

# MetroMorphosis®

*Transforming Urban Communities from Within*



## 5 KEYS TO TRANSFORMING YOUR COMMUNITY

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Community organizer. Activist. Social Service Worker. Concerned Citizen. It doesn't matter what title you put on it; working to create a better community is no easy task. It requires a certain balance of passion and precision, and while there is no "one size fits all" approach to community change, there are ways to increase the effectiveness of your chosen approach. Below are 5 things we've learned in our work to transform our community into a thriving and vibrant place to live, work and experience success.

## 1. Focus on content more than the container...

The most important step you can take in being a part of the transformation of your community is to clearly understand exactly what you are attempting to achieve or accomplish. One of the things we have seen most often in well meaning, but ineffective, change efforts is more attention to "how" something is done instead of "what" is being done. Let's dig a bit deeper.

When we use the word content, we are making reference to the true essence of the change you seek to accomplish. The term container then refers to the process or strategy you choose to actually accomplish this change. Here is an example. Your goal is to ultimately impact the lives of young boys so that they will experience success in life. That is your content. You choose to use a mentoring program as your method of impacting young boys so that they can experience success. This is your container. What we see far too many times is people who become preoccupied with mentoring and lose sight of the true work of impacting boys to experience success. Why is this important?

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When we become consumed with our container rather than our content, it can lead us to hold on to something that is not working. In the example above, if we are not focused on the right thing, we can have a mentoring program that has lots of participation but NO impact. We can actually encounter lots of boys over time, but few, if any, are really experiencing success as a result of our efforts. This requires a mindset that moves beyond outputs or how many as a measure of success and focuses on outcomes or how things are better as a result. But, if we are focused on the content, we will be open to attempting another strategy to achieve our ultimate goal. Maybe we shift to an afterschool program, a summer camp, or a sports team. We are comfortable with changing the container because we are focused on the content.

*What are you focused on in your efforts, the content or the container?*

## 2. With is more important than for or to....

A fundamental issue to be addressed as we begin to attempt to impact a community in some way, is to determine the nature of the relationship between your efforts and the people you seek to impact. In far too many instances there are initiatives and programs that pop up in a community that gives no thought to what are the relational dynamics between their program and the people they seek to impact. The result of this lack of intentional thoughtfulness is the long list of programs we see that seek to do their work "for" the people or "to" the people. In these instances the community becomes an object to be manipulated in some way or another. It should be noted this is not always a conscious decision being made by someone. Most of the time what we see is either ignorance to the need to reflect on the relational dynamics or an institutional history of doing things "this way".

If you are committed to truly being a part of transforming your community, or any other for that matter, you must position your efforts so that they are "with" the people who are the intended beneficiaries of your work. Unless and until the voice and participation of the community is welcomed and embraced, your work will never experience its full potential for impact. This welcoming and embracing will be visible in the diversity and

communities represented in your work. Community engagement has to be more than a phrase we toss around. It must be ingrained in the very DNA of your efforts.

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### 3. You are not the real subject matter expert

Lived experience is the most important criteria for qualifying someone to participate in a community change effort. The previous sentence is of such importance that we invite you to read it again, slowly.

Too many times in too many places there are those who believe that a title, degree, credential or resume' establishes one as a "subject matter expert". This tragic mistake leads to any number of tragic outcomes. First, this mindset is a major driver of things being done "for" or "to" people and communities. After all, when we are the expert, why should we listen to others? Second, it can lead to programs that are well meaning but totally ineffective. How many times have you observed things intended to serve the best interest of a particular community waste valuable resources because the people who think they know it all don't have a clue about the community they are "serving"?

The people who have experienced as a way of life the circumstances you seek to change are the real "subject matter experts". They have forgotten more about the subject than any of your credentials will allow you to know! If you are truly committed to the transformation of people's lives and communities, you must do the hard work of positioning them to inform every aspect of your work. Please be clear, this is not an easy thing to do...but neither is real transformation.

### 4. "Culture eats strategy for breakfast..."

The quote above is attributed to Peter Drucker, the prolific business guru and writer. Gaining a clear understanding of its meaning and implication for your work is vital to your success. Earlier we called your attention to the need to give attention to the content of your work more than the container. Unfortunately, in many instances there is this focus on our "strategy" or "program". And we should be attentive to these important matters? But make no mistake, the people you have around you and the environment that is created will determine your ability to do things that have impact. One of the statements we repeat here at MetroMorphosis is "chemistry trumps credentials". This statement is a shortened version of a truth we have learned over the years. This truth: good people who enjoy working together will get much more accomplished than smart people who don't work well together.

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Creating the right culture is one of the most important things you can do. One of the definitions of culture is "the shared beliefs, customs, practices, social behavior and identity of a particular group of people". While all the words in that sentence are important to note, please don't miss the word shared. Culture is about our sharing in all of these things. And the truth of the matter is if you don't act intentionally to create an environment where who you are, what you believe and how you will act in regards to one another, you will never reach your full potential for difference-making.

### 5. Money doesn't guarantee meaning

One of the first things that many well meaning people focus on when motivated to impact their community is money. It is standard operating procedure to become a tax exempt organization in order to receive money. We identify potential board members who can give or raise money. Then we identify someone who can write grants to get money. We plan our gala and other events to raise money. At our monthly board meetings we spend time focused on the money. If we are not careful, money becomes the be all and end all of our existence.

But money does not guarantee meaning. Said differently, just because you do or don't have money does not determine your real impact in the lives of people. Now obviously if we are focused on the right content for our work, are working with the people we seek to impact, respect the wisdom of the people, and have built a great culture in our organization, then money is the fuel that propels us forward into a place of progress and impact. But by the same token, if we have missed out on these matters, we can have all the money we desire and never truly experience transformation as a result of our efforts. Money is important, but it is not the "silver bullet" to solve all problems!

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Develop a healthy relationship with money. Understand money as a vehicle to impact. Recognize that money only makes a difference if you have worked to create the right set of circumstances within which to use it. Keep the "first things" first. Be clear on the essence of your work, build true partnership with the community, honor their lived experience, and remain diligent in the who and the how of your organization. If you give your attention to these areas, others will notice. Your reputation will grow. Those with funds will be able to discern the truth of your identity. And most importantly, the money

you do secure can have its best chance to make a difference in lives, families and communities. You will see transformation.

*At MetroMorphosis we are committed to helping people and organizations transform neglected and broken communities into thriving and vibrant places to live, work and experience success. This document is one of the ways we live out this commitment. We want to share with you the lessons we are learning in order to help you make the difference you seek. If you have thoughts on other ways in which we can be of support to you or your organization please email us at [info@metromorphosis](mailto:info@metromorphosis).*