

Reflecting on What Works: Disruptive Leaders Are Essential

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It is easy to do more of the same, and it can be uncomfortable to question the systems that have created the oppression that leads to chronic poverty.

It has been five years since Shirley Franklin and David Edwards lifted up the Purpose Built Communities Model in the book *Investing in What Works for America's Communities*. Those intervening years have reinforced the importance of a fundamental element of community development that defined our own beginning—the presence of leaders who are willing to be disruptive to accelerate change in struggling neighborhoods.

During the neighborhood revitalization planning process, there are decision points that either advance or halt progress. The civic and business leaders who often initiate neighborhood revitalization run in the same circles as those who lead the government agencies, companies, and social institutions that are actively and passively limiting revitalization. Are you willing to stand up to a school superintendant who might be in the pew across from you on Sunday morning to demand change in a failing or mediocre school? Can you keep going until city planners who relax in the same park as you understand the need for greenspaces in neighborhoods other than their own? Tension will arise. Conversations might get heated. But to achieve the success that these communities demand and deserve, leaders must be willing to endure, listen, and work through or around resistance.

In Atlanta, that disruption began in 1995 when legendary developer and philanthropist Tom Cousins put his reputation on the line to revitalize East Lake, a neighborhood where violent crime was commonplace and failing schools were the only option. Cousins partnered with civic and community leaders to create the East Lake Foundation to work with private, public, and nonprofit stakeholders to transform the area from a sinkhole to a springboard. The revitalized neighborhood included deep, broad, and durable pathways out of poverty for low-income families. A model focused on cradle-to-college education, mixed-income housing, and community wellness emerged. The Charles R. Drew Charter School was built from the ground up to give students unique opportunities for hands-on learning. Families across a broad range of incomes were able to move into beautiful new homes. And young people learned life lessons and wellness on the Charlie Yates public golf course while revenue from the private, historic East Lake Golf Club supported the programs that neighbors used to lift themselves up the economic ladder. As the East Lake neighborhood grew stronger, leaders from around the country sought to learn and bring the approach to their own communities, leading to the formation of Purpose Built Communities in 2009.

While every neighborhood in which we work is different, we have found that the existence of a coordinating organization like the East Lake Foundation is an essential element. This “community quarterback” orchestrates the many moving parts of a changing neighborhood.¹ The same mix of solutions—housing, education, and community wellness—has been tried before, but success is often limited without the presence of a community quarterback to view the neighborhood holistically and empower existing change agents to work together and achieve more.

Early on in Purpose Built Communities’ evolution, we struggled to articulate the importance of creating a new organization when we began working in a neighborhood. Initially, we used the term “lead organization” to describe that critical role but found that it inadvertently set the coordinating organization above the many others already working in neighborhoods, which created tension that took time to dissipate. The term “community quarterback” described that organization’s work much more clearly, and it resonated with others who quickly recognized that their work was less effective without intentional coordination. As we have grown, leaders from other communities have asked for advice on how to set up an effective community quarterback, and that role is now seen as necessary infrastructure.

Each time we are invited to work in a new city, we refine our approach in order to make swift progress toward improving the lives of the millions of Americans living in concentrated, chronic poverty. In the past five years, we have learned several lessons about the role of the community quarterback, which has strengthened Purpose Built Communities’ collective ability to contribute to healthier, more resilient neighborhoods. In addition to a willingness to be disruptive, coordinating organizations must set clear boundaries with other change agents, include the voices of people who live and work in the neighborhoods that are being revitalized, and be committed for the long haul.

Omaha, Nebraska: Why a New Community Quarterback Matters

The historic segregation of African Americans in northeast Omaha still reverberates today in this area of concentrated poverty. The African American Empowerment Network, an organization dedicated to transforming North Omaha into a vibrant place to live and work, was having bold conversations with residents to set priorities and create a plan to build a neighborhood that places cradle-to-college education at its center.

Taking a plan from concept to reality requires skill and determination. When the time to act arrived, the African American Empowerment Network didn’t wait; representatives from the organization literally came knocking on Purpose Built Communities’ door. After a great deal of dialogue, it became clear that despite the many strengths and the unquestionable passion of the Empowerment Network, with a broad geographic focus and agenda, the organization wasn’t well positioned to implement the strategies necessary to create change at the neighborhood level.

1 David Erickson, Ian Galloway, and Naomi Cytron, “Routinizing the Extraordinary,” in *Investing in What Works for America’s Communities: Essays on People, Place, & Purpose*, ed. Nancy Andrews et al. (San Francisco: Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, 2012).

As a result, local leaders, including supporters of the Empowerment Network, created 75 North, a nonprofit organization that became the community quarterback for its patch of North Omaha—the Highlander neighborhood. 75 North, made up of committed board members, developers, ambassadors, and community members, acquired the vacant site of the former Pleasantview Homes public housing development to create an entirely new neighborhood in North Omaha—a place with homes, schools, and gathering spaces to support a culture that respects and raises up diversity.

Hundreds of units of mixed-income apartment homes and townhomes are under construction in this changing neighborhood. Purpose Built Communities helped 75 North identify exactly the right developer to construct high-quality, market-rate homes while layering in complex financial structures that are critical to making housing affordable for people across income levels. Not all developers understand how to work within layered financing, and among those who do, fewer still know how to leverage those resources to build housing that will create broad demand. Purpose Built also supported the creation of an agreement between 75 North and Omaha Public Schools so that Howard Kennedy Elementary serves as an anchor for the Highlander neighborhood, much like the Charles R. Drew Charter School does in East Lake. Carefully planned greenspaces and innovative areas for fellowship and life-long learning are in progress, and after building on the commitment and strengths of many people and partners, this area of Omaha is transforming into a community of opportunity.

Spartanburg, South Carolina: An Inclusive Community Quarterback

Just seven years ago, the Northside of Spartanburg was struggling. At least half of the homes in this 400-acre area were in foreclosure, condemned, or unoccupied. The neighborhood school was not structured for success. Employment rates and incomes were low, while crime rates were high.

The turning point came when Virginia-based Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine decided to build a campus on an abandoned textile mill site. An infusion of new energy and jobs gave local leaders and residents a reason to begin wondering, “What if?” At the request of city leadership, former Mayor Bill Barnet convened stakeholders from across the city to pick up the conversation, which led to the creation of the local community quarterback, the Northside Development Group (NDG). With a small federal planning grant and support from Purpose Built Communities, the community created a plan to revitalize itself using the Purpose Built Model. While there is still much to do, there is now much to celebrate. The Northside Harvest Park, home to a weekend farmer’s market and a community garden since 2014, provides healthy food options and jobs. Plans to build hundreds of residential units and a state-of-the-art recreation facility are becoming a reality. Neighborhood children attend the only elementary school in South Carolina with a 205-day student calendar.

All of this widely embraced progress was possible only as a result of purposeful engagement with local residents. In the Northside community, early organizers insisted (and we

wholeheartedly agreed) that neighborhood residents be represented in planning and decision-making. To fill this need, a leadership group, self-named the Voyagers, was created. A cohort group of residents was brought together for a year-long training process designed to empower their voices. Today, two of the nine voting members of the NDG Board of Directors are Voyagers, and the Voyagers themselves are an authority on the revitalization plan.

“Building a nice apartment complex is not going to change lives,” says Bill Barnet, CEO and board chair of NDG. “Our goal is a stable neighborhood with less crime, great schools, and rising incomes. But also, it’s about people finding a value in the journey itself and the ultimate result.” Barnet believes that growing capacity within the neighborhood has a lifting effect: The knowledge and skills gained through the Voyagers program not only increase the relevance of the changes being made in the community, but also show others who live there that their voice matters.

“When someone comes up with an idea—a community art project, a housing issue, improvements to a park, whatever it may be—the Voyagers are part of the decision-making group. Their input is critical in terms of making sure the project is relevant to the needs and interest of the community and well executed. An added benefit is that change is not perceived as coming from well-intentioned people who are from the outside,” Barnet said. “That’s what the Voyagers represent for us. They are recognized and valued contributors to the journey.”

History, geography, political structures, cultural centers—and on and on—all influence the rate at which change can occur. It can take years to build trust between external change agents and local people. In Spartanburg, involving local voices at every step was, and continues to be, a critical element. Investing in growing capacity within the community ensures that new leaders can, will, and must emerge.

Atlanta, Georgia: Community Quarterback Renewal

With 1,300 people living in 542 high-quality, mixed-income housing units and more than 900 young people participating in a skills and leadership development program at the Charlie Yates Golf Course, the East Lake neighborhood of Atlanta is thriving. The Charles R. Drew Charter School, opened in 2000, was the first charter school in the city of Atlanta. Now a Pre-K through 12th-grade school serving nearly 1,900 students, the school’s first graduating class will walk across the stage in 2017, and every single student in the class is projected to earn a high school diploma. It took more than 20 years to get here, but this community has arrived.

At the same time, in the neighborhood where it all began, we discovered another layer of necessary support that the community quarterback needs to provide. The local YMCA had a new executive director. The East Lake Golf Club had a new general manager. The Villages of East Lake had a new manager. The Drew Charter School had a new head of school. And due to organizational growth, the East Lake Foundation had new leaders as well. All of these

leaders were dedicated to the health and potential of the residents in East Lake, but as new employees in their respective roles, they had not lived the history and had not set new goals for collective work. It was time to pause and potentially disrupt individual goals for the sake of the collective good.

The East Lake Foundation convened these and other partners to renew our commitment to the long-term viability of this neighborhood. “We spent four months creating the East Lake Compact, a document that states unequivocally that ‘we are all still in this together,’” said Daniel Shoy, Jr., president of the East Lake Foundation. “We are now set up to adapt, to plan over time, and to support individual organizational and collective goals.” The community quarterback was thus critical for integrating the new leadership and strengthening the existing infrastructure, improving our collective ability to make progress.

The Next Five Years: Where Are We Going?

The Purpose Built Communities Model is refined every time we are invited to work in a new neighborhood or reexamine the evolution of places that are well on their way to revitalization. Regardless of where we go, Purpose Built holds true to the fundamental elements of a cradle-to-college education pipeline, mixed-income housing, and a focus on community health and wellness. A community quarterback organization ties those pieces together and never hesitates to be disruptive if it is required. It is a formula that works.

Looking across our network, we are seeing exciting ideas adding new layers to the model. One example is the meaningful partnerships being developed with colleges and universities. The president of The Ohio State University in Columbus had the forethought to use growth for good. Working with partners and the city government, the university received an exemption from a citywide payroll tax, and the funds that would have been generated from the expansion of the university medical center and staff were set aside to invest in the Near East Side neighborhood. These investments have leveraged \$29.7 million in implementation grant funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Choice Neighborhood program to the City and Housing Authority. The plan on which that grant was based was the brainchild of Partners Achieving Community Transformation (PACT), a community quarterback organization formed by the university, the city of Columbus, and the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority before Purpose Built Communities was invited to Columbus. The Columbus City Schools and the university have created a new feeder pattern that shares a vertically aligned curriculum with a health sciences theme to expose young people to in-demand career opportunities right in their own neighborhood. University professors are teaching electives to high school students, and the full-circle connection between the neighborhood, its schools, the university, and employment is coming together.

Similarly, in Spartanburg, the partnerships between the community quarterback and different types of strong local organizations—the Mary Black Foundation, the Spartanburg Regional Medical Center, and the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine—are

providing resources and leadership to the Northside Development Group's efforts. Representatives from each of these local institutions serve on the Northside Development Group's board of directors.

The new opportunities presented by innovative partnerships, such as those with institutions of higher learning, give us hope for the coming years. We see new challenges as well—in particular, the lack of resources to fund the work happening in struggling neighborhoods. The volatility of federal funding is a risk to the future of our work; it is unclear what funding sources will be available and at what levels, and keeping up will require technical skills and tenacity. Our organization and the many community quarterbacks we have helped create will have to adapt to this changing funding climate.

Disruption Today and Tomorrow

When Social Security began in 1940, our country was very different. With longer life expectancy, generational trends, and other changes, the number of workers paying into the system for every person who is in retirement has drastically declined.² We need to equip the 16 million American children currently living in poverty to succeed in an increasingly knowledge-based job market and contribute to our nation's economic growth. As our population expands and our economy shifts, we must come together to secure a sustainable future for every person, neighborhood, and region across the country. Being disruptive is now more important than ever—and Purpose Built Communities is dedicated to collaborating with leaders, agencies, organizations, and all partners who want to come together to amplify our voices toward meaningful, lasting change.

Carol Naughton has been a leader in comprehensive community revitalization for more than 20 years and was a founding staff member of Purpose Built Communities. She leads the consulting teams that support revitalizations across the country. Previously, Carol served as the executive director of the East Lake Foundation, the community quarterback organization that developed and continues to implement the model of community revitalization that Purpose Built Communities is charged with replicating around the country. Previously, she was general counsel and deputy executive director for Legal and Nonprofit Affairs for the Atlanta Housing Authority and an attorney with Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan's real estate group. She is a graduate of the Emory University School of Law and was executive editor of the Emory Law Journal, and graduated cum laude with an AB in Political Science from Colgate University.

2 Gayle Reznik, Dave Shoffner, and David Weaver, "Coping with the Demographic Challenge: Fewer Children and Living Longer," Social Security Bulletin, 66(2005).