

## How to save a community

**Colin Read: Everybody's Business**

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— I recently traveled to Kingston, Ontario, to attend our Rotary International district conference. While there, I heard of an example from which we all can learn. Communities can face adversity, consolidate services and, by doing so, snatch a sustainable community from the jaws of defeat.

I also gained a greater appreciation for groups like Rotary International. This organization is the world's largest humanitarian and service organization, with more than a million members. They are one of only two non-government organizations that have a seat at the United Nations. But while they may be a million strong, their efforts to bring clean water to under-developed nations, to stamp out polio worldwide, or to help the elderly or less fortunate in our hometown, all begin with the power of each of us to make a difference.

These efforts succeed because dedicated individuals remain undaunted by the task ahead.

On a beach awash with tens of thousands of sea stars, a man is seen tossing the stranded sea stars back into the sea, one by one. When a passerby asks why he tossed one more sea star back into the ocean in a seemingly futile effort, he responded "To that sea star, it makes all the difference in the world."

Kingston, Ontario, understands that a community effort truly makes a difference. Their leadership and appreciation of diversity of thought and community spirit is precisely the energy that allowed Kingston to survive and thrive in a most difficult circumstance.

Just like Plattsburgh in the 1990s, Kingston was threatened a number of years ago with the closing of an army base. The town contemplated the loss of 4,000 jobs and the largest employer in Kingston. The odds were stacked against this effort to save the base. The base-closing process was not transparent, and the stakeholders were not united. The future of Kingston looked bleak and dramatic change was necessary.

Fortunately, common sense prevailed.

The community made a strategic decision to fight the closing not with politics, but with cold, hard economics. They banded together with the goal of demonstrating how they could operate the base with a 40 percent smaller budget. They felt if they could achieve this efficiency without a dramatic cutback in operations, they would demonstrate an efficiency on par with the best run bases anywhere. If they could succeed, they could be spared.

And they did it.

I am most impressed with how they did it, and what we too could learn.

They first recognized that there was a tremendous duplication in services on the base and within the broader community. The base had run its own power plant, its own sewage and water system, its own garbage-

disposal network, and its own road-maintenance department. It had never seen a need to consolidate services with the surrounding community until it realized that all would fail if it did not.

The base was also home to unions with separate contracts and separate objectives designed to serve its members, if even at the expense of a sustainable community. The union memberships got together and suspended their special interests so they could rethink how they can deliver their services in ways that work toward the benefit of the broader community. By reevaluating how they do their work, more efficiently and less expensively, they eventually found their numbers would grow fantastically. This growth was not because they had clout to pad their membership, but because they reinvented a better mousetrap, and Kingston beat a path to their door.

The mastermind between this "Great Compromise" was Brigadier General William Richard. He shares with the Canadian armed forces a definition of leadership that is "the art of motivating and inspiring a group or community toward the achievement of a perceived common goal, including creating the environment and providing the necessary resources."

His ability to put our common interests forward, and to evolve beyond our special interests or special status, was the key to success. He recognized the value of a large, whole and diverse team. He embraced Walter Lippmann's words, "Where all think alike, no one thinks very much." And he recognized that, while change may not come easily, lack of change in crisis is far more painful.

General Richard also realized that an essential aspect of leadership is the capacity to directly engage someone with whom you disagree without seeking to defeat or destroy them. Conflict is everywhere, but those who succeed are those who can manage and can look beyond the conflict to attain those goals upon which we all agree. Success comes with the recognition of mutual interdependence.

So, does this really work?

Kingston did not immediately reach a 40 percent savings, but they did manage 30 percent reductions very quickly. Their base has since expanded from 4,000 employees to more than 7,000 employees. They are stronger than ever, providing more to the local community, and have never been less vulnerable. They did this because of one key factor — they proposed and embraced change from within to attain common goals rather than to perpetuate self interests.

Of course, Plattsburgh can and should be very proud of its success in responding to a base closure. While we did not manage to avert a closure, we have done much better than most in the aftermath of the closure.

Nonetheless, there are lessons we can learn. We remain fragmented as a community, we suffer from duplication of services and we remain unwilling to seriously rethink how we conduct our business. Some respond defensively to new ideas, and we seem to perpetuate outdated institutions and policies. We are transfixed on the same stumbling blocks Kingston very quickly overcame. And we often divide along political lines rather than strive to demonstrate excellence and enhanced productivity.

Kingston did not expect a white knight or a government agency to come and bail them out. Their future was borne of necessity and sustainability, efficiency and excellence, not happenstance and serendipity. Kingston was also able to focus on the face of the client and the face of the community rather than the face in the mirror. And that made all the difference.

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