

New Brunswick's Business Leaders Talk about Poverty Reduction

Challenge

Imagine 75 business leaders assigned the task of figuring out a budget for a single mother working full time at the minimum wage. Accustomed to solving problems, they get down to the business of calculating her expenses – swapping Monopoly dollars and considering the trade-offs among her various needs and wants. At first, people are excited and optimistic. The room crackles with conversation and laughter: They're good problem-solvers and they love a challenge. Fifteen minutes later, they realize there is no way this young woman can live anything close to a decent life. In that brief period, participants move from talkative optimism to quiet frustration and sadness. Poverty is, indeed, a big problem that isolates those living the experience and confounds those who want to solve it – even business people with big ideas who are used to success.

This short 'poverty empathy' exercise was the kick-off activity at Activate – a one-and-a-half day business leaders' event in Saint John, New Brunswick, in October 2009. It mirrored the personal journey RBC executive Bill Gale began in 1997 when he spoke with a homeless man in Saint John who, despite his best efforts, was trapped in poverty. Bill was astonished that the man needed to beg for extra money. Was it really true that Canada's income support system kept people poor and unsheltered?

In that moment, Bill's conception of why people are poor was turned inside out and he felt compelled to act. He invited a few people who were knowledgeable about poverty to join him in a conversation about ways to end it, and to figure out how to get more business people involved in the issue. The group decided to invite 45 Saint John business leaders to join them at the local soup kitchen to hear the stories of people who live in poverty. Those who attended were profoundly moved by the experience. The Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) was formed shortly afterwards (www.bcapi.ca).¹

By listening to people living in poverty and the groups that help them, BCAPI members quickly learned that escaping poverty is tough and that the resources required are scarce. BCAPI members also saw that poverty weakens our social fabric and the long-term stability of businesses and communities. While humanitarian reasons are the impetus for action by BCAPI's business leaders who absolutely want to do the right thing, the economic benefits cannot be ignored.

BCAPI's interest and involvement in reducing poverty have continued unabated for 13 years, effecting significant shifts in how Saint John businesses see and respond to the issue. Says Bill: "In every community, there are business people helping with poverty reduction in one way or another. However, when business leaders come together under a common organizational framework, it provides them with a powerful platform to learn from the poverty experts, evaluate options, pool resources and focus on specific strategies that will make big differences for families, employers and their communities."

Widening the discussion

No one – neither people living in poverty nor those working in government, community organizations or business – likes to be put in the position of being the token representative for their sector. An issue as complex as poverty requires the will of many groups coming together to forge a collective understanding and strategy for change. In Saint John, BCAPI has enabled the business sector to become an effective poverty reduction partner. Between 1996 and 2006, the poverty rate in the City of Saint John has dropped from 27 percent to 20.8 percent.

In 2007, BCAPI representatives were among the voices calling for a poverty reduction plan for New Brunswick. By the spring of 2008, the weight of their opinion had helped convince Premier Shawn Graham's government that the time was right to engage the government, business and community sectors in a province-wide discussion about poverty.

The provincial government's public engagement process coincided with Bill Gale's sense that the time was also right to explore whether the BCAPI model could be replicated in other communities. Inviting business leaders to work in concert with the provincial process would be BCAPI's opportunity to add to the dialogue and extend the conversation to a wider business audience.

BCAPI decided to organize a provincial conference for business leaders. The goal was to host a discussion that combined poverty issues with successful poverty reduction models that people could review as examples of concrete actions where business was helping to create change.

A BCAPI conference committee was formed, co-chaired by Derek Riedle, owner of Revolution Strategies, a public relations and marketing firm, and Charlie Harling, Vice President of Business Sales, Bell Aliant. The committee solicited sponsorships, shaped the event agenda and extended invitations.

Moosehead Breweries Limited chairman Derek Oland – a member of BCAPI and chair of the New Brunswick Business Council (NBBC) – convinced Council members that NBBC should co-host

and help promote the business leaders event. The province-wide reach and business leadership role of the NBBC added more credibility to BCAPI's invitations.

Response and outcomes

Premier Graham opened the October 2009 Activate conference at an evening reception. The following day, the group undertook the poverty simulation experience. They were introduced to the facts of New Brunswick poverty by Deputy Minister of Social Development James Hughes, and were challenged and inspired by business leaders already engaged in poverty reduction work. This last group included Gerry Pond, co-chair of the NB Poverty Reduction Plan, and James (J.K.) Irving, chair of J.D. Irving, Limited, and founder of PALS (Partners Assisting Local Schools) – a business/education partnership program.

PALS: Mentorship and school success

PALS (Partners Assisting Local Schools) was initiated in 2000 by James K. Irving, Chairman of J.D. Irving, Limited, and Bev MacDonald, Director of Education with School District 8 in Saint John, New Brunswick, as a result of Mr. Irving's involvement with BCAPI, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative.

The project aims to break the cycle of poverty for students living in identified vulnerable or priority neighbourhoods served by seven local schools. It combines a focus on academic achievement with a positive school environment. Poverty reduction remains the central focus of the PALS initiative in Saint John. However, other schools in Saint John and other jurisdictions have developed PALS partnerships for a variety of other reasons, a testament to its adoptability and adaptability as a model.

Employers adjust work schedules so that interested employees can participate in the PALS program at the partner school during their regular working hours. Employees are generally permitted to volunteer for an hour or two a week. This is a significant contribution and is the backbone of any PALS Partnership.

In Saint John, what began with one school and one business partner nine years ago has grown to 10 schools (and six more in the developmental stage) and more than 70 partners. Some 500 PALS volunteers are now working with students and schools to make a positive impact on the lives of children.

The success of the PALS initiative is seen in the establishment of 17 PALS schools in other New Brunswick school districts. The model is also attracting the attention of other provinces. The PALS partnerships of Saint John were the basis for the establishment of New Brunswick's first Community Schools.

Says James K. Irving: "PALS is one of the most gratifying initiatives we have ever undertaken. We can see that this program has a good chance to break the cycle of poverty that grips the community where we work."

Says Activate co-chair Charlie Harling: “The day resulted in a very rich dialogue that’s hard to capture in a report or a story. The right people came together, shared experiences and insights, and challenged one another to get involved in poverty reduction work. People felt energized – the event was seen as a creative approach to a complex issue and it was a worthwhile experience.” Adds his co-chair Derek Riedle: “The energy and creativity generated by the participants were powerful signs that attendees would continue to dialogue with their colleagues and find ways to participate in poverty reduction work in their own communities.”

BCAPI’s background in this kind of collaborative work has taught its members that long periods of learning and more dialogue may be necessary before people can move into action. The meeting’s purpose was to stimulate thinking and talking, and it was seen as a highly successful event.

Besides his work as co-chair for the province’s engagement process, Gerry Pond is Chairman of Maritime Partners Inc. and former CEO of NB Tel (now part of Bell Aliant). He continues to consider how the Activate conference and his experience as co-chair have influenced his thinking and future plans. Since his official retirement from NB Tel in 2001, he has founded six information technology startup firms and is considering how to use social media tools to launch a community economic development enterprise.

Says Gerry: “I used to help look after my community by donating my time and money, but the engagement work proved that we have to go further in order to change the community. We have to break the old paradigm of creating wealth, taxes and employment, but we can’t help one another until we understand one another. We have to figure out collectively how things are working in our community in order to re-instill the spirit that together, we’re stronger.”

The province’s approach to rolling out its poverty reduction plan is to create local networking structures – a social inclusion network – that will require membership from business, community, government and people living in poverty. The Activate conference offered a rich opportunity for people to learn and take a personal stake in future poverty reduction work. Together, these initiatives may ensure a long-lasting and effective conversation on poverty in which business listens, learns and participates.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

Endnote

1. For inspiration about how to start a social movement like BCIPI, watch: [TEDtalks](#)