



SAMUEL CENTRE
FOR SOCIAL
CONNECTEDNESS

COLLABORATIVE OUTCOMES DOCUMENT

SCSC Co-Creating Connectedness Webinar Series

Webinar 1: Innovation & Connection



May 5, 2023

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INTRODUCTION

CREATING A DIRECTORY OF BEST PRACTICES FOR BELONGING

Following the 2022 Global Symposium, many participants felt a desire to reignite the momentum built and continue the rich conversations that were started during this gathering. In response to this call from our community, SCSC has designed the Co-Creating Connectedness Webinar Series. This series offers a space where we can learn from partners and members of our community of practice through collaborating, co-creating, and discussing best practices to pressing issues around belonging that affect us all.

The overarching goal of these webinars is to create a directory of best practices and shared knowledge around each topic, so that we can all benefit from the experience, wisdom and expertise of our community. This document is the first iteration of this collaborative work, and together, we can begin to incorporate our collective tools to build belonging in the systems and spaces that matter most to us.

THE FIRST WEBINAR: INNOVATION AND CONNECTION

On May 5th, 2023, we gathered our community of practice together virtually around the topic of belonging-centric partnerships for the first participatory webinar, entitled *Innovation and Connection*. We set the stage for small group conversation with a brief panel discussion, featuring Danya Pastuszek, Co-CEO, The Tamarack Institute, Jillian Racoosin, Executive Director, Foundation for Social Connection, and Hanen Nanaa, Founder, BAM - Books Art Music Collective, who gave us insight into the role and significance of belonging-centric partnerships in their work.

Following this, we separated into breakout groups, where we discussed questions around the role of belonging-centric partnerships for collective action. Out of these conversations a few central themes emerged, from which the SCSC team was able to gather a collection of best practices. We learned that to create strong partnerships with a foundation of belonging, it is important to build trust and tackle power imbalances in relationships, research must be reciprocal and center community, and partnerships should be designed to create lasting and sustainable community capacity. Lastly, we must remember that it is critical in this work to make space for moments of joy and hope so that we can bring our best selves to the table.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can we, as partners, build relationships and trust with community members and stakeholders, especially those who may feel disenfranchised or excluded, as a means of mobilizing for collective action?

2. Within our partnerships, how can we identify and address power imbalances, and ensure that all members feel equally valued, heard, and included in collective action efforts?

3. What role can partnerships play in building community capacity for collective action, and how can they ensure that their efforts are sustainable and have a lasting impact on the communities they serve?

BUILDING TRUST IN PARTNERSHIPS

1. Prioritise Meaningful Inclusion in Decision-Making

Meaningful inclusion of historically excluded groups in decision-making processes is pivotal for building trust in partnerships for collective action. Beyond offering a seat at the table, **voices must be heard, and perspectives must be valued**, so that all partners can feel a sense of **empowerment and ownership**. Not only does this approach bridge the gap between decision-makers and affected individuals, but it also promotes the development of more comprehensive and effective solutions that address the diverse needs of all community members, fostering **trust and commitment through collective decision-making and shared accountability**.

If co-creation in this context is not **intentional and meaningful**, it will be tokenistic: people should feel represented in the work and its outputs.

EXAMPLE 1: The establishment of participatory advisory groups allows for the inclusion of diverse voices and expertise from the beginning of any collaborative decision-making process.

EXAMPLE 2: Making sure that everyone feels included and represented will not look the same for everyone. Offering a variety of formats and media options in communications - writing, visual, audio etc. - increases accessibility so that everyone can be included.

2. Bridge Gaps Between Resource Providers and Communities

Resource providers and those working alongside funders should explore the pathways to making funding and resources more easily accessible to communities. When resource providers proactively ensure that funding and resources are accessible to communities, it demonstrates a **genuine commitment to their needs and priorities**.

This fosters a sense of trust, making communities feel **valued, empowered, and recognized** as equal partners - a vital component of building belonging-centric partnerships. As a first step towards bridging this gap, reframe the idea that certain communities are 'hard to reach,' reflecting instead on how funders or resource providers may be hard to reach for those communities.

3. Approach Communities with an Offer, Not an Ask

Approach communities with a **mindset of support** and be prepared to better the community you are working with when starting a new relationship.

*"If you're going to build a relationship with marginalized groups, you have to go, not asking for something, but offering something. That's what you do as a good houseguest, you don't go empty-handed." - **Hezzy Smith, Harvard Law School Project on Disability (HPOD)***

To establish a rapport with community members, who may eventually work in partnership with you, it can be useful to first **offer your services and build connections with all stakeholders** before asking anything in return.

4. Foster an Internal Culture of Trust & Belonging Before Looking Outwards

To tackle systemic issues effectively, it is essential to **establish small-scale practices** within projects or programs. These micro-elements and internal training initiatives can shape organizational culture, enhance cohesion, and build trust, forming a vital foundation for developing external partnerships and undertaking broader initiatives.

A good place to start is in **defining the bounds of co-creation** within your organization. Spaces can be intentionally designed to support a balance between collaboration and individual leadership and ownership. Active and attentive listening serves as a valuable tool to determine individuals' roles and contributions within these processes.

Above all, **belonging** serves as the crucial starting point and foundation for effective work, enabling difficult conversations and problem-solving, while also acting as the catalyst for partnerships, ultimately **serving as both the means and the objective**.

"The ethos of belonging starts with the internal team within your organization and making sure that everyone feels that they're valued. This then extends outward in how they will engage with their stakeholders cross-functionally and inter-disciplinarily."

- Jillian Racoosin (she/her), Foundation for Social Connection

"If you don't have social connectedness, trust, and belonging in your organization as a culture, you're going to have a hard time doing anything else, [...] nothing is going to come to fruition. People have a hard time with these concepts because they're not quantifiable; there is little appreciation for trust. Outputs are measured, but the important factors are often dismissed."

- Dina Souleiman (she/her), The Welcome Collective

RECIPROCITY IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

5. Work 'With, Not For' in Research

Establishing how the research is going to help or feed back into the community and honour their contributions embodies a 'with, not for' approach, by **integrating community needs into research goals**. Research should always be conducted in consultation of all partners involved, so that the process is rooted in co-creation from the start.

EXAMPLE: Hosting **representative focus groups** creates space for two-way feedback, which serves all parties, particularly the affected community, to ensure that the research outcomes meet their needs effectively. When everyone has an equal stake in the outcome, **involvement moves from consultation and feedback, to action and impact**.

Part of ensuring continued reciprocity in research contexts also involves **showing up consistently**. This demonstrates meaningful commitment and reciprocal collaboration, shifting away from historically extractive research processes.

"It's very tempting to jump into a context, get what you need, and jump out. But I think continuing those relationships, not just once every year or so, but checking up, being there, even if there's not something you can immediately do. Maybe you don't know exactly how you can contribute, and maybe it's not even professional in nature, but just showing up."

- Sam McQuillen (he/him), University of Oxford

6. Prioritize Strengths-Based Research

There is a need to suspend damage-centric research by shifting from a deficit-based approach to a strengths-based approach when engaging communities. Rather than focusing on a frame of problem or disadvantage, highlighting a community's opportunities, resilience and positive impacts is an empowering starting point for building fruitful engagement and representation in research projects.

EXAMPLE: Appreciative Inquiry, often known as an Asset-Based approach, is a method to identify, explore, and amplify the positive aspects and strengths within communities. To learn more about Asset-Based Community Development and how to implement it in your work, please refer to [this guide](#) published by our partner, **[the Tamarack Institute](#)**.

7. Create Opportunities for Self-Advocate Researchers

Restoring trust and making space for healing work is necessary to begin to repair the harms inflicted on marginalized groups by researchers in the past. An effective method for establishing trust and facilitating belonging between a researcher and their participants is by creating opportunities for those within a given community to become the researchers themselves.

Researchers should not be collecting data for communities they are not a part of. Instead, they should think of themselves as the container to resource the work, so that communities are supported in collaborating and have agency over their own outcomes.

EXAMPLE: At the **[Harvard Law School Project on Disability \(HPOD\)](#)**, they are redefining research by breaking down formal barriers to entry for individuals with psychosocial disabilities by inviting them to conduct and lead research in a field within which they have lived experience. This approach reframes who is considered a researcher and actively challenges the norms of modern academia. It also eliminates power imbalances and signals to the broader ID community that they too can engage in similar work.

TACKLING POWER IMBALANCES IN PARTNERSHIPS

8. Consider People with Lived Experience as Experts

Individuals possess valuable expertise from their own lives and can contribute significantly if given the chance to collaborate. We must regard individuals with firsthand experience as experts in the decision-making process due to their unique perspectives and in-depth, first-hand knowledge of an issue. Such participation and representation can be effective equalizers of power and can protect against prescriptive decisions.

EXAMPLE: At **BAM - Books Art Music Collective**, they advise Canadian organizations to hire people with lived experience, specifically equity deserving youth and women. They mentor and train these individuals, aiming for the organizations to involve them in decision-making processes and incorporate their input when implementing programs, strategies, and policies. **BAM** also emphasizes fair compensation to avoid tokenism and empower individuals to share their valuable stories.

9. Address Power Imbalances in Research Contexts

There is a need for increased safeguards in research conducted in contexts where power differentials exist, such as prisons, institutions, and among marginalized groups. Spaces must intentionally be created where people feel **safe and comfortable to openly acknowledge and define power dynamics**, as well as their role in each partnership. This will ensure a balanced and respectful approach to building research relationships and processes. Additionally, **fair compensation** can help balance such dynamics, by acknowledging the potential burdens taken on by those participating in the research.

10. Break Out of Operational Silos with Intersectional Allyship

Hierarchies and power imbalances can manifest as replications of dominant power structures, marginalization and overshadowing of voices, limited resource allocation, tokenism, and neglecting intersectionality. They can significantly contribute to division and hinder intersectional collaboration between marginalized groups and communities, nonprofits, or advocacy organizations.

To break out of silos and foster intersectional collaboration, it is important to actively challenge and dismantle hierarchical structures, redistribute power, and center the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. Inclusive decision-making, diverse leadership and ongoing self-reflection should be embraced as partners learn to address the complexities of intersectionality together.

Belonging can be a powerful tool to encourage marginalized groups to support each other in finding common ground and mutual benefit in cooperation.

Remaining in silos can hinder collective action, as people tend to differentiate themselves and compete, rather than acknowledging that we are more similar than we are different, and that **all systems of oppression reinforce one another and cannot be fought in isolation.**

SUSTAINING COMMUNITY CAPACITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

11. Create Leadership Opportunities Within the Community

Transferring leadership and making leadership positions available to those who are in the community will build lasting capacity for change amongst those most affected. **Empowering community leaders by transitioning the point of agency into the community** can amplify buy-in and impact at exponential rates, setting the stage for long-term commitment and goals.

"Often, you find that these are the people that we 'have to do 'so much for' to help them, but once you get them into leadership, they can actually help themselves. They are quite capable of doing that; I think it's for the space to open up."

- Renald Morris, Moving Dot

Empower and Engage Community Ambassadors

Ambassadors are individuals in a community that are called on to carry out special roles or leadership positions in partnership with an organization or project. Often, ambassadors are people with lived experience, making them **effective leaders when addressing power imbalances or sensitive topics within a community**.

When ambassadors act as an arm of the community, the projects, partnerships and changes they embrace become more highly **recognized, accepted and entrenched** among the broader community. Ambassadors are a great example of considering people with lived experience as experts, and then putting those experts into action-oriented leadership roles to create meaningful community change.

Here are some examples of what this can look like in practice, based on the work of some of our partners:

EXAMPLE 1: Ambassadors can be vital partners when employing multidisciplinary approaches and participatory community design, since they are already integrated into their communities. **LifeLine Durban** layers services within their programming to increase community access. They empower marginalized community members, such as sex workers, by providing programs for rehabilitation, skills development, and counselling, encouraging and enabling them to become leaders and mentors within the organization and their community. These ambassadors are then able to support other community members in accessing these services, by familiarizing the community with them and encouraging people to embrace them, thereby reducing resistance towards said services.

EXAMPLE 2: The **BAM Collective** employs what they call the 'Ambassador Model' across their programming, where they hire ambassadors who come from the same community that they are working to serve. For example, when working in areas of Toronto affected by gun violence, they ensure that those working with this community are also from the community, thereby deeply understanding the issues they are addressing. This facilitates trust between the organization and community members, allowing services to reach community members more quickly and meaningfully.

12. Define Intentions when Forming Partnerships

When forming partnerships, there needs to be **information and clarity on goals and outcomes** from the beginning. Partnerships that make space for collectively-formed objectives are often more transparent than those with more rigid or pre-determined objectives.

The **experience of co-creation should be as important as the outcome**, and evaluation has to look at both sides, asking questions such as: how are we getting there? Is the process joyful?

When there is clarity on the partnership's foundation, fewer issues will arise in the long term, because all partners have collectively agreed on a set of shared values, directions and goals.

"Many partnerships are assessing if their participants-- particularly those from equity-deserving groups or from communities who may not feel represented in the dominant ways of forming partnerships-- are experiencing belonging. How it feels to work in partnership with others matters."

- Danya Pastuszek (she/her), The Tamarack Institute

13. Make Space for Moments of Joy

It is easy to only focus on what's broken, but we should also recognize that which warms our hearts and brings us joy; this is personal work to help avoid burnout and build belonging within ourselves.

We need to intentionally cultivate spaces for positive experiences, and to share our stories and values to expose ourselves to hope. Rest and joy are what allow us to continue the challenging work of systems change.

"This network is uplifting stories of joy, of things that are positive. This is a critical alternative narrative to offer right now."

- Danya Pastuszek (she/her), The Tamarack Institute

"Joy in and of itself is resilience. It gives us hope. And as we have intergenerational trauma, we also have intergenerational joy, and so much to celebrate from our ancestors and those who came before us."

- Marlene Ogawa, Synergos

LOOKING AHEAD

The first contribution to our Directory of Best Practices for Belonging was based on our first webinar in SCSC's new webinar series, an extension of our Global Symposium. If you are not on our mailing list and would be interested in receiving updates, please [join here](#) under 'Subscribe,' so that you can be notified of future webinars and events.

SAVE THE DATE:

Our next webinar will be held on Wednesday, September 27, 2023 from 10am - 12pm EST on the topic of Belonging in the Workplace.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or thoughts about our webinar series, please contact either:

Rebecca MacLeod (she/her) at rmacleod@scscglobal.org OR Julia Pinchuk (she/her) at jpinchuk@scscglobal.org.

We hope this directory encourages individuals and organizations to start putting belonging into practice. Together, we believe we can build better systems in our communities that uphold our right to belong.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all the incredible individuals and organizations who showed up to, participated in and shared their knowledge during the first webinar of our “Co-Creating Connectedness” series, allowing us to compile the first collection of best practices in our Directory of Best Practices for Belonging.

Thank you for your valuable contributions, as well as your continued partnership, which has long centered belonging.