while we state that communities should or must measure progress, the reality is that in many of the places that I work, people don't. Maybe it's the sheer number of variables to consider that puts people off: personalities, relationships, community history, daily events, moods, whims, internal and external forces, etc. In fact, many of these communities don't do any planning worthy of the name.*

It is to help communities shake that habit that a colleague and I are developing the Communities Matrix (see pp. 22-23). We want something that a community with little or no planning capacity or experience will really use to ballpark its present state and define a target to move towards.

## Evolution of the Matrix

Let's back up a bit.

British Columbia's Kootenays. Mountains. Forests. Lakes. Proud, resourceful people spread throughout many communities. *Many* communities. Although it is home to only about 5% of B.C.'s population, the Kootenays is where 23% of the province's communities are located, with no two alike. I get to work with many of them.

It was in this context that I sat down with Anne Stacey one day in 2002 to look for patterns and characteristics shared by many of

these towns and villages. Anne was our CED intern, keenly interested in communities, highly analytical with a background in geography. I was the wily veteran, having worked with communities for 15 years as an economist, business analyst, and CED manager, among other capacities.

We were looking for ways to help communities in the region build their capacity and to create a tool they could use to become "unstuck."

For "stuck" is just what many of these communities are. Or maybe "constipated" or even "marooned" are better descriptors. Residents of one of these towns could not even sit at the same table to discuss issues. A good old-fashioned fist-fight was the most likely outcome of a meeting. In another, years of social capital were squandered as leaders tried to divide and conquer. Yet in a third – a small isolated community – we saw all the agencies pulling together, sharing information, and creating an environment that encouraged life-long learning and innovation.

So what exactly do communities like #3 have that puts them so far ahead of communities like #1 or #2? What would 1 or 2 have to do to catch up? How many "types" of community might there be on this continuum of progress? How many does it make sense to identify? This wasn't a theoretical exercise, after all. I love community development theory. But if you can't boil it down to something simple enough for people to use, then what good is it?

In fact, it appeared that we could classify each of the many communities we knew into one of nine or ten groups, depending on the capacity of the locals to confront their differences, appreciate mutual interests, be creative, and work with one another. By the end of the day we had a rough grid that gave each type of community a name, listed its characteristics, and described what prevented it from moving to the next level.

That was the Communities Matrix (Version 1). Why might communities use it, rather than some of the other planning "tools" or "systems" out there?

## The Power in Perception

The Communities Matrix gives credence and encouragement to residents' own powers of perception. Rather than rely on conventional measures of progress, the Matrix gauges community members' perceptions about where their community is at a certain point in time.

Perceptions are gaining more currency in research as important underpinnings for motivation and action. They often paint a much richer picture than statistics do, or even a different picture altogether.

Traditional statistical indicators – GDP, unemployment rate, poverty rate, incidence of crime – do not present a complete picture of a community. While a community may score favourably in these areas, there may be other factors at play that render a community unable to adapt or evolve. The legitimacy of local government may be a stumbling block, for example, or the community's cohesiveness or vision. Other factors might be the ability of leaders to work together, the inclusion of the broader community in decision-making, the presence of positive attitudes, or the ability to innovate.

Factors like these can only be determined by taking a highly subjective reading of the community. We all do this intuitively. We walk down the street in a community we're visiting and we take a reading: the smiles on people's faces, the feeling or vitality we feel walking down the main street, the freshness of the paint on businesses and homes.

If you have lived in a community long enough, you accumulate interactions, experiences, and observations that form a much deeper reading of the community than a newcomer's simple walk down the street. The Matrix harnesses these perceptions to gain an understanding of the community. It describes 10 different levels or stages a community can go through from "highly conflicted" at the bottom to a "learning culture" stage at the top. (Some users have called it "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" for communities.)

At each of the ten levels, there is a list of characteristics that the community might display, what prevents the community from moving up to the next level, and what the community needs to move up to the next level. Communities on the four lowest levels are "struggling," those at the middle three are "functioning," while those at the top three levels are "highest functioning."

## The Communities Matrix

LEVEL/STAGE	
<b>HIGHEST FUNCTIONING</b>	<b>1. "Learning Culture" Stage</b> Learning community; learning culture present in core values of people & organizations
	<b>2. Innovation Stage</b> Community innovation occurs; sense of opportunity permeates community
	<b>3. Integration Stage</b> Business, education, NGOs & community work together
<b>FUNCTIONING</b>	<b>4. Vision Stage</b> Able to undertake (& follow through on) vision & comprehensive strategic planning (many communities can stumble on follow through)
	<b>5. Strategic Stage</b> Communities become strategic in their planning; some longer-term strategic planning possible
	<b>6. Simple Planning Stage</b> Simple planning & limited community comprehensive planning & visioning possible
<b>STRUGGLING</b>	<b>7. Coping Stage</b> Planning for day-to-day & infrastructure-related needs possible
	<b>8. Paralysis/Unfocused Stage</b> Setting goals or making simple plans impossible
	<b>9. Non-co-operation Stage</b> Working together is impossible
	<b>10. Conflict Stage</b> Truly conflicted community

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## How communities evolve from truly conflicted to highest functioning

CHARACTERISTICS	LACK OF	TO MOVE UP TO NEXT LEVEL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reflection &amp; scanning to see ways of learning &amp; improving</li> <li>▪ Empowered individuals &amp; organizations</li> <li>▪ Can easily come together &amp; make decisions</li> <li>▪ Integration of community, individual, &amp; business values</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sense of community entrepreneurship &amp; opportunism</li> <li>▪ Innovative community-sponsored opportunities &amp; projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sense of commitment to constant learning &amp; improvement for individuals, organizations, &amp; community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Desire (shared among individuals &amp; organizations) to constantly learn &amp; improve</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Co-operation among business, education, &amp; community to further mutual self-interests &amp; especially interests of citizens</li> <li>▪ Shared decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Culture of innovation &amp; entrepreneurship</li> <li>▪ Recognition of opportunities for community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Build culture of innovation &amp; entrepreneurship</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ability to undertake &amp; follow through on strategic plans</li> <li>▪ Regularly update comprehensive planning &amp; visioning</li> <li>▪ Able to access dollars from outside community &amp; resources from within</li> <li>▪ Able to look years in advance to determine community vision</li> <li>▪ Less reacting – more proactive approach</li> <li>▪ Priorities well understood by members of community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Opportunity &amp;/or recognition of the need for business, education, NGOs, &amp; community to work together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase in networking opportunities to build social capital</li> <li>▪ Ability of leadership to recognize synergies of community's organizations &amp; citizens</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Able to take strategic decisions (but not necessarily undertake strategic planning); significant community consultation</li> <li>▪ More proactive approach, some reaction</li> <li>▪ Community recognizes its strengths &amp; weaknesses, &amp; strategically builds on assets; sets some priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Commitment to strategic/long-term planning &amp; visioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Success with being strategic</li> <li>▪ Recognition community vision &amp; strategic planning necessary</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Some simple planning undertaken; community still reacts</li> <li>▪ Some citizen consultation</li> <li>▪ Community chases funding without really recognizing its needs or having priorities</li> <li>▪ Starting to look to other communities for examples &amp; lessons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognition of need for being strategic</li> <li>▪ Ability to recognize community assets</li> <li>▪ Recognition of community priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognition of community assets</li> <li>▪ Recognition of need for being strategic</li> <li>▪ Financial resources</li> <li>▪ Success with simple planning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Able to manage issues as they arise (mill closure, hospital relocation)</li> <li>▪ Little community consultation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Financial or human resources to plan</li> <li>▪ Commitment to move community ahead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognition community will fall behind without meaningful planning</li> <li>▪ Success in small projects</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No community plan and/or consultation</li> <li>▪ No obvious direction for community</li> <li>▪ Lack of shared vision</li> <li>▪ Paralysis in decision-making</li> <li>▪ New issues can cause crises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ability to plan</li> <li>▪ Leaders unable/unwilling to unite community</li> <li>▪ Priorities &amp; focus</li> <li>▪ Success in small projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Training in goal setting, meeting management, etc.</li> <li>▪ Leaders to bring people together</li> <li>▪ Outside facilitation</li> <li>▪ Assessment of where community stands</li> <li>▪ Success in small projects</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Can gather but cannot work together</li> <li>▪ Deep-seated divisions in values</li> <li>▪ Lack ability to listen to one another</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trust &amp;/or values different</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Small nonpolitical projects with win-win outcomes (i.e., downtown beautification)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Can't get together to accomplish anything</li> <li>▪ Community has experienced extensive changes in economy</li> <li>▪ Self-esteem low, no or little sense of pride</li> <li>▪ People feel stuck &amp;/or sense of stagnation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Communication</li> <li>▪ Basic conflict resolution skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conflict resolution skills</li> <li>▪ Individuals or organizations to provide catalyst to get together</li> <li>▪ Outside facilitation</li> </ul>

## The Matrix in Practice

Like most good ideas, Version 1 of the Communities Matrix collected dust for a few months. Anne and I thought we had been caught up in a moment of excitement and were a little embarrassed to show it to anyone, especially to those who knew and worked with communities.

Perhaps the communities of the Kootenays were different from other Canadian communities. Perhaps we were way off base. Who could test our hypotheses when they were just based on our observations and notions of hierarchy?

My thinking on this changed at a meeting of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet). Michelle Colussi, of the Centre for Community Enterprise, expressed frustration that only two of the 30 B.C. communities she had recently surveyed were actually doing what could be considered CED planning. Most were not doing any planning at all.

That confirmed our suspicions! What Anne and I had observed was not just a local phenomenon. Over the next few months Anne and I shared the Matrix with Michelle and several other practitioners. We began to take it on the road.

Here's what we do. Before we engage a town in capacity building, we use the Matrix as a rough gauge to determine where the community is. By sharing with community leaders and members, the community can engage in a conversation to determine what level their community is at. More importantly, they can identify where they want the community to be (there is an alternative) and the incremental steps that can be taken by the community in order to get there.

My experience has taught me that communities, like families, feel they are more dysfunctional than they really are. Knowing there are others out there like you is a liberating thought. The Matrix also provides some common language and terminology that allow those conversations to take place.

The grid seems to be an excellent way to show progression.

Communities can move up or down it. Progress can be uneven and is not necessarily linear. Some communities require huge leaps or paradigm shifts to move from one level to another. That place with the divisive government I mentioned that apparently squandered the social capital? Now with a positive, bridge-building administration and government, this community has now recaptured much of its lost ground.

The Matrix can apply to communities of interest as well as geographic communities. One city manager thought the Matrix an excellent tool for polling city councillors about the state of local social, arts, business, and cultural communities. The Matrix was simple enough for everyone to understand.

## Feedback Time

We look upon the Communities Matrix as a work in progress. We completed Version 2 last May. By word of mouth alone it has come to the attention of a number of communities, several federal departments, a multi-community CCEDNet project, and a couple of Masters' projects. A reliable source tells me that a large American foundation that specializes in capacity-building has even used the Matrix to help determine which communities to assist with funding (no community at Level Seven or below, evidently).

We're hoping to produce a Version 3 that takes into account the feedback we've received. This is where you come in. Your input as a practitioner, community member, student or academic will help us build a better tool that can serve to advance the true evolution of communities. Thanks in advance!



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