An Introduction to Strategic Doing for Community Development

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Strategy answers two questions: "Where are we going?" and "How will we get there?" Deceptively simple, these questions are devilishly difficult to answer within a complex community setting.

This chapter introduces you to Strategic Doing, a new discipline for developing and implementing strategy in loosely connected groups. As a form of community visioning, Strategic Doing provides a discipline that can help community development practitioners guide communities as they develop new strategies for development.

Here is what is different: Strategic Doing is a strategy discipline designed specifically for loosely connected networks, the type of networks that characterize our communities. Many practitioners have experienced the situation: A small group of civic leaders attempts to drive a community in a specific direction. It rarely works, for the simple reason that no one can tell anyone else what to do. The mayor cannot tell the chamber of commerce what to do. The chamber cannot tell the community college what to do. The county commission cannot tell the chamber what to do, and so on.

Communities are organized around networks, not hierarchies. Strategic Doing guides strategy across organizational and political boundaries to build action-oriented collaborations quickly. Traditional strategy practices emerged from large hierarchical, "command and control" corporations. A small group of people at the top of the organization did the thinking, while rest

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of the people did the doing. In our civic spaces, there are no hierarchies. Yet, we still need to do strategic thinking. Now, more than ever, we need to act strategically. So, how do we focus our limited resources where they are likely to have the largest positive impacts? Strategic Doing is designed to answer this question.

Strategic Doing can stand alone as a visioning practice, or practitioners can use elements of the discipline in their own visioning process. While practitioners have used visioning as a process of community development for about two decades, no single framework has evolved to dominate the field. Indeed, one of the strengths of visioning may be that no strict dogma applies. Practitioners are free to innovate, to experiment with different approaches and adapt what works.

Strategic Doing emerges from this spirit of experimentation and adaptation. It relies on proven practices of Asset Based Community Development, Appreciative Inquiry and open source software development (Kretzmann, J.P. & McKnight, J.L. 1993; Coopperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D. 2001; Goldman, R. & Gabriel, R. P. 2005). It integrates these insights with a set of simple rules to follow (Eisenhardt, K., & Sull, D. 2001). Most important, perhaps, Strategic Doing is flexible, adaptive and low cost. Practitioners can make meaningful progress in translating ideas into action in as little as two to three hours.

Typically, practitioners with experience with large group interventions and facilitation pick up the discipline quickly. It embraces a simple framework that, like any discipline, takes practice to master. Its popularity is spreading, because the discipline provides an intuitive approach for developing a strategy and translating it into action. Practitioners can quickly integrate the insights, tools and practices of Strategic Doing into existing strategy or visioning programs.   Everyone has a network, and when we choose to collaborate, we bring this network into the room. Strategic Doing provides a way to align our extended networks, so we can get

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more work done faster. Practitioners can use Strategic Doing anywhere they need to develop and manage a focused collaboration.

Thinking strategically in new ways is a little like putting on a new pair of glasses. It might feel a little disoriented at first, but in a short time, vision improves. Here is an example of some of the traditional thinking that needs adjustment. Having grown up in a hierarchical world, many practitioners think of a strategy process as being either "top-down" or "bottom up". In network world, there are no tops or bottoms; only people and their connections matter.

Other seemingly confusing adjustments arise when practitioners shift their thinking toward networks. In building a network, it is easier not think of "stakeholders" – people who may be careful about guarding their boundaries. Instead, think of "shareholders" – people willing to invest in a developing network. In a hierarchical world, these boundaries matter. In a network world, they matter far less. Strong networks keep their boundaries open and flexible. Network developers look for "boundary-spanners", people who can jump across boundaries easily. They focus energy and attention on strengthening the hubs of the network and connecting these hubs to each other.

This chapter unfolds in three parts. First, the chapter introduces the core principles of Strategic Doing. This strategy discipline is designed for open networks, the kind of networks that characterize community and regional economies. The first section explores in more detail what it means to shift our community development thinking toward networks.

The second section describes the four key questions of Strategic Doing to focus a network on strategic issues. The last section concludes by summarizing seven simple rules that define Strategic Doing and offers some insights that have emerged from our Strategic Doing

workshops across the country. These guidelines are tentative, but they may help practitioners, as they struggle with the complex task of guiding communities to higher levels of prosperity.

Strategic Doing emerged from the practice of strategic planning in regional economic development. The Purdue Center for Regional Development continues to incubate the discipline and provide its anchor home for development. Currently, Strategic Doing provides guidance for practitioners in education, community development, economic development and workforce development. The core concepts, templates and ideas are freely distributed through the Purdue Center for Regional Development with a Creative Commons license.

A cautionary note: Strategic Doing is very much a discipline in development. New tools and practices are evolving. Even though many of the core concepts are grounded in proven development frameworks, Strategic Doing initiatives need continuous evaluations. So far, the evidence suggests that Strategic Doing can lead to step change improvements in productivity, as participants learn to "link and leverage" their resources toward shared, measurable outcomes. Because people can move their collaborations into action quickly, the popularity of Strategic Doing is spreading steadily among community, economic and workforce development professionals.

Throughout this chapter, paragraphs with the lead-in "*The practical consequences for community development*" will help practitioners experiment with these concepts. In the end, the best way to learn Strategic Doing is to do Strategic Doing.

The Principles Underlying Strategic Doing for Community Development: Thinking from a Network Perspective

The discipline of Strategic Doing for community development rests on a set of core principles:

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1. Communities — and their economies — represent networks embedded in other networks.

2. Prosperity emerges from the mix of three flows of money circulating through these networks in a community.

3. Innovation can shift the mix of these three flows of money.

4. Innovation drives prosperity by converting ideas into valuable and sustainable products, services and experiences.

5. Innovation can emerge quickly from open networks of focused collaboration.

6. Networks innovate by linking and leveraging shared assets and defining new opportunities where these assets connect.

7. As network members connect more assets, opportunities increase exponentially.

8. Strategy in open networks to pursue these opportunities emerges from following simple rules.

9. Leaders guide networks strategically by guiding conversations with appreciative questions.

10. Strategy in open networks balances open participation with leadership direction.

We will explore each in more detail.

Communities — and their economies — represent networks embedded in other networks.-- Economists have long taught us that economies operate like mechanical systems. They have fixed points of equilibrium. An "invisible hand" guides the market toward this balance point through prices and the rational decisions of buyers and sellers. While logical, the assumptions underlying this model are deeply flawed. This model does not provide much insight into how to build communities.

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An alternative perspective is emerging that sees economies as networks embedded in other networks (Beinhocker 2006). Economies represent open systems that adapt as circumstances change. This approach, although more difficult to grasp at first, holds far deeper implications and insight for community development.

As practitioners focus on growing their economies from the inside out, they are becoming more aware of the importance of networks to building prosperity. This thinking emerges in rural communities as they pursue both broadband and entrepreneurship strategies. Networks provide the rationale for both strategies.

In broadband, physical infrastructure creates the platform to strengthen the networks that lead to economic development (Kotko 2010). Bristol, Virginia provides a good case study of the value of broadband. A municipally-owned utility, Bristol Virginia Utilities, operates a fiber optic network in the city (population 17,000) and the surrounding counties. The deployment of a high speed backbone triggered investments by a major defense contractor and a large consulting firm to locate in this rural region in southwest Virginia. The defense contractor called the broadband investment "absolutely critical" to its decision to locate its facility so far away from a major metro (The Economist, 2010).

Entrepreneurship strategies also depend on developing networks. The resources that entrepreneurs need to form and grow a business flow through informal networks within a community or region. By strengthening these networks, a community can accelerate the pace of business formation and growth. As an example, the Charleston Digital Corridor launched in Charleston, SC in 2001. Soon after the launch, Ernest Andrade, the Executive Director of the Corridor, established the practice of conducting regular forums – Fridays @ The Corridor – to continuously build these networks. Through these forums, people in young companies become

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aware of the resources available to support their companies. They make the connections they need to gain access to these resources quickly. In 2011, Charleston ranked as one of the top cities in the country in support of small business (Portfolio.com 2011).

The practical consequences for community development: We can strengthen community economies by strengthening relationships and intentionally building new networks of economic activity.

Prosperity emerges from the mix of three flows of money circulating through these networks in an economy.-- Here is a simple way to explain how economies prosper. Prosperity in a community comes down to three flows of money that move through its networks: "good", "neutral" and "bad". Good money flows into an economy through businesses (both profit and nonprofit) that trade outside the community they import money into the community. These "traded businesses" pour money into the economy like water going into a bucket.

Neutral money represents flows of money circulating within the economy. Economists refer to the "multiplier effect" to capture this idea. The $100 that gets pumped into a community economy by a traded business will circulate multiple times among the local businesses within the community. This multiplier effect creates still more jobs and income.

Bad money represents money that flows out of the community. When residents make purchases outside of the community that they could make inside, they are reducing jobs and income. Bad money represents the holes in the bucket, the leakage. Prosperity within a community involves managing these three flows of money: increasing the volume of good money; increasing the velocity of neutral money; and reducing the volume of bad money.

The distinctions among these three flows are not hard and fast. So, for example, a local "Big Box" retailer may draw customers from a wide market area outside a community. In

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attracting these customers, the store increases the volume of good money. Yet, because of its sourcing patterns, the big-box retailer may not rely at all on local suppliers. So, while the Big Box retailer is increasing the flow of good money, it is also increasing the flow of bad money and reducing the velocity of neutral money (both by ignoring local suppliers).

A 2009 study in New Orleans illustrates this dynamic. Researchers examined financial data from fifteen locally owned businesses and compared their impact on the local economy to that of a Big Box retailer (The Urban Conservancy 2009). The study found that 16% of the money spent at a Big Box retailer stays in the local economy. In contrast, the local retailers returned more than 32% of their revenue to the local economy. The reason: the local stores purchased more goods and services from other local businesses. Small shifts in spending patterns can make a big difference to the local economy (circulating more neutral money). According to the study, if residents and visitors were to shift 10% of their spending from chains to local businesses, that change would generate an additional $235 million a year in local economic impact.

Here is another example to understand flows of money in an economy. The emergence of a local foods movement can improve community prosperity by reducing the flow of bad money and increasing the velocity of neutral money. Residents, by relying on local suppliers, keep more money in the local economy. As local food movement gains strength, it may develop its own marketing and branding. Then local food companies can become traded businesses, as they sell products in markets outside the community. When they cross this threshold, they increase the flow of good money.

That is exactly what is happening in Medora, IN, home of the National Maple Sugar Festival. After a Strategic Doing session, the community recognized the opportunity of

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converting a small basket of food assets (maple sugar producers) into a festival with a "Sweet Victory Challenge" contest, complete with celebrity judges, a national product sponsor (King Arthur Flour), and over 1,000 entries. In 2010, over 5,000 visitors attended the festival, a five fold increase from 2009 (http://nationalmaplesyrupfestival.com/).

The practical consequences for community development: We can quickly explain how economic prosperity emerges from three flows of money, and we can focus our efforts at improving these flows through networks in the community.

Innovation can shift the mix of these three flows of money.-- As organizations within the community innovate, they can shift the flows of money moving through their economy. These innovations often arise from new collaborations in the community. Medora, IN represents on example: innovations in local foods can create higher volumes of good money.

In another example, cooperation can increase the power of tourism attractions to generate good money. Take the case of a rural county in Kentucky. Packaging together a tour of local churches, each with a remarkable history, enabled one county in eastern Kentucky to market itself to residents in Louisville and Cincinnati. By creating a new tourism experience, they increased the flow of good money flowing into their community.

Buy local campaigns reduce the flow of bad money and increase the velocity of good money. The Business Alliance of Local Living Economies (BALLE) represents a fast-growing network of businesses focused on the strategy of strengthening local economies by building networks that support locally-owned businesses (http://livingeconomies.org). BALLE operates as a network of networks, with over 80 networks operating in thirty states and Canadian provinces. Local First, based in Grand Rapids, MI represents a hub for this strategy in the Midwest. From a

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base of 160 businesses in 2007 in Grand Rapids, Local First had grown to a network of over 600 businesses by 2010 (http://localfirst.com).

As governments collaborate, they can also alter these flows. Establishing a buying collaborative can reduce the price that governments pay for supplies and reduce the flow of bad money. For example, the Kansas City Regional Purchasing Cooperative, a collaboration of local governments, formed in 2003 to give government agencies access to volume discounts and better pricing. In the process, they are reducing the flow of bad money out of the economy.

The practical consequences for community development: Innovations emerging from networks of collaboration in our communities can shift the mix of the three flows of money.

Innovation drives prosperity by converting ideas into valuable products, services and experiences.-- Let's look at the process of innovation more closely. Innovation is a process of converting ideas into something valuable. Warren Buffett has famously drawn the distinction between price and value: price is what you pay; value is what you get. In a market economy, customers determine value.

The "something of value" can be virtually anything: a product, a service or an experience. In short, innovation happens anywhere. Artists are innovating when they create exciting experiences to bring people downtown. Businesses are innovating when they create a new product. Governments are innovating when they deliver services through the Internet or share public safety services.

Finally, innovations do not have to be big to be meaningful. The business literature is filled with articles about "disruptive" innovations — the big ideas that abruptly shift markets. In community development, we are not really looking for the "next big thing". Instead, we are

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looking for a lot of smaller innovations which, when taken together, alter the development path for our communities.

Here is an example. A monthly First Fridays Artwalk in Fairfield, Iowa encourages residents and visitors to see Fairfield in a new light. Sponsors conduct ArtWalk on the first Friday evening year around on Fairfield's downtown square. Over 25 galleries & art venues, businesses, arts organizations, and schools contribute exhibits, demonstrations and performance art. During these events, the sidewalks were filled with people who come to town for the experience. Artwalk marks one component in the rural renaissance of Fairfield. Despite being 60 miles off the interstate and 100 miles from the nearest metro region, Fairfield has fashioned itself into a vibrant entrepreneurial hot spot (Chojnowski, 2010). As communities like Fairfield accumulate innovations, they shift how money flows through their economy. The flow of bad money decreases, while both the flow of good money and the velocity of neutral money increase.

The practical consequences for community development: Innovation can be large or small. Small innovations can grow into big innovations. Many small innovations — accumulating over time — can amount to a big shift.

Innovation can emerge quickly from open networks of focused collaboration.-- In a network economy, innovation can come from anywhere. Corporations are beginning to recognize this fact by moving toward new business models of "open innovation". With this approach, a company relies on outside expertise to bring new ideas to market (Chesbrough 2003). Broadly speaking, "open innovation" is the process of innovating in partnership with others outside your organization, by sharing the risks and rewards of the outcome and process.

The idea is nothing new to community development. Most experienced practitioners recognize the interdependencies that bring new ideas to market. Successful community

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development projects require skills from facilitation to detailed project management. Think about the challenges of revitalizing the downtown main street in a place like Horse Cave, Kentucky. The city (population 2,200) is located 80 miles south of Louisville, just off Interstate 65. Twelve years ago, when a team from the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development visited, the downtown was downtrodden and dilapidated. Their first strategy: Turn the downtown into a vibrant place. The team gave them simple places to start: pick up the trash, cut the weeds, paint the faded and peeling welcome sign.

Now signs of life have emerged with a series of innovations, like the Horse Cave Heritage Festival. In 2001, the city started a Main Street program. In January 2011, they launched a cell phone walking tour with numbers posted on tour signs around town. Each stops is connected to a web site that provides still more information (http://www.horsecavestories.com/). Each of these steps represents an "open innovation" arising from collaboration.

By nurturing more networks within communities and focusing these networks on new ideas tied to next steps, the number of innovations taking place can accelerate. Speed comes from trust that builds through predictable habits of moving ideas into action. As these trusted networks become thicker and larger, the number of innovations expands.

The practical consequences for community development: We can accelerate the impact of innovations in our economy by developing and guiding open networks of collaboration.

Networks innovate by linking and leveraging shared assets and defining new opportunities where these assets connect.-- Building off a community's assets represents one of the key tenets of successful community development (Kretzman & McKnight 1993). By linking and leveraging our assets, members of a community can imagine new opportunities.

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What happens when an engineering professor with a love for guitars meets high school science teachers grappling with the challenges of engaging students in science, engineering and math? Out of this mix the Purdue Guitar Summer Camp now excites high school students by teaching them how to build their own electric guitar. During a week, students get exposed to advanced manufacturing technologies and the experience of working on a college campus. They take away a new appreciation of manufacturing and, perhaps, a new set of career options.

Here is another example. In Milwaukee, a cluster of fresh water technology companies formed in 2008. As the discussions leading to this cluster got underway, executives at two companies discovered a major opportunity to support new start up companies. One firm, A.O. Smith, operates one of the largest hot water testing labs in the country. Another, Badger Meter, operates one of the largest cold water testing labs. Both companies had excess capacity in their labs. By combining this excess capacity, the two companies now provide sophisticated testing facilities to start-up companies across the spectrum of fresh water technologies.

The practical consequences for community development: We need to start our strategies by identifying our assets, but we cannot stop there. The real opportunities emerge when we connect our assets in new and different ways.

As network members connect more assets, opportunities increase exponentially.-- This principle captures "the network effect" that can be explained with a little thought experiment. If the world had only one cell phone, it would not be very valuable. If the world had two cell phones, then two people could establish a connection. Assign a value of 1 to this connection. But what about ten cell phones? This network could establish 90 one-way (or 45 two-way) connections with these cell phones, so the value is much higher. That is the point. The

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value of a network increases exponentially with the number of connected nodes in the network. Welcome to the world of increasing returns (Arthur 1996).

This one idea has turned economics and business strategy upside down (Beinhocker 2006). Economics is no longer solely about how we manage scarcity. Knowledge, emerging from networks, is infinitely expandable. As knowledge becomes an increasing valuable component of products and services, businesses are facing the challenges of competing in markets with increasing returns. In this world, collaboration becomes vital to success. Who makes the Apple iPhone? It is not Apple. Rather, it is a network led by Apple.

The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in southeastern Ohio has pioneered the development of network-based economic development. Through an approach ACEnet calls Regional Flavor, ACEnet builds networks that add value to local agricultural production. The process started with an anchor investment in a shared kitchen incubator. As networks grew, collaborative buying started. More sophisticated collaborations emerged with still more collaborations around regional branding. As more network connections form, more opportunities emerge (Holley 2006, 2009).

With increasing returns delivered through networks, community and economic development are not zero-sum games. Communities with deep habits of forming practical collaborations will prosper. They will learn faster, spot opportunities faster and make decisions faster. They will be more innovative, adaptive and resilient.

The practical consequences for community development: to nurture community vitality we need a continuous, low cost process for developing and guiding collaborations.

Strategy in networks emerges from following simple rules.-- Even the smallest communities represent complex sets of relationships: networks embedded in other networks.

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Collaborative projects add another level of complexity. The shifting social, economic and natural environments add still more complexity.

Communities cannot develop strategy by adding even more complexity. Instead, strategy emerges by following some simple rules (Eisenhardt & Sull 2001). Strategy—the story of where a community is going and how it will get there—evolves from continuous, deep and focused conversations combined with experimentation. People learn by doing. A strategy should capture the best thinking at a single point in time. As the community gains knowledge and experience, the strategy –a combination of outcomes and pathways – changes. The community can create and adapt quickly by following a discipline defined by simple rules.

In the industrial economy of the past, strategy formed as a product of a logical, linear planning process. Rooted in the operational planning that developed during World War II, a linear planning process works very well in stable markets. In the network economy that is emerging, the future is far less predictable. Strategy remains vitally important, but effective strategy must be more flexible and adaptive, as circumstances change more rapidly (Homer-Dixon 2000).

The practical consequences for community development: Defining a strategy for a community is not a lengthy, costly linear process. In a network, strategy is a simple discipline — a set of collective habits, widely shared — that takes practice to master. It is a process of fast, frequent engagement with short bursts of strategic thinking to keep us aligned and focused.

Leaders guide networks strategically by guiding conversations with appreciative questions.-- Appreciative questions focus attention on the strengths embedded in a network. By framing a constructive conversation, an appreciative question can lead members of the network to see new possibilities and new collaborations. As members of the network begin to translate

their opportunities into action, appreciative questions enable the network to make adjustments and keep moving in the direction of their shared outcomes. As implementation continues, appreciative questions support and amplify these efforts (Busche 2007; Busche 2010; Cooperrider 1990).

Part of the challenge many communities face comes in crossing organizational and political boundaries. Only deeper conversations can bridge these divides. Getting people to share their stories by asking them appreciative questions demonstrates empathetic listening, a key element of overcoming these barriers and encouraging this deeper dialogue (Yankelovich, 1999).

Here is an example of the power of appreciative questions at work in Ascension Parish, Louisiana in the late 1990's. A small group of citizen planners faced a big set of problems. Ascension Parish is located just south of Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River. In the mid 1990s this predominantly rural parish experienced large increases in its population as people migrated out of Baton Rouge. The influx created a serious challenge for a parish with no zoning ordinance.

Only a few feet above sea level, the parish is prone to flooding. Major development that imported dirt to fill in the low land simply pushed water onto neighboring land. A more serious problem existed along the riverfront where large chemical plants operated. Residential encroachment on these plants created serious public safety problems.

The citizen planners had approached these problems by focusing on developing a zoning ordinance. However, the strong political sentiment against any government control of local property decisions prevented any serious discussion from taking place. When they started, the Parish Council stood unanimously against adopting a zoning ordinance.

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They changed the dynamic in the parish by shifting the discussion. Instead of focusing on zoning, they held citizen forums around the parish focusing our attention on another question. They asked, "What are the things that you love about this parish that you would like to preserve and pass on to your children and your grandchildren?" They used big wall maps to mark the assets that people wanted to preserve. After meetings across the parish, they drafted a development code to protect the assets that citizens wanted to protect. In the process, they dealt with the problems of flooding and residential encroachment on the industrial plants. When they were finished, the new development code easily passed the Parish Council.

The practical consequences for community development: We guide our strategy by guiding and focusing our conversations. Effective network leadership comes from asking insightful questions.

Strategy in open networks balances open participation with leadership direction.-- For many civic leaders, a legacy of hierarchical thinking divides the world into "top-down" or "bottom-up" approaches to strategy and leadership. As we have seen, in a networked world, these choices do not exist. There are no tops or bottoms to a network.

Instead, the most effective networks have both a tight core and porous boundaries. A tight core of members bound together with high levels of trust can quickly translate ideas into action. By their actions, these core members guide the network. They assume different leadership responsibilities, distributed throughout the core team.

At the same time, porous boundaries keep the network open to new ideas and flows of information. When boundaries get too rigid, the core members of the network can suffer from "group think". They are not open to new perspectives. They reinforce each other's thinking regardless of whether their perceptions are accurate (Surowiecki 2003, 184).

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The citizen planners who built networks in Ascension Parish maintained this balance between open participation and leadership direction. A handful of eight citizen planners guided the process. They agreed to hold citizen forums anywhere in the parish. They met in community centers, volunteer fire departments, schools, and even a small metal building that had been used for a warehouse.   The citizen planners guided these meetings with strict rules of civility. When people stepped out of order, the chair interrupted and reminded the audience of the importance of mutual respect. In this way, they built the networks that changed the political dynamics in the parish.

The practical consequences for community development: Community development is the art of balancing open participation and leadership direction. In most situations, practitioners can offer guidance by asking insightful questions. At the other times, practitioners will need to be more assertive. By keeping the community development process open, practitioners are not inviting confusion or sacrificing leadership responsibility. Leadership in networks provides coherence and focus. Practitioners need open participation to maintain the vibrancy and resilience of our networks.

The Key Questions of Strategy Doing: Focusing a Network on Strategic Issues

Community development involves guiding loosely joined collaborations toward common, shared outcomes. These collaborations emerge from complex conversations. How do civic leaders build strategic collaborations? How do they identify the projects and focus on issues that really matter to them? How do they define the essence of a strategy: explaining where their community is going and how they will get there?

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It is commonplace to think of helping and implementing a strategy as a linear process. In Strategic Doing, strategy emerges in a different way. It is an ongoing, agile discipline, an iterative fast cycle process of thinking, executing, and learning collaboratively. This discipline enables people in a network to focus and adjust. People do their complex thinking together quickly.

Community development involves a web of relationships far more challenging than two parties coming together to form a partnership. If developing a business partnership is a game of checkers, then community development is three dimensional chess. These collaborations involve multiple parties, each with their own governance, funding and network of connections. These resources are both embedded in invisible networks and remarkably extensive.

Think of it this way. If ten people come together to start collaborating on a community development project, there are more than ten people at the table. Each participant also represents an invisible network of people. With the right inspiration and direction, the people at the table can mobilize their networks and align them toward a common outcome. Assume that each person has a trusted network of thirty people. In this case, a group of ten people has the opportunity of mobilizing a network of three hundred people. But how can they do that?

One of the important insights from Appreciative Inquiry is that people move in the direction of their conversations. If practitioners can focus conversations on strategic issues, then they can guide this network to develop and execute a strategy.

Strategic Doing starts with defining new opportunities by linking and leveraging assets within the network. Members of a network then develop shared outcomes by conducting a detailed conversation on the characteristics of success. As network members explore what success looks like, they convert these characteristics into measurable outcomes.

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They then mark a pathway to each outcome by starting with a project and some simple milestones. They move into action with a short action plan that focuses on near-term steps to gain momentum. Finally, they set a time to come back together again to review what they have learned, explore new opportunities, refine their strategy (both outcomes and pathways), and create their next short-term action plan. They can do all this work together in a matter of hours, if they focus their conversation on four key strategic questions.

As they answer these questions they generate all the components they need for a strategic action plan. The process calls for continuous revision. Their strategic thinking is never finished. They treat each version of their strategic action plan as a work in progress, and they number them, much like a software company keeps track of new releases of a software package.

Defining Opportunities with Strategic Doing: What could we do?

The first question of Strategic Doing invites members of a new network to start the process of mapping the assets within their network. These assets can be tangible or intangible: resources, experience, connections, and passions. Their network assets represent the assets that the members are willing to share with each other. By linking and leveraging these assets, they define new opportunities. As they connect these opportunities into patterns, a vision of their future possibilities emerges.

What could happen if they connected their community college to science classes taking place in their high schools? What could happen if they linked their workforce system to their public libraries? Could they leverage the assets within their network to create new supports to keep at-risk youth in school?

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These are the type of explorations triggered by the first question of Strategic Doing. By combining the insights of Asset Based Community Development and Appreciative Inquiry, the first question of Strategic Doing invites them to imagine new horizons for collective action.

In 2007, a small group of no more than twelve people met in the basement of the White County, Indiana courthouse. They came to explore what steps they could do to move their region of fourteen counties toward a sustainable economy in energy efficiency and renewable energy. They started with an ambitious question: "How can we distinguish our region nationally in clean energy?"

A representative from Purdue University was the first to speak. She pointed out that Purdue had a lot of assets in teaching manufacturers new skills for sustainability. She wondered, "Could we establish a new green collar certification for manufacturing?" The representative from Ivy Tech, the state's community college system, pointed to the expertise within her system to develop and deliver curriculum. The economic developers around the table immediately saw the value of promoting their region as a center for sustainable manufacturing.

From this conversation, which took no more than 90 minutes, the group launched the first national certification in green manufacturing, the Green Manufacturing Specialist Certification. The training educates both hourly and salaried workers in the principles of clean manufacturing, energy conservation and waste reduction. Through Purdue's collaboration with the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, the certificate is now offered nationally (Industry Week 2009).

The practical consequences for community development: In defining new opportunities for our communities, listing assets does not go far enough. Our opportunities emerge when we connect our assets. We complete these discussions by asking a lot of "What if…?" questions.

Converting Opportunities to Strategic Outcomes: What should we do?

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Community participants can generate many opportunities from the assets they have within their networks, but a strategy is about making choices. They cannot do everything all at once. They need a strategy, and a strategy starts with an outcome, a destination.

Strategic Doing is designed to guide networks that we cannot "command and control". To do that, network members need convert their most promising opportunities -- which, taken together, may compose their vision -- into outcomes that are precise and clear. Moving a network requires specific destinations that practical people can see in their mind's eye. As the second step in Strategic Doing, they need to convert their opportunities into a small number of strategic outcomes.

Strategic Doing defines strategic outcomes in terms of clear characteristics. Network members define these characteristics by asking themselves some pointed questions. Specifically, how will their community be transformed by virtue of their collaborations? What will change? What evidence will they have that they have made a difference? What will people see, feel, or do that will be different? Defining a strategic outcome invites a detailed, deep discussion of the characteristics of the community they wish to leave behind, their legacy.

Motivating people in a loosely joined network requires that they become emotionally committed to common destination. That destination is a complex reality with many different characteristics, which are not mutually exclusive or necessarily conflicting. Rather than focusing early on vision statements, Strategic Doing concentrates energy on the complex task of defining at least one clear strategic outcome with measurable characteristics. A short thought exercise illustrates how characteristics can come together.

Imagine five people sitting around the table. We give them the challenge of choosing one quality car together. To find the best choice, each participant must first define what a "quality

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car" means. To Bob, it means a car with excellent fuel mileage. Mary, on the other hand, does not care so much about fuel economy, but she cares a lot about safety. She wants the highest safety rating possible. Jim thinks safety and fuel economy are important, but he really wants a car that will haul his kayak into some rougher off-road terrains. Janet is totally focused on the interior of the car. She wants heated leather seats, a good sound system, and a sunroof. Sue is the penny-pincher in the group. She wants a car that has a strong warranty and an excellent repair record.

As this thought exercise shows, all five members of the group have a different perspective on what a quality car means. They each define and weigh different characteristics, which are not mutually exclusive. They can undoubtedly find a range of models that would fit their collective needs. To do that, they have to reduce these characteristics to metrics, clear measurements that they can compare across models. Some characteristics (leather seats, sunroof, repair records) are easy to measure. Others (safety, off-road characteristics) are tricky. At the same time, clear measures can help the group to explore what they mean by quality car, make comparisons, and come to a decision.

Although this process may sound a bit daunting, it comes with practice. The Purdue Center for Regional Development used Strategic Doing to guide the development of a $15 million project to stimulate innovation in regional workforce and economic development. Funded by the U.S. Labor Department, they set out on a different course than most of their colleagues in other regions. They used a simple stage-gate process to decide which initiative proposals they would fund.

As part of a simple application process, they asked the sponsors of a proposal to define what they saw as an outcome: How did they propose to measure success? Through a short

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negotiation, they were able to help proposal sponsors to clarify their thinking about how they could describe their outcome so that everyone could measure it. For its part, Purdue was looking to invest their federal money in initiatives that were replicable, scalable and sustainable.

Over time, Purdue and its partners invested in over sixty initiatives in four strategic focus areas. Over 80% of these initiatives continued past their initial funding. Each initiative included multiple metrics that helped us to monitor what was working. Because everyone shared an understanding of where were they heading, Purdue did not need a heavy overhead to manage the $15 million in investment. Even with over 200 metrics reviewed monthly, Purdue added only 1.5 administrative people to manage the project. Clarity on our outcomes led to administrative flexibility.

Clear agreement on outcomes also helped Purdue and its partners move past potential arguments. Here is an example. Purdue and its partners targeted one of its programs to adults who had almost completed their college degree but were short a few credit hours. These "stop outs", they reasoned, may be induced to complete their college education with a relatively small financial incentive. They agreed that the outcome would be the number of adults who re-entered college to complete their degree.

As a first step, they designed a coupon program for these adults who attended two of the public four year institutions in our region: Indiana University–Kokomo (IU-K) and Purdue University. They agreed to divide the budget equally between the two institutions. Students would receive a small tuition break if they re-entered school.

They sent invitations to participate in the program to an equal number of stop outs at each institution. They quickly found that the response rate at IU-K was far higher than Purdue. Based

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on this initial response, they shifted all of the money over to IU-K. Because they had agreed on clear outcomes at the beginning, they avoided any controversy about reallocating the budget.

The practical consequences for community development: The first part of any strategy involves defining an outcome. As practitioners guide discussions within their community to define these outcomes, they need to move to deeper levels of detail. They need to define specific characteristics that are measurable, so they can agree on what success looks like. This step may take time at the beginning, but when it comes to implementation, the community can move faster.

Developing Clear Project and Action Plans: What will we do?

Answering this question draws the logical links from where the community is today to where they want to be. This step involves defining a pathway with at least one project, as well as an action plan that outlines the next steps.

Recall that an effective strategy in open networks mobilizes a community's collective networks. In order to do that, participants in a Strategic Doing workshop need to convince people that their outcome is clear and worthy, that they know what success looks like. They also need to convince them that they have a practical path to get from here to there. A project plan with clear milestones meets this test. It helps convince people in their networks that their outcome is achievable.

In addition to the project plan, however, they need an action plan. What steps will they take collectively in the short term to move ahead? A transparent, shared action plan breaks another common bad habit. In civic discussions, participants are often comfortable with coming up with ideas for other people to do. This customary approach is a recipe for gridlock. Instead, Strategic Doing emphasizes the importance of everyone in the network taking a small step to

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advance the project plan and move toward a clear outcome. Execution, like everything else in Strategic Doing, is a shared responsibility.

The discipline of Strategic Doing emphasizes the importance of small next steps for number of reasons. First, everyone is busy; no one has enough time; and small steps make it easier to commit. In implementing a project plan, a network is are far better off by breaking their project plan into these small steps over the short term. The probability that members of the network will make some progress increases, and the risk that they will fall victim to schedule delays goes down dramatically. Second, by taking small, coordinated steps collectively, they can generate a big movement. A telephone tree works this way. Members of a telephone tree can notify hundreds of people quickly, if each person makes only a handful of calls.

Third, a shared, transparent action plan also helps a network make adjustments when circumstances change. If a member of the network cannot fulfill her commitment, others can quickly fill the gap. They can substitute with someone else or simply defer this step until later. Finally, a transparent action plan develops an atmosphere of mutual accountability. With mutual accountability, members of the network help each other keep on track.

This third step of Strategic Doing is critical to translating ideas into action. Many strategies published by community, economic and workforce development organizations often fail to include an action plan. Without one, any strategy is incomplete. It does not clearly answer the question of "How will we get there?"

Part of the problem, may be that people naturally expect someone else to do the work. Here is an example from northern Idaho. A group of civic leaders in Sandpoint, Idaho convened to come up with a clear strategy for improving workforce skill development within their region. The group took two hours to go through the first two steps of a Strategic Doing workshop.

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When it came to the third question -- "What will we do? -- the group naturally assumed that a handful of staff people within the economic and workforce development organizations would implement everything. Their answer meant that, in effect, forty people would be telling three people what to do.

To move around this implementation roadblock, participants in the workshop needed to shift the thinking in the room on how to translate ideas into action within a network. In a hierarchy, implementation is a responsibility assigned to one person or, at most, a handful of people. Within a network, the responsibility for implementation is broadly shared. To move the north Idaho region forward, everyone in the room needed to take a small step toward the outcomes we had outlined.

The group moved in this direction when one person asked each member of the group to raise a hand if they agreed with the outcomes that they had defined. Virtually every hand in the room went up. They then went from person by person and asked, "In the next 30 days, what will you do to move our strategy forward?" In the space of about fifteen minutes, they had their action plan.

The practical consequences for community development: In moving a strategy to action, focus on next steps. End each meeting with a discussion of your next steps. What will people be doing as they walk out of their meeting? What will they be doing next week?

Committing to a Learning Loop: When will we get back together?

The last step of Strategic Doing involves making commitments to connect and learn. The strategy process in open networks is organic, not fixed or mechanical. It requires absorbing the lessons from experience and making adjustments, as members of the network accumulate new knowledge about "what works".

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At the same time, a commitment to continuous learning recognizes that the strategy process is never done. Because the environment is continuously shifting, strategy in open networks involves an on-going process of adaptation and adjustment. Building the shared habit of convening regularly moves a community away from the notion that strategy can be hatched through one-time summits, an occasional "big tent" event, or a fat report.

During the initial launch of a Strategic Doing process, it makes sense to reconnect in person every thirty days or so. Personal connections are help to embed a strategy discipline among people in the network. At the same time, collaboration can continue online with multiple different Internet platforms for sharing information and keeping projects on track. Building the discipline of sharing information and meeting regularly to adjust strategy builds resilience within the network. As new trusted networks emerge, the community is more capable of spotting new opportunities and responding to new challenges.

For the past few years, the Edward Lowe Foundation has helped to develop the disciplines of Strategic Doing. With two and three day retreats, they explore different components of a curriculum for teaching the skills of guiding an open network. In one team-building exercise, called the River Tweed, teams work together to solve a complex problem of crossing an imaginary river. As they approach the distant shore, teams falter. They lose their focus. They think they have solved the problem before they actually reached the other side.

The experience carries an important lesson. In the closing minutes of a Strategic Doing workshop, the group cannot afford to drift off. They must focus on their next steps and answering the question: "When will we come back together to share what they have accomplished and learned?" Without closing this loop, the network does not learn or adapt. Instead, it will likely fall apart.

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The practical consequences for community development: Start slowly to build momentum, focus on linking strategic outcomes to small steps. Rather than concentrate on the number of people attending an event, pay attention to the quality of the conversation. Strategy in open networks involves guiding these deeper conversations. Use the Internet to post meeting notes and keep the process both open and moving forward. If practitioners focus on delivering powerful experiences, networks will grow. Most important, everyone leaving a gathering should have a clear idea of next steps.

The Simple Rules of Strategy Doing: Moving Collaborations to Action

With Strategic Doing being conducted around the country, a set of simple rules is emerging to guide the process. Here are some steps to follow to implement Strategic Doing within a community.

Establish civic spaces for complex thinking and doing.— Strategic Doing does not work without safe, stable civic spaces. The best way to start establishing these spaces involves conducting regular civic forums. By establishing clear expectations of civility and guiding the conversation with strategic questions, a community can model the behavior that will lead to new innovative, collaborative initiatives.

These civic gatherings can be organized around the first question of Strategic Doing: "What could we do?" Regular civic forums focus on identifying and connecting assets within the community. So, for example, a community could explore the question, "What could we do to expand the market for local foods?" The people drawn to this conversation will form the core of a new network focused on building local food initiatives in the community. Conducting regular civic forums is a low cost way to uncover emerging networks with the energy to innovate.

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Guide conversations with appreciative questions.— Leaders can guide networks by asking appreciative questions. These questions focus on opportunities, not deficits: what they can do, not what they cannot do. Through these questions, members of a network start to see new patterns and new possibilities. As we have seen, opportunities emerge when network members start connecting their assets.

Initially, the responsibility for guiding conversations falls to an individual. However, the healthiest leadership within an open network is widely distributed throughout the group. In the most dynamic networks, asking questions that point to new connections emerges as a collective responsibility.

Link and leverage assets to define opportunities.— As network members connect more assets within a network, their opportunities become more pragmatic and achievable. The challenge at this stage of a strategic conversation involves getting members of the network to stretch their thinking. As people add assets to a promising opportunity, a new dimension of that opportunity becomes clearer. More emotional energy emerges behind the opportunity, as members of the network grapple to align, link and leverage their assets.

In communities with no clear vision, Strategic Doing focuses initially on exploring new opportunities from new connections. Defining a collective vision is an extremely complex and difficult challenge. For people with little or no experience working together, the task is a steep hill to climb as a first step. For these communities, Strategic Doing focuses on discovering opportunities as a way to get started. These opportunities — when taken together over time — can give rise to a collective vision.

For communities that have a vision statement, Strategic Doing focuses on converting this vision into action. The four key questions walk members of a network through this process of

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converting visions to opportunities; opportunities to outcomes; and outcomes to project and action plans, all tied together with a commitment to continuous learning.

The real work of Strategic Doing – and where most networks experience difficulty -- comes in moving from opportunities to outcomes, projects and action plans. As people gain experience translating their ideas into action, the job of coming up with a collective vision becomes easier. So, some networks develop a "placeholder" vision to start and revise their vision as they gain more experience working together.

Convert opportunities to clear, measurable outcomes.— The most challenging stage of Strategic Doing comes in converting opportunities into strategic outcomes. To do this step well, members of the network must focus their thinking and move their conversations from big ideas down to concrete, measurable details. Sufficient clarity on an individual characteristic emerges when people can agree on how to measure it. If the characteristic is too vague to measure, it is best to go back to the characteristic and clarify the thinking.

Getting really clear about outcomes is not easy. Network members struggle to explain what success looks like and how measure it. Yet, that level of detail, rather than pushing people apart, actually pulls them together. The reason: The outcomes on which they can agree are complex and composed of many different dimensions. They are not dealing with simple either/or choices. Instead, they are creating an outcome with different perspectives, different dimensions and nuances. Many people find excitement in this complex work of civic creativity and construction.

Connect your outcomes to small, shared next steps.— An effective strategy connects big ideas to small steps. The key to execution comes in developing project plans with a handful

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of milestones and action plans. A project, combined with an action plan, draws the logical links from where members of a network are to where they want to be.

Transparent project and action plans have other advantages. They help distribute the workload and make sure that the responsibility for execution is widely shared. Transparency and shared responsibility improves the probability that something will actually get done. Before a network adjourns from a Strategic Doing workshop, all members of the network should have a clear idea of the next steps that each person will be taking. By agreeing to take even a small step — making an e-mail introduction, for example — members of the network endorse their action plan.

Experiment continuously with pilot projects.— Community development is all about co-investment. Diverse parties come together and make investments of time and resources to achieve transformative outcomes. The future is unknowable, so members of a network must experiment to figure out what works. Implementing pilot projects creates an environment in which they can learn from each other, refine their strategies, and then move to the next level with more confidence.

Press on regardless.—Strategy in open networks is never done. It involves a continuous process of refinement, learning and execution. Overcoming objections and obstacles is all part of the process. Network approaches to community development can bewilder some and threaten others. The best way to address healthy skepticism or unhealthy threats is to keep the network moving: focused on the four strategic questions that shape strategy.

Networks continue to evolve, as members strengthen and focus them. They are building social capital as they go. Rather than being a painful process, strategy in community

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development becomes a process that is continuous, purposeful and — above all — fun. Participants connect, learn, encourage and celebrate.

With Strategic Doing, members of a network can generate a strategic action plan quickly: an evolving asset map of our opportunities; a handful of strategic outcomes; a set of project plans and action plans to chart a path to outcomes; and a process to keep moving forward by making adjustments, as circumstances change and we learn what works. Although it is still early in its development, the signs are encouraging. Strategic Doing provides a simple, intuitive discipline to stimulate innovation and move communities to the next level of prosperity.

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