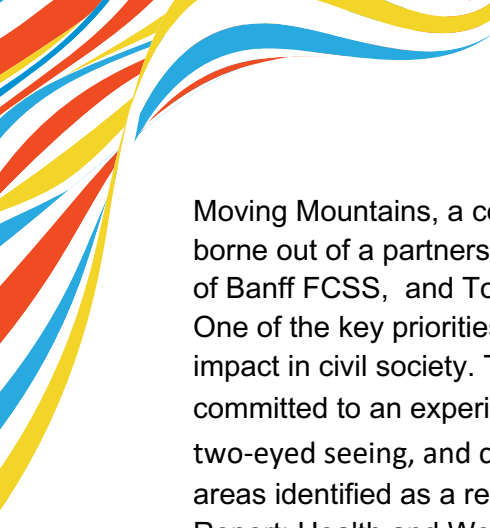


MOVING
MOUNTAINS

Collaborating for Impact





Moving Mountains, a community-based initiative about making change in the Bow Valley, was borne out of a partnership between the Banff Canmore Community Foundation (BCCF), Town of Banff FCSS, and Town of Canmore FCSS, with funding from the Alberta Civil Society Fund. One of the key priorities of Moving Mountains was to increase collaboration in order to increase impact in civil society. The initiative, co-lead by Jeanie Macpherson and Daryl Kootenay, was committed to an experimental approach to collaboration grounded in human-centered design, two-eyed seeing, and co-creation methodologies, as a pathway to change within priority issue areas identified as a result of the 2018 Banff Canmore Community Foundation's Vital Signs Report; Health and Wellness, Economy, Truth and Reconciliation, and Environment.

As part of the initiative, Macpherson and Kootenay hosted a series of dialogues in efforts to promote inclusion, build belonging, and encourage participation in future phases based on a shared understanding of the relevance of these priority area issues for Bow Valley residents, in the midst of a global pandemic. Following the dialogues, a series of five Learn and Try Groups were established, each wrestling with a different priority issue area. Groups were encouraged to experiment; to work together to develop understanding of, and then, through new ways of working together, develop solution spaces to help meet the needs of the Bow Valley Community.

Coming into the initiative, the team held a few basic hypotheses about collaborating for impact, including:

- Collaboration makes hard work easier: ie: more hands make less work!
- Collaboration is a replicable skill: ie: I know how to do it!
- Collaboration creates ownership of the work: ie: if we involve people, they will step up!

In reality, Moving Mountains showed that there are conditions under which these assumptions can be true, AND, more often, they come with many caveats.

Insights

Collaboration is a replicable skill

As of April 2023, 51% of Bow Valley Civil Society survey respondents reported that they are presently involved in “more than three” collaborative initiatives (with other individuals or other organizations) in the civil service sector. Learn and Try group members acknowledge that one of the few consistencies across these collaborative activities, is that other individuals or organizations are involved. Reflecting on this, Moving Mountains core team member, and Town of Canmore FCSS supervisor, Tara Gilchrist laughs, “There is no linear path. There is no right way. It's not always gonna be the same.” Macpherson agrees, “there's a number of different approaches to working together, there's cooperation, coordination, collaboration, cocreation...but at the beginning, we can sometimes just jump in without starting from a place of shared understanding of what model we're going to use.” Understanding what “working

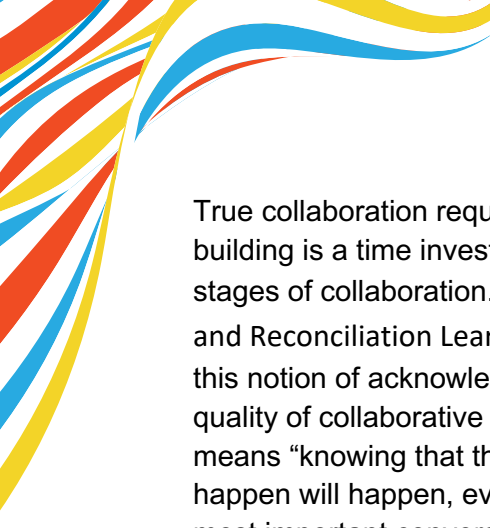
together” really means in the context of the work at hand can provide indicators for success and accountability and identify what experiences can be pulled through from previous projects, and what needs to be adapted specifically for the current context.

TABLE: Ways of Working Together

| | Coordination | Co-operation | Collaboration |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| Root Co = together + | Order | Work | Labour |
| Looks Like | Operating separately but in sync (loosely connected) | Acting together in agreement (work-based trust) | Investing in working with, toward (interdependent) |
| Rationale for Engagement | I/We can't do it alone | Our work converges toward a defined, shared outcome | Emergent cocreation |
| Trust | Low: Shared interests, processes are well defined | Medium: Converging interests that are well-understood | High: Interdependent interests, dynamic processes |
| Relational Time Frame | Short, is efficient and organized - transactional | Medium, usually based on previous projects - increasingly relational | Long and winding - deeply relational |
| Power | Power remains with each part | Power cascades hierarchically | Power is shared |

Collaboration makes hard work easier

The notion that the work will go smoothly and efficiently if everyone chips in what they know and are good at isn't that simple. Each group member brings themselves to the work, complete with their knowledge, skills, lived experience, work habits, (mis)conceptions, and conflicting priorities. Each of these act as filters or lenses through which the group members see the work at hand, creating layers of social complexity within the work, which can lead to conflict, unhelpful power dynamics, and varying levels of commitment. As Laurie Edward, Executive Director of BCCF reflects, "collaboration doesn't necessarily solve problems in a way that makes anybody's life easier at the end. In a lot of ways, it does add complexity because then we're in relationship with more people with more nuances." Learn and Try group members amplify this reality, sharing that, "Often it is conflict that comes from personal or cultural perspectives," that gets in the way of moving forward; "I think we still have a ways to go in terms of engaging different people within this. Inclusivity is saying that when you're doing anything you need to consider many diverse people rather than just creating something for the white majority."



True collaboration requires significant trust building to advance ideas into action - and trust building is a time investment that is often overlooked, especially, but not exclusively, in the early stages of collaboration. Phillip Lozano of Be Local Calgary, who worked closely with the Truth and Reconciliation Learn and Try group, suggests “this notion of ease, this notion of trust and this notion of acknowledging wisdom that’s in community,” are powerful determinants of the quality of collaborative work and, he says, sometimes investing in practices that support these means “knowing that the conversations that need to happen will happen, the events that need to happen will happen, even if they may differ from what you hope or expect them to look like, the most important conversation that needs to happen will happen on its own time.” Learn and Try group leads echo Lozano, speaking to the tension of delivering on collaborative work with integrity, noting “it takes time. The journey is as important as the destination,” and “building relationships, getting goal clarity prior to action - these are investments of time.”

Collaboration builds ownership of the work

Including a diverse group of contributors in collaborative work might help to bring ideas to the forefront, make decisions, and get things done, but it doesn’t guarantee those contributors will feel a sense of ownership in the work. In some cases, the Learn and Try Group members reported “feeling overwhelmed by all the moving pieces and all the things I have or want to do,” and identified that time pressures and logistical barriers got in the way of feeling ownership, sharing that “scheduling and administrative supports” and “having supports to help organize collaborative interactions and keep track of shared learnings” would help folks to feel their degree of involvement or ownership was manageable. “People have to find their own path to ownership. If people get really involved in it and then they feel like they’re not held in the structure available, they will step back” says a Learn and Try group lead. Another team lead shared, “efforts to plan and organize while still tending to regular job duties is tough. Communication falls apart sometimes, when people don’t have time to respond about what times and dates work to meet. And then, transition of some group members leaving their organizations and new people joining changes the dynamics a bit,” which they express, makes it difficult to make decisions and feel confident moving forward. Others pointed to themes around alignment, noting “shared understanding of problems and suite of solutions; having a mandate and the resources to work with” build motivation and commitment to working together. For her part, Edwards states, “we saw very clearly how collaboration is enabled when there is support and, and when barriers are addressed. People do want to collaborate, and there are real things that hold them back. Support matters.”

Common threads that run through these insights on collaboration point to an evolving set of grounding principles for setting up generative and enriching collaboration spaces. Principles help to establish trust, and support the communication of the approach to prospective collaborators. They are also useful in that they provide enough guidance to develop processes, and give enough flexibility to tailor those processes in a way that is bespoke to the work in context. The five key principles have emerged for building and supporting impactful collaborations are:



1. Create relevant and accessible pathways to participation

Gilchrist reflects, “what this project has done is open my eyes to different people who might sit at that table,” she says, adding a big take away with Moving Mountains was that “having some social enterprise people and inviting different individuals around the table who were showing investment and interest, made us think about opportunities outside of the normal usual suspects.” Shawn Carr, the Town of Banff’s representative FCSS Supervisor, amplifies this insight, “what surprised me was that we had different voices and that led to different groups forming. It was definitely not what I recognized as the civil society non-profit space. And that was great to see...I don’t think we would’ve got to some of the conversations we had, had we not had different faces at the table.” For Macpherson and Kootenay, creating conditions for intersectionality and the presence of diverse voices was critical for the initiative. Macpherson shares, “Inviting engagement from people whose lived experiences reflected the diverse intersections of our Bow Valley community was really important to us - and it changed the evolution of the work and shaped it into something powerful - and almost totally unexpected.” Moving Mountains, says Kootenay, “was the first time that anyone gave me the opportunity to create a space for Indigenous peoples to feel welcomed while at the same time allowing me to create and curate that to ensure that those that are invited are respected and feel welcomed, and making sure that their voice and perspective is cherished. I think that really reinforced and empowered our community to get more involved. And, I’m really happy to see that they’re still continuing to be involved.” This invitation really resonated with participants from the Indigenous Circle, who shared “The engagement with Indigenous community has been described repeatedly as amongst the most meaningful engagement processes of memory in the Bow Valley. There is a call for continued relationship, trust building and more conversation... something to celebrate!”

2. Center relationships to build trust:

Working together in new groups can be tricky. As groups begin to work together, it’s easy to prioritize deliverables and timelines, but investing in relationships will be what carries the work you do together. Prioritizing activities that promote trust facilitates the inevitable forming, storming, and norming processes new groups experience. A Learn and Try group member reflected the importance of, “relationship building, and strengthening and creating those terms of trust between people who have never worked together before, or people who have never met each other, or people of different cultures who are coming together to make a change.” Another shared, “I am learning the role of ally and accomplice is different in connection to the cultural intricacies of the groups and individuals participating in a collaboration, and that trust in navigating these is paramount.” Thinking about trust, Edwards adds, “It’s an interesting thing to think that a consequence of collaboration is whether you have the capacity to sustain new relationships in a more complex way of thinking about the work you do...the flip side of that is actually collaboration creates a different kind of responsibility than we’re used to. Sometimes it can leave you with more complexity that is sustained over time, because now you’re in these kinship relationships with more people. You have more relationships to continue to steward,



you've got responsibilities that don't go away.”

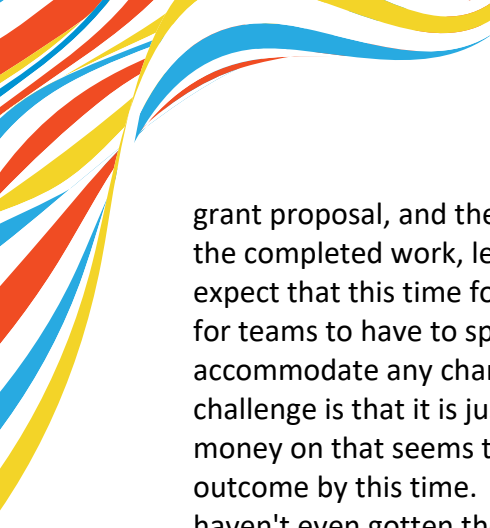
3. Interrogate power dynamics to establish meaningful equity

Collaborators each bring *something* unique to the table, including combinations of resources, knowledge, and capacity. Understanding these contributions is critically important; different combinations can affect the distribution of power between collaborators, and can negatively impact the perception of collaborative contributions of some collaborators. Efforts must be made early and often to acknowledge and understand the dynamics that are at play and seek to (re) distribute power meaningfully. ” This includes understanding who is represented in the group - and who does not have a seat at the table, which perspectives are being represented, how decisions are being made, and what information is being shared, when, to reduce the chances that the work unfairly benefits some in the group over others. A Learn and Try team lead noted, “it is difficult when roles are unclear and when shared goals and objectives are not truly shared, but service one or more collaborators over others. Being intentional about discussing and consenting to how decisions will be made and agreeing to group norms can help to ensure people can feel safe to speak out if they do not feel heard. Lozano reflected on his own experience of shifting power within the Learn and Try group he participated in, “every time I feel the need to speak up or to jump in, I fight that urge and I just be quiet and trust in the wisdom of the group, trust in the collective power, and the knowledge that's there. Slowly over time more people spoke up until, maybe it was the first four meetings where one person didn't say anything and the fifth meeting they just dropped this amazing nugget of gold and insight.”

4. Respect for the time it takes to work relationally

Bringing trust building, relational norms into collaborative work takes longer than typical transactional forms of working together, like coordination and cooperation. Moving Mountains was a great reminder that it takes a lot of time to get organized and to be on the same page when starting a new collaboration. The core team and learn and try groups consistently observed that things take the time they take, and that can be uncomfortable. A Learn and Try team lead remarked, “What has been challenging is working to an aggressive timeline, building trust and relationship...and balancing expected outputs,” An intense sense of urgency can create pressure that slips focus and energy away from the intent of the work, and can grind collaborative generosity to a halt, as it often results in barreling ahead by power-full group members, or those with the most capacity, or those groups who have the most urgency around achieving the outcomes.

Expectations that might be realistic in coordinated projects, are unrealistic in collaborative ones, and this can be exacerbated when groups applying for funding need to have a fully - or even an almost fully fleshed out plan in advance of securing funding. Through Moving Mountains it became very clear that initiatives don't unfold in a vacuum, the work must navigate changing contexts (politically, socially, organizationally, etc.) and will need to respond where, when, and how best suits the moment as new information and pivot points emerge. The grants themselves do not retroactively compensate teams for the time it takes to prepare the

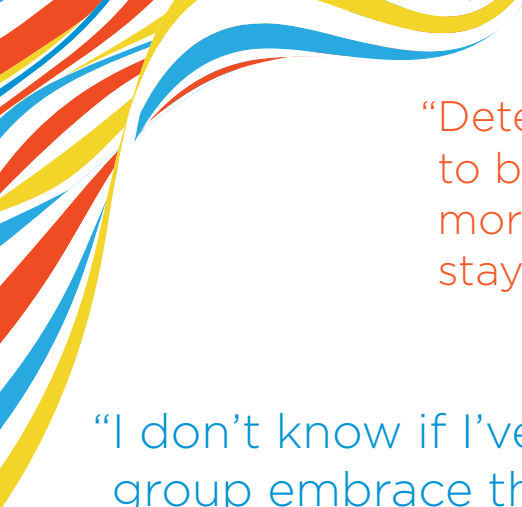


grant proposal, and the reporting required if you get one, often doesn't cover the timeframe of the completed work, let alone the actual project planning and delivery. It's unsustainable to expect that this time forming, storming, and norming should be uncompensated - it is common for teams to have to spend time revisiting their approach, adjusting resources or processes to accommodate any changes from their original proposal. Kootenay reflects, "I think part of the challenge is that it is just seen as spending a long time just talking to each other. Spending money on that seems to be hard for people who are giving thousands of dollars to have an outcome by this time. People wanna see results with the quick turnaround, when really we haven't even gotten there yet."

5. Recognize what's working and celebrate successes:

Collaborative community work takes significant energy and commitment - it can feel long, often unfurling over years. It is totally natural for the paths forward to wind or travel through unfamiliar territory. Anticipated outcomes may shift as context changes, which can create doubt about the success of the work in the short term. Humility and generosity are important values in collaboration, and developing a practice around celebrating big wins and small ones, can go a long way. Developing both internal and externally facing practices to communicate progress and be transparent about learnings can do wonders for morale and engagement.

Moving Mountains has had much to celebrate and recognize, from the technical and logistical wins of new groups developing patterns to work together and manage their activities, to the forming of new relationships and collaborative projects, to the work that has been thoughtful and passionately shared with the Bow Valley community during this initiative.



“Determination, persistence and patience needs to be celebrated! This endeavor has involved far more coordinating skills than anticipated, so just staying focused calls for celebration.”

- Learn and Try Team Lead

“I don’t know if I’ve ever really seen a group embrace this level of emergence as I’ve seen with Moving Mountains. There’s been a lot of beauty in that.”

- Philip Lozano

“Deepening connections amongst the group, and making new connections and collaborations. :) It’s wild to witness how many have tried this or had this idea or wanted this before.”

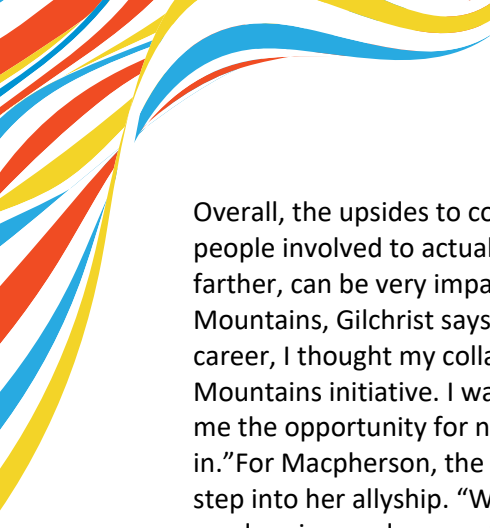
- Learn and Try Team Lead

“We did our first community event - Stories from the Land at artsPlace near the end of January. There was a full turnout for registration, and feedback from attendees was that it was amazing and that they want more events like this!”

- Learn and Try Team Lead

“The soft launch of Mini Hrupa! We’re creating a space, a center for Indigenous peoples and for all peoples. It has a lot of momentum and I think it will really take off this year.”

- Daryl Kootenay



Overall, the upsides to collaboration, bringing different perspectives to problem solving, having more people involved to actually do the work, and combining financial resources that can stretch the work farther, can be very impactful - and very rewarding. In reflecting on her experience of Moving Mountains, Gilchrist says, ““Having been a collaborator in hundreds of small projects throughout my career, I thought my collaborative skills had me well positioned to support and guide the Moving Mountains initiative. I was surprised how much his multi-year, complex and emergent project afforded me the opportunity for new learning about collaboration that will benefit future projects I am involved in.” For Macpherson, the opportunity to “create space and try something different,” was a chance to step into her allyship. “We were trying to approach the initiative through human-centered design, two-eyed seeing, and co-creation methodologies, so we were holding the complexity of that as we went. We needed to do a bit of braiding between and within those approaches, but even though it was hard, we persevered, and I’m very proud of what we were able to accomplish. In the end, I feel inspired to do better in this work...to relax into the courage of it; to continue to demonstrate my commitment to reconciliation in my work, and to share that forward, because it’s really changed my life, and I know it can help us shift the way we support community, and future generations.” Kootenay agrees that collaboration has the potential to shift the dynamic of support in the community, and sees Moving Mountains as a step in the right direction; “I know that there’s still a lot more community members out there that haven’t even come to our circle yet. And I always think, you know, what if they were there? How much more excitement, how much more strength, and empowerment would we get when we bring all those voices together?”

Katrina Donald is a Banff-based developmental evaluator, and the principal consultant at [ever-so-curious](http://ever-so-curious.com). Her work with Moving Mountains supported the collaborative partners as the initiative progressed - as a friend to the process in the thick of it, and in helping them to gather data, reflect, and contextualize their learning so it could inform the initiative’s strategy.