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PROFILE**

How Organizational Culture Can Support People-Centered Civic Engagement in Community- Serving Agencies

Insights from the Grassroots Strategies Circle at the
Centre for Connected Communities (C3)

This profile is the product of the efforts and expertise of many contributors.

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This profile is part of a seven-part series sharing practices and recommendation to strengthen people-centred approaches to the work of neighbourhood-based agencies in the non-profit sector, led by Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, with support from Maytree.

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AGENCY PROFILE

Toronto Neighbourhood Centres' Community Voices for System Change initiative brings TNC's member agencies together to explore how they can better incorporate people-centred civic engagement into their work at all levels. As part of the initiative's two-year mandate, TNC is working with agencies, resident groups, and community organizers to produce a series of community profiles that highlight people-centred projects and activities unfolding across the city, as well as the resources and relationships that make this work possible. With concrete recommendations for frontline workers and senior management, these profiles are intended to serve as resources for community-serving agencies that are looking to incorporate people-centred practices into their work and planning.

Introduction

The Centre for Connected Communities (C3) is a community development strategy organization that aims to strengthen connections between and among people, organizations, and institutions so they can find collective solutions to complex social issues.¹ C3 uses the Connected Community Approach, a new paradigm in community development that was born out of the pioneering efforts of the East Scarborough Storefront. This approach focuses on strengthening social connections and networks between and among people, organizations and all parts of a community ecosystem as a means to catalyze community-based social and economic development.

Amplifying grassroots voices and highlighting the critical nature of grassroots work is core to C3's work. To this end they work with the Local Champions Network, an autonomous group of grassroots leaders from across Toronto who are focused on increasing grassroots influence on systems and policies that impact neighbourhoods, and highlighting the critical nature of grassroots work in building thriving cities.

This case study examines how organizational culture can foster people-centred civic engagement through the Local Champions Network, supported by the Centre for Connected Communities (C3) and C3's Coordinator of Grassroots Networks, Gillian Perera.

¹ To learn more about C3, please visit the agency's website: <https://connectedcommunities.ca/>

Defining People-Centred Civic Engagement

The Toronto Neighbourhood Centres' Civic Engagement Affinity Group has created a common definition of people-centred civic engagement (PCCE), which informs this case study.

As per this definition, PCCE is an approach to working with communities that consciously privileges perspectives drawn from the lived or living experiences of community members. Community members are seen as co-pilots in working towards social change, as well as individuals who have the right to access community services that are organized around their rights, holistic needs, and expectations.

PCCE works toward a larger vision of social justice and community change that addresses the power imbalances within our sector, organizations, and communities that deny people's ability to work together to meet local and systemic challenges. It also enables organizations to work differently with the people they serve, and to respond to the needs of communities by integrating services, capacity-building, and social reform.

Amplifying and supporting PCCE requires that agencies commit to working collectively with communities, grassroots groups, and other organizations to ensure that appropriate structures, procedures, and practices are in place. Ultimately, this approach aspires to remove barriers and enable people to have more control over their lives through civic engagement.



What We Mean By Organizational Culture

Broadly understood as “the way things are done around here,”² organizational culture includes the inner workings of an organization, the values and expectations guiding the work (i.e. output) of agency staff, and shared attitudes, assumptions and beliefs. It is also evident in what an organization prioritizes, what processes are involved in completing tasks, and how collaboration happens (or does not happen).

Organizational culture plays an important role in supporting PCCE because it shapes and conditions how agency staff members engage with the people they serve. For instance, we have heard from resident community leaders that challenges with organizational culture—such as a lack of transparency, gatekeeping in terms of decision-making and power, and the tendency of staff members to work in silos—often impact an agency’s ability to work in solidarity with residents and thus stand in the way of PCCE.

However, It’s important to keep in mind that there is a vast array of complexities when it comes to organizational culture, and no one definitive way to view it or understand how it works. The intention of this case study is not to weigh in on a precise definition of organizational culture or its essential elements, but rather to examine specific practices that have worked for C3 and its work with grassroots leaders.

How It Works: People-Centred Civic Engagement Working Alongside The Local Champions Network

The Local Champions Network (LCN) emerged from a one-year pilot project led by C3 in partnership with the City of Toronto and George Brown College. The pilot included capacity building that focused on municipal systems, human rights and effective collaboration, and included microgrants for participants to further their neighbourhood-based work. LCN has since developed into an autonomous organizing structure through which grassroots leaders can benefit from peer relationships across the city, build their influence on municipal strategies and decisions, and highlight the critical role that grassroots work plays in a thriving city. Currently, the network consists of 70 members and focuses on solidifying internal network structures and influencing systems and structures that impact neighbourhoods.

² “What is Organizational Culture,” gothamCulture, <https://gothamculture.com/what-is-organizational-culture-definition>



C3 works alongside LCN to support the network's goals and priorities. Our work proceeds from the following principles:

Respecting and fostering the autonomy of grassroots leaders. As mentioned earlier, LCN is an autonomous network of grassroots leaders focused on collective goals. They have developed a sociocratic structure (also known as dynamic self-governance) that includes a shared decision-making process, a focus on values, and a practice of consensus decision-making. C3 works closely with LCN, offering support for capacity-building, network-weaving, and facilitation as requested.

For example, in 2020, the City of Toronto provided funds for LCN to use to further their work, and the group entered into a collective budgeting process rooted in consensus decision-making. Drawing upon the aforementioned sociocratic model, task groups emerged and fed into decision-making by the larger group, and members of an Ethics Committee ensured that processes and decisions were grounded in the articulated shared values of LCN.

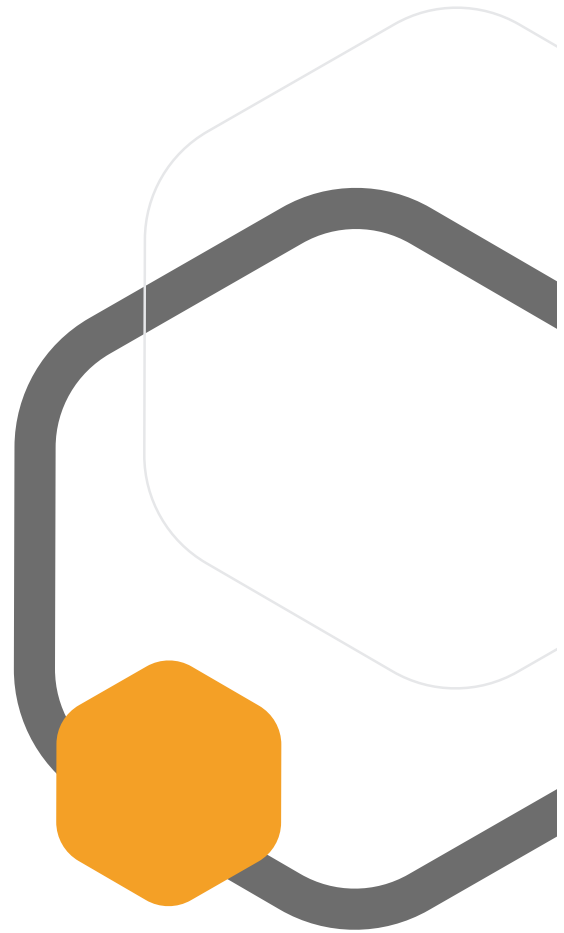
Throughout 2020, multiple task-groups made recommendations grounded in the network's collective priorities and took action based on those recommendations. C3, acting as an organizational partner, disbursed the funds needed to enact these recommendations. But LCN has the independence to grow the network regardless of whether they have funding from the City or another donor.

Recognizing the expertise of grassroots leaders. LCN is committed to supporting members who take on the deep work of building the network. For example, in spring 2020, as part of its collective decision-making process, the network decided that task-group members would be eligible for barrier-reduction funds. C3, acting as an organizational partner, also disbursed these barrier-reduction funds for members who were deeply engaged in specific tasks on behalf of the network.

Acknowledging and mitigating power imbalances. C3’s guiding principles—including “put people and process before product”—enable C3 staff to deliberately and intentionally develop a strong awareness about power and equity. One example that Gillian mentions is awareness about micro-level practices and power dynamics. “It’s as simple as reflecting on who is going to moderate the meeting or be the note-taker,” she says. “Certain roles inherently hold power.”

Staff members recognize the differences between their power and perspective as people who are paid to do the work, and the perspectives of grassroots leaders, whose critical work in supporting communities is often under-resourced and uncompensated. Shifting and sharing power is a priority in relationships with grassroots leaders. “Anyone with the market at the front of the room is going to be deemed as having power even if they don’t,” says Gillian. “Understanding the power that I have as a staff member working with community members who continue to show up and support the communities they are often a part of is essential to my work.” She also recognizes the equity that is required in the way she communicates, designs projects, and otherwise engages with community leaders.

Leading with values. A people-centered approach is cultivated in attitudes, assumptions and beliefs among staff members by how the organization views success and prioritizes community impact. “At every stage of a project, we make sure the proposal is aligned with our values,” says Gillian. Moreover, projects are co-designed with grassroots leaders so they have a role in the project. They are also contracted for specific roles within the projects, like project design, steering or advisory roles, or enacting specific project deliverables, i.e. community mapping.





Enabling Elements And Architecture

People-centred civic engagement depends on several elements of C3’s organizational culture: its commitment to knowledge-sharing and transparency; its hiring process; its staffing model (in which all staff are encouraged to actively participate in unpacking power); and its grounding documents, like the [Theory of Change](#) and [Connected Communities Approach and the Ten Keys](#).

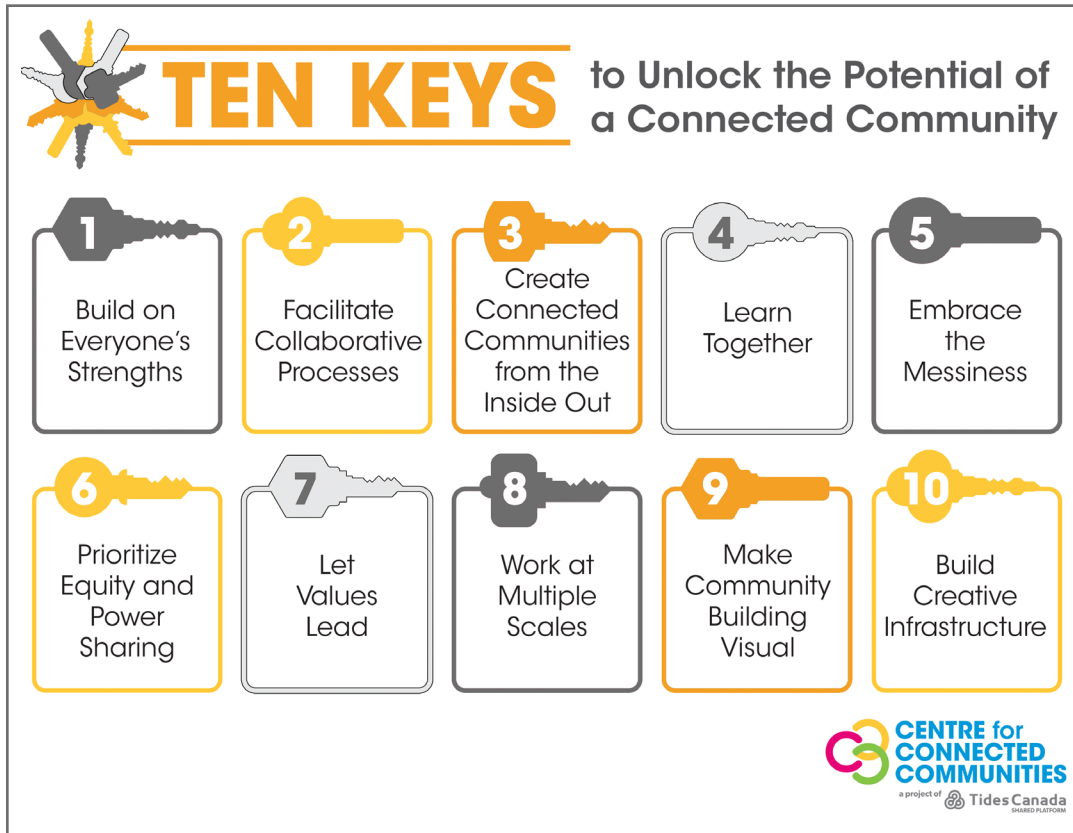
Theory of change (Connected Community Approach) and foundational values:

C3 enacts community development through the Connected Community Approach, which holds that “people and organizations in communities interact with one another in complex ways, therefore, strengthening relationships is foundational to strengthening communities.”³ This approach is inscribed into the organization’s work through C3’s “Ten Keys of the Connected Community Approach,” which is a critical tool for designing complex community processes effectively and collectively. The Keys highlight ways of working—like “building on everyone’s strengths” and “embracing the messiness”—that are relevant throughout any collective community-building process.

The first seven principles of the Ten Keys reinforce ways of working that support PCCE through an emphasis on community members as experts, co-pilots and partners: building on everyone’s strengths; facilitating collaborative processes; learning together; and prioritizing equity and power-sharing. In addition, the Ten Keys adopts a community-centered approach and starts from the perspectives of the lived experiences of residents and/or community members by including: create connected communities from the inside out; and embrace the messiness. Finally, these principles also keep the staff focused on the overarching goals of supporting and connecting people and communities by reminding them to let values lead.

³ “About Us,” *Centre for Connected Communities*, <https://connectedcommunities.ca/about-us/>

Image 1.0 – 10 Keys to Unlock the Potential of Connected Community



The Ten Keys and a Connected Community Approach together foster a way of working that supports PCCE and cultivates a conscious, intentional approach for C3's work alongside grassroots leaders. One example of how this manifests is the respect for autonomy of grassroots groups and leaders as part of every community eco-system: "We always respect autonomy and choice for their level of engagement, being mindful to reduce barriers as much as possible," says Gillian. As a support person for LCN, Gillian looks at how she can help to foster connection, build trust, and support the grassroots leaders to civically engage and influence systems in whatever role they decide to take, respecting their autonomy and thus enabling community authority.

Community voices in the hiring process. Another important avenue for fostering people-centred values as part of C3's organizational culture is its collaborative hiring process. During the hiring process, all applicants who meet the basic criteria are first invited to a group screening where staff observers rank the applicants according to interpersonal and collaboration skills. Those who are selected are then invited to an interview with one grassroots leader, one partner staff member, and the C3 manager who will be supervising the position. Gillian credits this process with setting the

stage for how work is done around the organization. “No one voice is the loudest,” she says. “This is foundational.”

Knowledge-sharing across the organization. In Gillian’s words, learning, knowledge-sharing, and connection happen “up, down and across” C3. One important avenue for knowledge-sharing is Strategic Learning Day, which is a full-day event held once or twice a year that brings staff members together to promote cross-learning and encourage reflection on a specific theme. While most staff members are project-oriented, committees are formed to support cross-learning and connecting across the organization, and at the start of a project, all staff members are brought in to provide perspective and support. Another organizational practice that fosters cross-learning is having each staff circle create and share a “pecha kucha,” a two-minute slide show, so that all staff can be connected to the work of the organization.

This culture of cross-learning helps to foster collaboration and the sharing of perspectives, thereby reinforcing these activities as a way of working. This in turn influences how the organization works with grassroots leaders. For example, the collective budgeting process described earlier actively integrates cross-learning and works to include everyone’s perspectives.



Challenges and Opportunities

One of the challenges in supporting PCCE is building in time to reflect on the process, and ensuring that working with grassroots leaders intentionally supports autonomy and only facilitates decision-making if requested. Gillian acknowledges that the sector has been set up in such a way that “positional power is often with organizations” and that the imbalance of power can get in the way of developing authentic collaborative processes. “We must intentionally shift and share power all of the time,” she says.

Ultimately, PCCE is an opportunity for organizations to work alongside and in collaboration with communities and support grassroots community-building work through acknowledgement and celebration. While there are inequities baked into the social system, Gillian says she sees how grassroots leaders work when a community organization authentically supports them to name and work through

power imbalances and how they work when that support is filtered through systemic power structures. “There’s a real difference when community leaders know they have allies in a sector and really understand that they have power collectively to influence systems and create the change they want to see.”

Agencies have the power to support the capabilities of community leaders. Gillian says community leaders can step into their power more effectively “because an agency listened to them, acknowledged them, celebrated their work, respected them and shared power with them.” According to her, the power and strength of PCCE lies in offering “the transparency and trust of having an organization in your community that you know is supportive of your work as a community leader but also is willing to include you in the ways that you find meaningful. This relationship of respect and support is the essence of how community organizations can truly support people-centred civic engagement.

Summary: Learnings With Regard to Organizational Culture

People-centred civic engagement calls for an organizational culture in which practices that support it are established throughout the organization: in the agency’s values and expectations, in the inner workings of the staff, and in shared attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs. The relationship between C3 and LCN illustrates that agencies can develop their organizational culture in order to support PCCE.

In terms of values and expectations guiding the work of staff, agencies can:

- Make PCCE explicit as part of their purpose and inscribe this into how agency staff work across the organization’s programs;
- Make a clear commitment to supporting this work by developing a framework of values to guide the work of staff;
- Dedicate time to infuse this throughout the agency;
- Inscribe this framework into hiring practices so that it is made clear to staff from the outset as a way of working.

In terms of norms or inner workings and interactions among staff, there needs to be:

- Integration, knowledge-sharing and connection across the organization;
- Expectations and tools that are built into staff hiring, training, procedures and evaluation;
- Resources to make this work happen;
- Integration of specific practices into the staff infrastructure, e.g. staff meetings where all staff members are invited to provide input at the beginning of every project.

Finally, in terms of shared attitudes, assumptions and beliefs, how the agency views success and prioritizes impact is critical for supporting PCCE. This can include:

- Developing a checklist to ensure a project aligns with the goals of an agency or developing a tool to gauge if the project is people-centred;
- Intentionally building in a consciousness about power and reflection into the work of staff;
- Emphasizing the value and input of grassroots leaders to ensure that they have leading roles in a project and are paid.

Related Links

People-centred civic engagement:

- White, Byron P. et al. "Elevating Community Authority in Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, vol. 17, no.2, 2019, <https://ssir.org/issue/winter-2019>

Centre for Connected Communities

- [The Connected Community Approach: A Theoretical Framework](#) (PDF)
- [C3's Theory of Change](#) (PDF)



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