

The Role of Creativity and Problem Solving in Building and Sustaining Caring Communities

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We R 3C's mission statement states that "*We R 3C, Inc. is dedicated to building and sustaining caring communities through programs which develop and celebrate respect, kindness and compassion.*" The purposes of this brief paper are to review several essential elements of the "caring community" and to describe the important role of creativity and Creative Problem Solving (CPS) in attaining that mission.

Caring Communities

Community generally refers to a group of people who interact and who share several common characteristics. The members of a community may be linked by any (or several) common factors including geography, history, social relationships, economic concerns, shared personal or professional interests and values, mutual goals, or shared personal or professional interests and skills. The community's commonalities may lead to a unified approach to goals, interests, and activities. Although the members of any community have numerous shared characteristics, as well as mutual interests, goals, and needs, its members are often also diverse in a variety of ways. The variety present in any community can lead to different perspectives regarding present or future action, to disagreement, or even to conflict. Caring, mutually supportive communities seek to establish and maintain trust, collaboration, and shared goals with openness and respect for the diversity within them. Brahm and Bowling (2009) described five characteristics of a caring community, which were: strong personal relationships, everyone is involved, common values, connectedness, and involvement of all in decision-making. Davey (2004) emphasized the importance of caring about outcomes and process, building a caring community (in the sense of engagement beyond an emphasis on emotions and cultivating friendships) in strong inquiry. Davey described caring as having a regard for the views and interests of others, with reciprocity, trust, tolerance, fairmindedness, and accommodating to differences.

Morse (2004) described seven strategies that "smart" communities have used to become thriving communities. The strategies were: identifying issues and decisions that might yield the greatest return on the community's investment; working to build the necessary partnerships to create opportunities; building on strengths by emphasizing positives rather than what is wrong; enabling broad involvement in deciding the future; preserving the past to inform and be a catalyst for the future; growing leaders; and, encouraging risk-taking and entrepreneurship in tackling difficult issues. Clearly, these strategies call upon community members, individually and collectively, to think creatively and critically, to be effective problem solvers, and to be effective agents and managers of the ever-present change in our world. Leaders and researchers at Michigan State University (undated) have identified six important principles of community development. These are:

- Promote active and representative citizen participation so that community members can meaningfully influence decisions that affect their situation.
- Engage community members in problem diagnosis so that those affected may adequately understand the causes of their situation.
- Help community members understand the economic, social, political, environmental, and psychological impact associated with alternative solutions to the problem.
- Assist community members in designing and implementing a plan to solve agreed upon problems by emphasizing shared leadership and active citizen participation.
- Disengage from any effort that is likely to adversely effect the disadvantaged segments of a community.
- Actively work to increase leadership capacity, skills, confidence, and aspirations in the community development process.

Again, these principles reflect the importance of and need for creative and critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and change management by individuals, teams, or community-wide groups.

Creativity and CPS

A creative approach to problem-solving implies that you are attempting to advance toward an outcome that is new, unstructured, and open-ended, for which no solution is already available. It requires an individual, team, group, or an entire organization (or community) to engage their imagination as well as their knowledge, intelligence, and past experience because no "ready-made answer" is available (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011, pp. 20-21). Creative approaches to problem solving in groups challenges people to hold a comprehensive view of their task, drawing on an entire system of people, method, content, and context in their approach. Using a creative approach also implies that problem-solvers have a courageous attitude, being open to new experiences, embracing ambiguity, and venturing into new and unfamiliar territory. Creative problem solvers must move from a place with which they are comfortable or familiar to one that is different and potentially unknown, in which the results of their efforts may be uncertain and unable to be assured or determined in advance.

A contemporary approach CPS (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011; Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval, 2006) involves four components and eight specific stages. These include: *Understanding the Challenge* (with three stages, called *Constructing Opportunities*, *Exploring Data*, and *Framing Problems*); *Generating Ideas*, with one stage of the same name; *Preparing for Action* (with the *Developing Solutions* and *Building Acceptance* stages); and, *Planning Your Approach* (with two stages, *Appraising Tasks* and *Designing Process*). The *Constructing Opportunities* component involves gain clarity about the nature of an opportunity, challenge, or problem, understanding its key elements, and constructing a problem statement that invites an open-ended

search for solutions. The Generating Ideas component engages problem solvers in producing many, varied, unusual, and richly detailed solution possibilities. Preparing for Action's stages involve formulating a clear plan of action for carrying out promising solutions and engaging people and resources that will contribute to a successful response to the task or situation. Planning Your Approach is a metacognitive component that guides problem solvers in determining the appropriateness of using CPS for a specific task and in designing and managing appropriate selection and application of process components, stages, and tools. Figure 1 presents a graphic representation of the CPS framework (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011; Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval, 2006).[You can download an overview of CPS in PDF format at: <http://www.creativelearning.com/images/stories/freePDFs/CPSVersion61.pdf>].

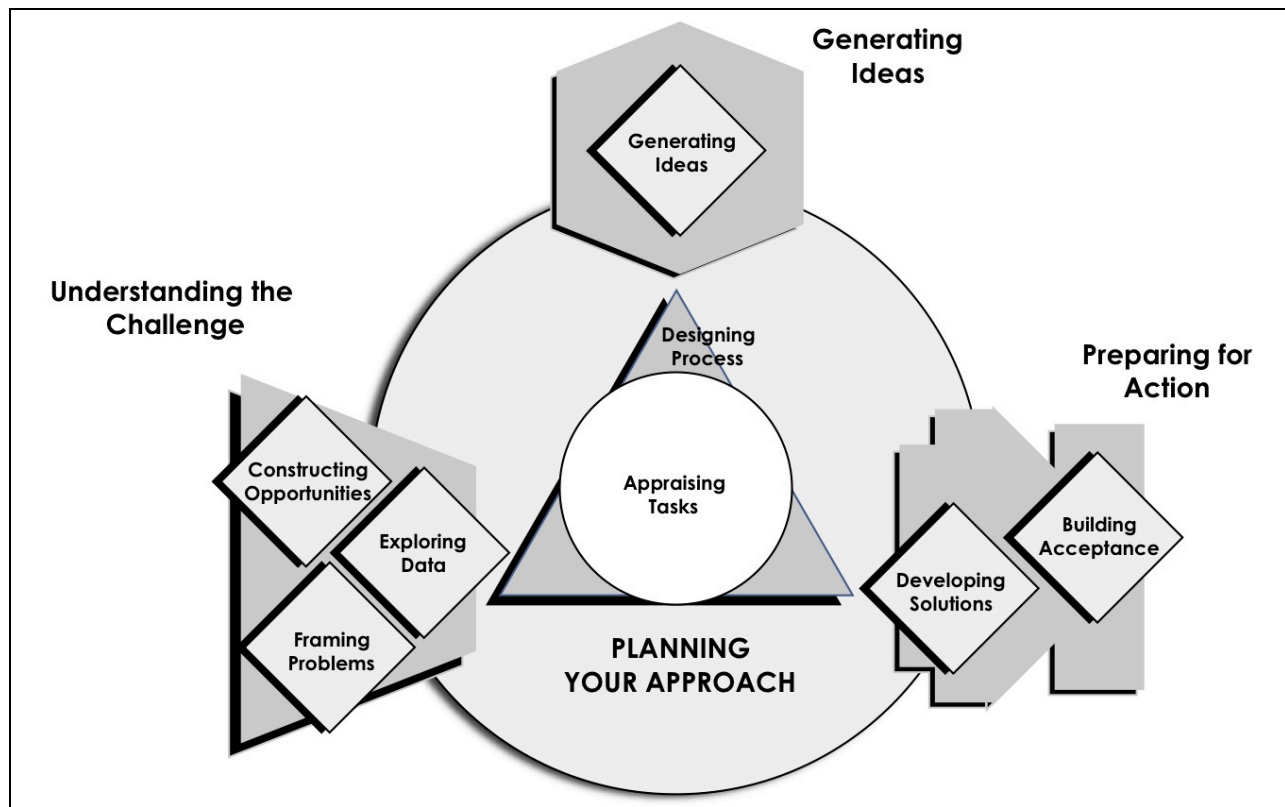


Figure 1. Creative Problem Solving Framework (CPS Version 6.1™)

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It is appropriate to apply CPS components, stages, and tools when individuals or groups are working on a task, for which there is ownership (i.e., people care), and a task that is important, ambiguous, complex, open-ended (needs novelty), timely, involving, and has potential to move people, work, actions forward (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger 2011, p. 153). Individuals, teams, and groups often encounter such tasks when they are striving to build or sustain caring communities.

Research also indicates that creativity and innovation in any organization can be influenced—and either encouraged or inhibited— by nine specific factors: challenge and involvement,

freedom, playfulness and humor, idea time and support, debate, [low] conflict, trust and openness, and risk-taking (Isaksen, Lauer, & Ekvall, 1999; Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011).

Linking Creativity, CPS, and Caring Communities

Education that supports the growth and development of all learners involves creating positive and high expectations, providing opportunities for meaningful participation by students and adults in the learning experience, and building caring and supportive relationships that are characterized by compassion, understanding, trust, and respect (Gibbs, undated). Those educational experiences, Gibbs argued, lead to the development of lifelong abilities in social competence (including responsiveness, cultural flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills and a sense of humor), problem-solving skills (including planning, help-seeking, critical and creative thinking), autonomy (including identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and task-mastery), and a sense of purpose with belief in a bright future (Gibbs, undated; Benard, 2004).

Sharp (2004, p. 9) proposed that "caring thinking suggests a certain view of personhood and a pedagogical process. It also suggests a particular environment for the cultivation of such thinking. I am referring to the process of communal inquiry and the democratic environment of the classroom community of inquiry. It is as if you can't have one without the other, if you are interested in cultivating caring thinking among children on a large scale."

It seems reasonable, then, to propose that caring thinking and the challenge of building and sustaining caring communities are mutually supportive and interrelated. Both involve a broad, inclusive level of engagement among participants, trust and openness, compassion, mutual respect, and a commitment to a constructive, positive set of goals with a positive outlook for the future. The same principles come into play when groups are addressing creative opportunities and challenges, meeting the challenges of change, and seeking innovative solutions for complex problems.

It is important to recognize that all people have creative potential, and can learn skills and tools for creative and critical thinking and problem solving (Treffinger, Schoonover, & Selby, 2013). The CPS framework offers a powerful set of tools for individuals and groups to apply when they are working on the challenges of building or sustaining caring communities. The power of CPS is evident in practical applications of CPS that extend to many kinds of organizations in varied settings and at varied ages. Some successful applications involve simply the use of one or a few tools. Other settings involve learning to use the language and key concepts of CPS to clarify and enhance the purpose of a meeting or a working committee or task force. Other successful applications involve use of the entire CPS framework. Several factors influence the scope of CPS applications, such as the nature of the task, the desired outcome, the readiness of the people with whom you are working, and the situation within which you find yourself. Thus, CPS provides a structured framework that can readily be "scaled" to address a broad range of opportunities, challenges, and concerns that may arise in initiatives that focus on building and sustaining caring communities. Successful CPS applications in a variety of caring community contexts include the following examples:

At-risk students. CPS has been applied successfully in helping at-risk adolescents and young adults find constructive directions in their lives and enabling them to find opportunities for personal and vocational success (as in the Lost Prizes project; McCluskey, Baker, Bergsgaard, & McCluskey, 2001) and for becoming contributing members of their communities, rather than participants in the criminal justice system (e.g., Place, McCluskey, McCluskey, & Treffinger, 2000). The use of CPS has resulted in desirable effects because of its long-term history of research and development, the wide variety of applications, the ease with which it can be learned, and its demonstrated value in helping people understand and utilize their creative strengths (e.g., Isaksen, 2008).

CPS in a Local Community Service Organization. Christie and Kaminiski (2002) described their applications in a local United Way program, working collaboratively with an agency whose programs seek to build self-sufficiency, hope, supportive living situations and a stronger community.

A Statewide CPS Project with Multiple Initiatives. Freeman, Wolfe, Littlejohn, B., & Mayfield, N. (2001) reported the results of a survey evaluating a multi-year CPS-based program with more than 400 participant responses from a variety of organizations. They reported that 90% of the survey respondents indicated that CPS had positive impact on several aspects of their work. The responses indicated successful impact of CPS applications in many settings, including: schools (in relation to instruction, staff morale, communication between home and school, student conferencing and work by planning teams); state government agencies (including children's and family services and strengthening planning and service delivery); training and technical assistance providers (increasing efficiency in delivering services to the community, assisting individuals with disabilities and families to enhance the quality of life, working with parents and families in need); and, non-profit, disability, and social service agencies (improving client programs, aiding community committees identifying and responding to client needs, enhancing organizational climate) among others (Freeman, et al., 2001, pp. 5-6).

Summary

Building and sustaining caring communities— the heart of the *We R 3C, Inc.* mission— and the CPS process and its effective implementation) share several important principles and priorities; these include: focus on a positive or constructive set of goals, coming together and working with trust, openness, honesty and integrity, concern for complex challenges that are open-ended and for which there may be no "ready-made" solutions already available, readiness to engage in extended collaborative efforts, willingness to take risks and look at situations from many points of view.

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