

FOSTERING EFFECTIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT  
THROUGH THE CITY OF WATERLOO'S ADVISORY COMMITTEES OF COUNCIL

by

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We accept this Report as conforming  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This Organizational Leadership Project examined how the City of Waterloo may enhance organizational decision making by fostering effective community engagement through our volunteer citizen advisory committees. Applying an appreciative inquiry approach, the organizational system was assessed for opportunities to leverage the collective gifts of our committee members, seeking ways to create a shared understanding of the efficacy and capacity of this citizen engagement methodology. Working collaboratively with our stakeholders, including Waterloo Council, City of Waterloo staff, and our citizens, resulted in recommendations that met the unique needs of our community. The results illustrated opportunities to reframe the current committee experience to one based on fostering healthy relationships, creating a culture of learning, engaging our volunteers in meaningful work, and achieving success by measuring what matters.

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## CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS AND FRAMING

As an elected official in Waterloo, Ontario, I am part of a governance team that oversees a mid-sized municipal government focused on providing community services to our citizens.

Block (2009) stated,

Local government has two primary responsibilities. One is to sustain and improve the infrastructure of the community, . . . [while] the other role of local government is to build the social fabric of the community. . . . [Social fabric relates to the ability] to engage citizens in the well-being of the city . . . [and] to get connected to each other or to be engaged as producers of the future. (pp. 91-92)

Hamilton (2008) offered the perspective of cities being “full of diversity, full of collectives and full of communities, all of whose members are capable of learning to adapt and more effectively align their energies and directions to produce a coherent, whole, evolving life experience for all citizens” (p. xxiii). Kouzes and Posner (2007) reflected that

what truly pulls people forward . . . is the exciting possibility that what they are doing can make a profound difference in the future of their families, friends, colleagues, customers, and communities. They want to know what they do matters. (p. 134)

How can our organization create the environment that fosters this shared purpose and commitment? Block (2009) presented the idea that

transforming action is always local, customized, unfolding, and emergent. The role of leaders is not . . . to drive change; their role is to create the structures and experiences that bring citizens together to identify and solve their own issues. (p. 74)

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) reflected that “any change problem is a cluster of possible changes” (p. 67). It was my goal to explore our current decision-making processes from a citizen’s perspective, to convene our citizen stakeholders to collaboratively seek opportunities for improvement and to actuate change that will nurture effective and sustainable decision-making. This action research project is designed as an opportunity for the community to co-create a shared vision of committee engagement and lay the foundation for a new Citizens

Advisory Committee Policy. The research question being explored in this action research project was: How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees? Sub-questions included:

1. What role can citizen input play in council decision making?
2. How can the City of Waterloo facilitate effective committee performance?
3. How do we measure effective committee performance?

### **Significance of the Inquiry**

Baker (2003) highlighted the idea that “insightful leaders see their organizations as they are—as networks of many relationships—and they constantly strive to revolutionize the way people work together, communicate, and interrelate” (p. 14). The City of Waterloo’s corporate value of personal leadership paints a picture of a collaborative work environment, characterized by healthy relationships: “Being accountable, treating others with respect and dignity, extending trust and being trustworthy, leading by example, being consistent while respecting differences” (City of Waterloo, n.d., para. 4). Whether acting quickly to address a citizen’s complaint or working together to develop a long-term community strategy, this value of resilient relationships extends to our interactions with our citizen stakeholders.

Kahane (2007) offered that “if talking openly means being willing to expose to others what is inside of us, then listening openly means being willing to expose ourselves to something new from others” (p. 73). Sonnenfeld (2002) posited that effective teams are “robust, effective social systems” (p. 109) and identified the necessity of a “culture of open dissent” (p. 111) as key to establishing trust: “Respect and trust do not imply endless affability or absence of disagreement. Rather, they imply bonds . . . that are strong enough to withstand clashing viewpoints and challenging questions” (p. 111). It is clear that exposing an organization’s



decision-making processes to intense citizen involvement requires a level of trust and is built on a foundation of resilient and respectful relationships. Through this OLP process, necessary dialogue was facilitated with our internal and external City of Waterloo stakeholders, creating an opportunity to collaboratively identify challenges, opportunities, and tools for implementing change.

The City of Waterloo has recently completed a strategic plan review, through a broad-based public consultation process, that will allow Council to formally endorse a long-term community vision. A common theme of increased community engagement emerged as a formal pillar of the new strategic plan (City of Waterloo, 2011). My goal was to weave my action research with the parallel process of implementing the strategic plan, seeking “a sense of excitement about tackling a significant opportunity which may have the potential for creativity” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 54). Senge (2006) offered that individuals who are committed to a shared vision “bring an energy, passion and excitement” (p. 205) to an organization and its goals: “A group of people truly committed to a common vision is an awesome force” (p. 205). By offering an opportunity to explore the question “What do we want to create together?”, we will mirror Kahane’s (2007) approach of creating the opportunity “to talk not about what they . . . wanted to happen—their usual way of talking about the future—but simply about what might happen, regardless of what they wanted” (p. 21). This approach encouraged participants to step outside of their own perspectives and embrace the possibility of creating a fresh and resilient shared vision.

### **Organizational Context**

Waterloo has been identified by the Province of Ontario as an urban growth centre, as part of the province’s *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* (Province of Ontario,

Ministry of Infrastructure, 2012). It is designated “to accommodate a significant share of population and employment growth” (p. 16) and to alleviate strain on Ontario’s agricultural lands (p. 12). Over the past ten years, Waterloo’s population has increased by over 25%, outpacing Ontario’s 13% average rate of growth (City of Waterloo, 2009, p. 16).

This rapid shift from small town to developing urban centre has created organizational pressure as city departments struggle to effectively meet the needs of a burgeoning city. As the community expands, the associated municipal service requirements, such as social, public safety, recreation, and infrastructure, also increase. As a progressive community, there is a persistent call for new and exciting initiatives to be implemented. All community services are connected by the city’s financial resources. We undergo a year-long budget process, which can be contentious as the departments compete for scarce resources and Waterloo Council strives to keep the tax increase at a politically palatable level.

In addition, a prior Waterloo Council made a decision that will forever live in infamy, when it inked a deal to build a new recreational facility and promptly landed in legal proceedings: “The lawsuits stem from a botched deal to finance the huge park in 2000, which cost tens of millions of dollars more than expected” (Caldwell, 2010, para. 13). This event still resonates in the community and commands a high level of public scrutiny, as our \$140 million annual operating budget incorporates an annual five million dollar debt payment until 2032 (K. Eskens, personal communication, February 14, 2011). A final challenge lies in the reality that municipal projects are often heavily regulated. For instance, a seemingly simple construction project may carry the burden of complex environmental and public input expectations that stretch fiscal resources and require employees to share their expertise across departmental boundaries.

The collective impact of these influences is a complex and pressurized decision-making environment as our organization strives to make fiscally prudent, effective, and sustainable operational decisions in order to meet our stated organizational mission:

The Corporation of the City of Waterloo is a dedicated team of volunteers, staff and elected officials who apply leadership, enthusiasm, skill and integrity in providing needed and valued services that help build the best quality of life possible for all of our citizens. (City of Waterloo, n.d., para. 1)

The questions emerge: How can the City of Waterloo increase its capacity under fiscal constraints? How can we ensure that the problems and issues that we are devoting resources to are the right ones for the community? The objective of this OLP was, through action research, to seek answers to these questions of relevance, capacity, and sustainability by addressing the research question.

### **Systems Analysis of the Inquiry**

There are two primary systems relevant to this OLP: (a) The Corporation of the City of Waterloo and (b) the extended Waterloo community. Internally, the City of Waterloo employs over 800 individuals in seven separate functional departments, based on knowledge and skill (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 53). A well-defined hierarchical management structure ties the departments together and an elected council governs the organization from the top. Bolman and Deal (2008) offered that “creating roles and units yields the benefits of specialization but creates problems of coordination of control—how to ensure that diverse efforts mesh” (p. 53). Wheatley (2006) reflected that “traditional organizational charts are filled with lines connecting well-bounded boxes” (p. 71) and argued that organizations “must move beyond the boxes they have drawn to describe roles and relationships” (p. 109). A future layer of boundaries is added by the political influence of our assorted labour organizations, as some of our employees are unionized,

such as CUPE and Fire, and others are not. These relationships are often tenuous and can cause stress on the entire system.

Wheatley (2006) argued that “we need fewer descriptions of tasks and instead [must] learn to facilitate process. We need to become savvy about how to foster relationships, how to nurture growth and development” (p. 39). In their discussion of lateral organizational structures, Bolman and Deal (2008) shared that “the effectiveness of coordinators who span boundaries depends on their credibility and skills in handling others” (p. 59). Wheatley furthered the notion of organizational culture being shaped by interactions between individuals and the resilient interconnectivity of a living system, as illustrated by the image of the spider’s web:

Most of us have had the experience of touching a spider web, feeling its resiliency, noticing how slight pressure in one area jiggles the entire web. If the web breaks and needs repair, the spider doesn’t cut out a piece, terminate it or tear the entire web apart and reorganize it. She reweaves it, using the silken relationships that are already there, creating stronger connections across the weakened spaces. (p. 145)

A question of efficacy arises from Wheatley’s (2006) contrast of hierarchical versus web-like organizations, as Waterloo, including its corporation and community, is legislated to be governed by an elected council that sits at the top of the structure. The interconnected web reaches beyond our corporate border, as the City of Waterloo maintains partnerships with a broad spectrum of external stakeholders, which includes over 100 governmental, social, educational, health, and business organizations, in order to effectively provide services to the citizens of Waterloo. All of these working systems are woven together by the residents of Waterloo: the citizens who pay their taxes and live, work, and play in our community. McGehee (2001) posited that an organization’s locus of control must shift from the centre to the periphery of the web: “Command-and-control leadership cannot control a web. The way to operate in a web is by pushing the decision-making as far out to the edges of the networks as possible”

(p. 49). This notion advocates that decision making be distributed away from the top and into the hands of our citizens.

McKnight (as cited in Block, 2009) shared that “community is built most powerfully by what he calls ‘associational life’, referring to the myriad ways citizens come together to do good work and serve the public interest” (p. 43), suggesting that our most important stakeholders have the collective potential to do great things, once effectively woven into the system. Hamilton (2008) defined a city as “a living system that emerges from the intentions and interactions of individuals and groups” (p. 51), clearly supporting this notion of associational life. While our city governance structure is prescribed, Hamilton offered that purposeful actions can be taken to effectively share leadership:

While positional leadership may be vested in one or several people (e.g., mayor and council), true leadership is actually practiced by those who interpret, negotiate and create the boundaries within which the city functions. Who are these leaders? They are the people who with attention and intention take responsibility for themselves, organize for others, lobby positional leaders and power structures and consider global implications of decision sets. (p. 114)

In this light, it was not the intent of this OLP to redesign the structure of our organization, but to create an environment that empowers individuals, both internally and externally, to move beyond the boxes and effectively participate in enhanced decision-making processes.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined the focus, framework, significance, organizational context and system analysis of the inquiry, laying the foundation for my inquiry into how the City of Waterloo can optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees. In the following chapter, relevant literature regarding citizen engagement in local government, the active role of

leadership in creating the space for authentic citizen engagement, and the effective measurement of change will be reviewed.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is comprised of three topics: (a) citizen engagement, (b) leader as host, and (c) measurement of effectiveness. The value of purposefully choosing to include citizens in organizational decision making is explored as the first topic. The second topic examined is the leadership of convening (i.e., creating the environment for citizens to gather together). The third topic investigated was the nature of evaluation, in the context of complex systems. The literature review consists of a comprehensive comparison of several scholarly resources that relate and link to the various theories of citizen engagement and leadership.

### **Citizen Engagement**

The traditional structure of government places decision-making responsibility squarely on the shoulders of politicians: individuals who are elected to represent the interests of their constituents. This reality does not preclude a government's ability to enhance the integrity of the process by choosing to engage its citizenry. The literature reviewed will examine the theory and benefits of purposeful citizen engagement, distributed decision making, and dialogue.

Block (2009) postulated that "we speak endlessly . . . about the rise and fall of leaders. The agenda this sustains is that leaders are cause and others are effect. That all that counts is what leaders do" (pp. 40-41). He offered that this framework "lets citizens off the hook and breeds citizen dependency and entitlement . . . [undermining] a culture where each is accountable for their community" (p. 41). Wheatley (2006) added that "when leaders strive for equilibrium and stability by imposing control, constricting people's freedom and inhibiting local change, they only create the conditions that threaten the organization's survival" (p. 89). Of course, there are possible risks in opening the door to citizens. In her examination of urban planners, Carp (2004) found that "public participation costs time and attention; to the extent that it introduces political

and interpersonal complexities into decisions, it compromises . . . autonomy and efficiency” (p. 242). However, Block cautioned that “if we keep engaging citizens in this traditional way, then no amount of involvement will make a difference” (p. 41). In order to provide an antidote to this agenda of control, a purposeful choice can be made to engage our citizens: those “willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole” (p. 63).

Head (2007) reflected on the current trend towards increased citizen engagement: “There has been a renewed focus on dialogue between government and citizens, and deliberation among stakeholders in the process of deciding priorities and actions” (p. 442). In a survey of select American municipal governments, Moulder and O’Neill (2009) found that citizen engagement “means different things to different local governments” (p. 21) and that “ninety-seven percent of local governments reported opportunities for citizen engagement in community problem solving and decision making” (p. 26). Unfortunately, this input was found to largely be in council chambers, at the end of the decision-making process: “There is an important distinction between giving input and participating in the solution” (p. 26). If governors are intent on gleaning true citizen input, addressing the “issues that citizens themselves [underline original] define as important and in ways that citizens themselves [underline original] decide are appropriate and/or needed” (Gibson, 2006, p. 7), they must seek new ways of inviting them into the conversation.

Moulder and O’Neill concluded:

Recipients of services can contribute to the decision of which services are essential, which can be reduced, and which can be eliminated. If citizens have the opportunity to participate in decisions of this kind, they will feel part of the solution. If not, they may feel disenfranchised and unable to support decisions made without their involvement. (p. 26)

Central to this notion of open, engaged leadership is dialogue: “When we are talking with others, there is a flow of meaning between us” (Born, 2008, p. 25). Senge (2006) shared that “the



purpose of dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding" (p. 223) and that "in dialogue, a group explores complex difficult issues from many points of view" (p. 224). This ability to effectively dialogue appears relevant in light of Head's (2007) observation that "a more participatory approach has been linked to a growing awareness of the complexity and interconnectedness of many problems, and the need to share responsibility for resolving these complex social and environmental issues" (p. 443).

Kahane (2007) also considered the nature of complexity in decision making, offering that "to solve a complex problem, we have to immerse ourselves in and open up to its full complexity" (p. 75). Many public sector decisions are socially complex: Kahane posited that this reality "requires us to talk not just with people who see things the same way we do, but especially with those who see things differently, even those we don't like. We must stretch way beyond our comfort zone" (p. 75). The choice to purposefully engage citizens demonstrates a willingness to welcome diverse and disparate perspectives to the table. McKnight (2003) posited:

At the heart of the democratic faith is an idea that reaches beyond equality. It is the idea that every person has unique skills, capacities, and gifts and that a good society provides an opportunity for those gifts to be given and shared. In this way the community grows strong because each person provides unique contributions to the common good so that the sum of the parts is a free, productive neighborhood. (p. 9)

This openness and resiliency is reflected in Hamilton's (2008) *Integral City*: A city that is "dynamic, adaptive and responsive to its internal and external life conditions" (p. 52), with integral defined as "whole, comprehensive, integrated, interconnected, inclusive, all encompassing, vibrant, responsive, [and] adaptive" (p. 52). Making a conscious choice to reach out to others requires a leader to make a decision: Am I prepared to recognize and trust the gifts of others, effectively giving up full control of the outcome?

Li (2010) examined the nature of engagement, offering that there is a spectrum of participation ranging from passive watching to active curating. At the highest level, “people who engage in curating set themselves apart, because they become highly and personally engaged in a community” (p. 60). Johnson, Glover, and Yuen (2009) explored “the interconnection between public officials, community representatives, and community participation in an urban regeneration project” (p. 1) and highlighted that strong relations; perceptions of trust; sharing information, knowledge and economic support; and providing opportunities to take responsibility and ownership, as facilitated by the City of Kitchener, enabled citizens to demonstrate increased levels of engagement and long-term commitment (p. 14).

The potential benefits of an engaged citizenry offer a leadership challenge to public officials: “Our work is to build the capacity of citizens to be accountable and to become creators of community” (Block, 2009, p. 64). This action research project sought ways to purposefully engage the citizens of Waterloo in decision making, thus serving to deepen our collective accountability for our community.

### **The Leader as Host**

A basic tenet of open leadership suggests that “convening leaders create and manage the social space within which citizens get deeply engaged” (Block, 2009, p. 88), highlighting the purposeful role a leader plays in creating the environment for resilient relationships to flourish and produce authentic output. The literature reviewed in this topic will examine the theory and benefits of the leader as host.

Block (2009) suggested that “the most useful role that elected officials can perform is to bring citizens together. They have this convening capacity like no one else in a city, but it is way underutilized” (p. 90), and by holding this overarching role, “they are in a key position to engage

citizens in the well-being of the city” (p. 91). However, the traditional means of formal engagement, such as “city council meetings, public hearings, neighborhood summits, town hall meetings, and any variety of speaking engagements and special events that they attend” (pp. 91–92), may impede authentic and effective citizen engagement. Block offered that these structures create an environment that encourages “citizens to show up as critics and consumers” (p. 92) rather than striving to “build the capacity of citizens to become accountable and to become creators of community” (p. 63).

In his examination of the shifting trends in community engagement, Putnam (2000) reflected that there is a “striking shift in the way we allocate our time—toward ourselves and our immediate family and away from the wider community” (p. 107). Further, he offered “that ‘cooperative’ forms of behavior, like serving on committees, have declined more rapidly than ‘expressive’ forms of behavior, like writing letters” (p. 45), noting that “it takes two (at least) to cooperate, but only one to express himself” (p. 45). In their study of engagement trends in municipalities, Moulder and O’Neill (2009) reported common characteristics of non-participating citizens to be poverty, language barriers, seasonal residency, and apathy (p. 28). When asked about attempts to engage residents who do not typically participate, the municipalities frequently noted that “outreach to these groups is uncommon” (p. 28). These reported trends of decreased interaction present a challenge to leaders interested in fostering authentic civic participation. Block (2009) posited that “communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness. The conversations that build relatedness most often occur through associational life, where citizens show up by choice” (p. 29).

Hamilton (2008) offered a view of the city as “a container for people who are different from one another and who make exchanges with one another” (p. 40) and suggested that choices

can be made to change the nature of the system by changing the container by expanding/contracting the size of the container, increasing/decreasing the differences of the people in the container, or increasing/decreasing the number and/or type of exchanges in the container (pp. 40-41). All of these options involve purposeful choices being made to alter the fundamental nature of the container, opting to be open to change.

There are risks involved in opening the doors to new and diverse perspectives: “With a shared vision, we are more likely to expose our ways of thinking, give up deeply held views, and recognize personal and organizational shortcomings” (Senge, 2006, p. 195). This choice may require purposeful and sustained effort, as Born (2008) shared that “for most of us, our first thought, when planning a community conversation . . . is to invite people who already agree with us” (p. 38). Block (1996) posited that we “govern our organizations by valuing, above all else, consistency, control, and predictability” (p. 7) and that this focus on strong, top-down, and autocratic leadership is incompatible with leading authentic cultural and organizational change (p. 13). He offered partnership as a potential antidote: “To be connected to another in a way that the power between us is roughly balanced” (p. 28), highlighting the generative power of working collaboratively to create something new.

Block (2009) presented the idea that “communal transformation is best initiated through those times when we gather” (p. 93), offering that the “small group is the bridge between our individual existence and the larger community” (p. 95). Born (2008) shared that “community conversations are a deliberate form of listening to the people in a community in an effort to learn to agree, to become committed and engaged, and to create a place in which discovering the obvious is possible” (p. 20). Putnam (2000) supported this requirement of interpersonal interaction: “Without immediate feedback, without being forced to examine our opinions under

the light of other citizens' scrutiny, we find it easier to hawk quick fixes and to demonize anyone who disagrees" (pp. 341-342). If "the issues and dynamics of power often arise when a community conversation between people from various sectors is convened" (Born, 2008, p. 44), it becomes the leader's responsibility to create the space in which citizens are comfortable, listened to, and respectful relationships are nurtured, modeling that "successful leaders are open—to new ideas, people and possibilities" (McGehee, 2001, p. 52).

Wheatley (2006) proposed a need for relationships built on a foundation of openness: "All of us need to become better at listening, conversing, respecting one another's uniqueness, because these are essential for strong relationships" (p. 39). She asked relational questions to assess the resilience of any organizational system:

Do people know how to speak and listen to each other? To work well with diverse members? Do people have free access to each other throughout the organization? Are they trusted with open information? Do organizational values bring them together or keep them apart? Is collaboration truly honoured? Can people speak truthfully to each other? (p. 40)

Wheatley's (2006) approach highlighted the need for fundamental relational skills, which include listening, respect, support, and collaboration, to be embraced by leaders, as they invite citizens into community conversations. She offered that "with these new connections, we grow healthier. We develop greater capacity to know what to do. We weave together an organization as resilient and flexible as a spider's web" (p. 155). Purposefully weaving this foundation of resilient relationships in the appropriate social and physical space, we may discover a new approach to problem-solving. Kahane (2010) posited:

[This] approach to co-creating new social realities involves building a container within which we can build up our capacity to walk fast and far together. This supports us in co-creating innovative ways to address our most complex challenges. It provides us with the time and space to breathe and stretch, to get confused and lost, to stumble and fall, and so to carve our way forward. (p. 126)

In this spirit, this action research project will seek ways for the City of Waterloo to foster a welcoming social space, inviting the citizens of Waterloo to effectively partner with our organization in community decision making.

### **Measurement of Effectiveness**

Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton (2007) posited that measurement may actually impede innovation: a paradox that may be magnified in the public sector as policy makers strive to monitor success of and compliance with laws and regulations (p. 156). As this action research project sought to develop policy designed to enhance citizen engagement at the City of Waterloo, the question arose: How will we effectively assess and nurture the innovations that emerge via this change initiative? Through the literature reviewed in this section, I will investigate the nature of effective evaluation in complex systems.

Wheatley (2007) reflected that “the search for measures has taken over the world as the primary means to control systems and people” (p. 156). Hamilton (2008) concurred, offering that “a global interest in profiling indicators for health, well-being, quality of life (or even happiness) and success has become a national and global pastime” (p. 230). Wheatley distinguished between feedback and measurement, suggesting that the traditional metrics of measurement (i.e., numbers, indices, graphs, and charts) are often static and non-reflective of the complex aspects of human and organizational behaviour. Conversely, the nature of feedback in a living system is context-dependent and fluid, allowing participants to absorb valuable information that will enable the system to adapt and grow. Acknowledging that measurement is both necessary and desirable, it becomes clear that evaluation must be designed very purposefully.

Auspos and Kubisch (2004) offered that “comprehensive community initiatives pose special challenges for evaluation because they do not fit the accepted paradigms of social

program evaluation” (p. 10). Rather than focusing on finite quantifiable outcomes, they posited that evaluation must recognize the contextual complexities of a given system and hold the goal of sustainable change as a central focus (p. 10). They identified timeliness as a key shortcoming of traditional evaluation: Is a single data point truly reflective of emerging realities? They urged researchers to “accommodate the long-term nature of the community change process, including strategies for drawing on the experience of initiatives in their later stages in order to assess the impact and sustainability of these change efforts” (p. 12). Westley et al. (2007) succinctly advised that “success is not a fixed address” (p. 161) and urged innovators to keep an eye on their long-term, sustainable goals.

Hamilton’s (2008) definition of integral: “conscious, complex, adaptive, evolving, [and] developmental” (p. 52), allows one to consider the qualities that may be reflected by effective evaluation. However, Patton’s (2011) informal analysis of evaluation methodology revealed that “the common themes that have struck me are a two-pronged effort to first deny complexity (redefine the complex as simple) and then, failing that, control it” (p. 6). He reflected that “creative evaluation invites us to think outside the boxes of accountability mandates, evaluation as a compliance activity, fixed reporting deadlines, and narrow evaluator roles” (p. 53) and presented developmental evaluation (p. 53) as an effective way to evaluate and nurture complex systems:

Innovation . . . exhibits characteristics and dynamics associated with complex adaptive systems. Developmental evaluation likewise centers on situational sensitivity, responsiveness, and adaptation, and is an approach to evaluation especially appropriate for situations of high uncertainty where what may and does emerge is relatively unpredictable and uncontrollable. (p. 7)

This focus on innovation is well-suited to settings where goals are emerging, rather than fixed and predetermined. It is forward thinking and may be geared to longer-term deadlines, where the

focus is on learning and systematic change. Hamilton (in press) advanced the parallel idea that an integral framework, which includes consideration of the nature and interactions of individual, collective and situational (i.e., environmental) elements, will result in an evaluation process that fuels creativity and growth (pp. 4-5). These methods nurture the emergence of relevant feedback. Evaluation as “a mindset of inquiry into how to bring data to bear on what’s unfolding so as to guide and develop that unfolding. What that means and the timing of the inquiry will depend on the situation, context, [and] people involved” (Patton, 2011, p. 75). This framework weaves nicely with the notion of leader as host and understanding the importance of creating an organizational environment based on inquiry and learning.

Patton (2011) highlighted the relevance of the personal factor in evaluation: “The presence of an identifiable individual or group of people who personally care about the evaluation and the findings it generates” (p. 56). Weisbord (2004) spoke to the benefit of having all parts of the system present to determine the outcomes of organizational change: “New patterns of actions achieved in the room are often carried outside it because all the relevant parties enacted them together” (p. 343). He offered that when

people meet across levels and lines of status, function, gender, race, and hierarchy, when problems are seen as systemic rather than discrete, wonderful (and unpredictable) things happen . . . [and] results can’t be planned except in the sense of making them more probable. (p. 342)

Weisbord’s statement suggests that performance metrics that the system co-creates will result in a higher level of accountability.

In 2011, a team at the University of Waterloo released the inaugural Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) in response to the observation that global well-being had commonly become a reflection of a singular statistic:



Gross Domestic Product, widely known as GDP, had become the standard way to assess economic prosperity. GDP is a composite index, based on a complicated formula that tells us whether an economy is growing or shrinking. It is really just a number, but in the relatively obscure world of economic indicators, GDP became “the defining indicator of the last century”. (p. 1)

The gross domestic product is a purely economic statistic that “measures the aggregate of how much money we receive, what we buy with it, or how much we pay for it” (p. 12). Conversely, the CIW attempts to measure “how well we fare as engaged citizens in our private, public, and voluntary lives” (p. 12), by measuring “domains of life: living standards, healthy populations, community vitality, democratic engagement, leisure and culture, time use, education, and the environment” (p. 15). The CIW was developed through a rigorous public and academic process:

[The] ongoing cycle of public engagement, consultation, and refinement is one of the key characteristics of the CIW. It ensures that the CIW is rooted in Canadian values, grounded in community experience, and shaped by technical expertise. The CIW is not a static measuring tool, carved in stone for all time. It will grow and change as more becomes known about how to measure changes in our quality of life, and more sources of data become available. (p. 15)

Going forward, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (2011) project acknowledged that “as the world changes, new issues become salient and new knowledge and technology become available, some of the things that matter most to people today may be supplanted by other things in the future” (p. 16). Additionally, the CIW team will start to look for connections between the eight indicators, thus reflecting Wheatley’s (2007) observations that the right measurements are “permeable rather than rigid . . . [and provide] access to the information they needed to prosper and grow” (p. 161).

In the spirit of the Hamilton’s (2008) definition of integral, this action research project sought ways for the City of Waterloo to consciously nurture a developmental evaluation process that will empower our diverse committees to evolve and, subsequently, effectively contribute to sustainable decision making in our organization.

## **Chapter Summary**

The current literature on citizen engagement in the government sector, the role of the leader as a host, and the importance of determining meaningful evaluation have been reviewed in this chapter. The literature served to illustrate the complexities of engaging the community in effective and relevant citizen engagement processes and provided a framework for designing an appropriate action research project to examine the optimization of our citizen committees. The chosen methodology and a thorough description of the project are included in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE: INQUIRY APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

### **Inquiry Approach**

This action research project was framed on the basic premise that “leadership begins with the understanding that every gathering is an opportunity to deepen accountability and commitment through engagement” (Block, 2009, p. 87). Kahane (2007) offered that “a problem that is generatively complex cannot be solved with a pre-packaged solution from the past. A solution has to be worked out as a situation unfolds, through a creative, emergent, generative process” (p. 101). Stringer (as cited in Glesne, 2011) posited that action research “assists a group, community, or organization in defining a problem; better understanding a situation; and then in resolving their own problems” (p. 23). This democratic approach is a good fit for performing action research in a municipal government organization and with Block’s (2009) notion of citizen: “One who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole” (p. 63).

Through this process, key stakeholders were brought together to dialogue and co-create sustainable solutions to the stated research question: How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees? Sub-questions were:

1. What role can citizen input play in council decision making?
2. How can the City of Waterloo facilitate effective committee performance?
3. How do we measure effective committee performance?

The context of this project was important. Currently, there are many disparate opinions about the purpose of citizen committees at the City of Waterloo, which creates uncertainty and conflict amongst stakeholders. This action research project was designed as an opportunity for the community to co-create a shared vision of committee engagement and lay the foundation for

a new Citizens Advisory Committee Policy. As a result of this action research project, high-level recommendations have been made to our administration, outlining the community's aspirations for our citizen advisory committees. In the follow-up stage of the research project, the recommendations will be translated to an action plan and policy, ultimately circling back to the community for assessment, action, and ownership. It is expected that time will allow for future evaluative cycles to occur, as the political landscape of the community evolves.

Data generation was qualitative in nature, gathering “information about participants’ experiences and perspectives and [a definition of] the problem/issue in terms that ‘make sense’ in their own terms” (Stringer, 2007, p. 65). The inquiry was appreciative in nature. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) offered that

a diverse set of assets, strengths, and resources . . . broadly constitute an organization or community’s positive core . . . [and that] conversations about the positive core bring it to life, give it meaning and enable an organization’s members and stakeholders to share best practices. (p. 9)

By creating the space for this appreciative community conversation to occur, focusing on the positive nature of “What do we want to create together?”, I expected to glean relevant expectations, themes, and possibilities that will facilitate the development of a robust and effective citizen advisory committee program to meet the unique needs of my community.

### **Participants**

I was the primary researcher for this project and worked closely with my project sponsor, the City of Waterloo’s Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), Mr. Tim Anderson. I am also acting as an internal champion for this change process, but the administrative responsibility of implementation and management falls to Mr. Anderson. As Mr. Anderson reports directly to me and Waterloo Council, he was not a participant in the data generation. However, as the project’s

sponsor and primary change agent, he was involved as a member of my advisory committee. The advisory committee was composed of the key City of Waterloo employees who are responsible for drafting official policy and action plans. Each member of the advisory committee signed the advisory committee's confidentiality agreement (see Appendix A). The advisory committee did not participate in the data generation. The committee also included the Director of Communications, the Director of Volunteer Services, and a senior member of the Clerks department. After each data collection event, the advisory committee had the opportunity to review the raw data, in order to keep them aware of the emerging outcomes. This data were free of any personal information.

The principal stakeholders in this action research project were the current membership of the City of Waterloo's citizen advisory committees: (a) 110 citizen volunteers who have applied for and been appointed to advisory committees by Waterloo Council, (b) six Waterloo City Councillors, and (c) 12 City of Waterloo staff who provide expert resource and/or administrative support to the committees.

In total, there were approximately 130 people in this population. The City of Waterloo's Procedural By-law stipulates that a majority of council constitutes a public meeting (S. Greatrix, personal communication, September 28, 2011); therefore, in order to enable full council participation, two World Cafés were held. The six councillors were personally invited by me to participate in the World Cafés. All remaining members of the population were invited to attend one of the two World Cafés by email (see Appendix B), and the invitation was framed to "set the expectation in advance that this will be a different kind of meeting where everyone will have an active opportunity to contribute" (Brown, 2005, p. 55). The research question was shared in the invitation, and participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C).

After completion of the two World Cafés, a subset of the attendees was asked by personal invitation (see Appendix D) to participate in a subsequent focus group. Patton (as cited in Glesne, 2011) offered that qualitative researchers “tend to select each of their sample cases *purposefully*” (p. 44) in order to glean meaningful and important insights into a given theoretical construct (p. 45). The Focus Group members were purposefully selected to be reflective of the original population, with the goal of ensuring that each stakeholder group that is “affected by or has an effect on the problem or issue of interest” (Stringer, 2007, p. 43) was proportionately represented. Therefore, the Focus Group was composed of four citizen committee members, one staff liaison member, and one council member. Stringer (2007) posited that it is important to identify gatekeepers and people of influence, while Weisbord and Janoff (as cited in Block, 2009) suggested that it is important to invite people with “authority to act—decision makers . . . [and] resources, such as contacts, time or money” (p. 119). In this spirit, participants who may act as champions of change were selected. Participants in the Focus Group were required to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix E).

The World Café sessions were facilitated by a third-party facilitator, a member of my Royal Roads Cohort. The facilitator and I worked to research the World Café process and craft an appropriate and successful experience for our participants. The facilitator also consulted with a Royal Roads University Faculty member, Phil Cady, to ensure that our interpretation of the World Café methodology was accurate. The table hosts were sourced from my pool of personal connections and included a number of local university professors, school board trustees, and community leaders. On each night of the World Cafés, the facilitator provided an hour-long coaching session for the table hosts, sharing tips for facilitating effective dialogue at the World Café tables (see Appendix F).

## **Inquiry Methods**

In this section, the inquiry tools, study conduct, and data analysis will be presented.

### **Data collection tools**

Block (2009) offered that “an invitation is more than just a request to attend; it is a call to create an alternative future, to join in the possibility we have declared” (p. 114). Inquiry methods of World Cafés and a Focus Group were chosen, as they encourage active participation by the population and foster rich community dialogue. In addition, I maintained a research journal, seeking the opportunity to regularly record observations and reflect on the process.

### ***World Café***

Wheatley (2005) wondered “how can we access the mutual intelligence and wisdom we need to create innovative paths forward” (p. 3), and Brown (2005) shared that “the living process of conversation lies at the heart of collective learning and co-evolution in human affairs” (p. 19). The World Café method is designed to bring diverse stakeholders together, creating the space to “enable us to notice a deeper living *pattern* of connections at work in our organizations and communities—the often invisible webs of conversation and meaning-making through which we already collectively shape the future, often in unintended ways” (p. 3). The World Café method enabled the stakeholders in this research project to come together for an exciting community dialogue, while creating a shared sense of ownership of the possible solutions.

Brown (2005) offered that World Café conversations are useful for “deepening relationships and mutual ownership of outcomes in an existing group” (p. 162) and “for connecting the intimacy of small-group dialogue with the excitement and fun of larger-group participation and learning” (p. 163). Brown further stated,

Small, intimate conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into questions or issues that really matter in their life, work, or community. As the network of new connections increases, knowledge-sharing grows. (p. 5)

In consideration of the appreciative inquiry methodology, I crafted café menus that reflect a positive, constructive approach to dialogue: “Open questions [to] encourage a more thoughtful response that opens the door to further exploration and positive change” (Brown, 2005, p. 91). Each of the three research sub-questions formed the basis for a café menu (see Appendix G). The table questions were crafted to allow participants to reflect on their personal experience: I; their experience within their committee: Me; and the committee’s experience within the larger city system: We. This approach reflected my desire to gather knowledge about a participant’s relationship with all parts of the system, starting with their personal perspective and expanding to their perceptions of their committee’s experience.

### ***Focus group***

Morgan and Spanish (1984) defined the focus group as a “small group discussion that explores topics selected by the researcher and is typically timed to last no more than two hours” (p. 254). Stringer (2007) offered that focus groups “might be characterized as a group interview” (p. 73) and that the method allows participants to focus on a specific issue by enabling them to “express their experience and perspective in their own terms” (p. 74). This inquiry tool reflected my commitment to creating a community dialogue: “Listening to others, entering into their meaning, and joining creative energies to dream of real solutions leads to engagement: the shared commitment to find and implement decisions” (Born, 2008, p. 35).

Stringer (2007) shared that “the first cycles of an action research process enable researchers to refine their focus of investigation and to understand the ways in which primary



stakeholders experience and interpret emerging issues” (p. 106). Subsequent research cycles add further information that “clarifies or extends participants’ understandings” (p. 106) in a manner that enriches the analysis. Creswell (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 49) offered suggestions to increase trustworthiness of the data, including member checking, which entails “sharing interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report with research participants to make sure you are representing them and their ideas accurately” (p. 49). In presenting the themed data from the World Café and the preliminary analysis to the Focus Group, I provided an opportunity for the participants to confirm that the results “do not merely reflect the particular perspectives, biases, or worldview of the researcher and that they are not based solely on superficial or simplistic analyses of the issues investigated” (Stringer, 2007, p. 57). In the context of this research, the Focus Group was designed to member check the preliminary World Café themes and add further depth of meaning to emergent topics of interest.

### **Study conduct**

The invitation to the World Café (see Appendix B) was emailed to all current members of the City of Waterloo’s citizen advisory committees. The cafés were facilitated at the large-group level by a third person, a volunteer member of my MAL 2010-03 cohort. There were volunteer facilitators acting as table hosts at each café table. Each facilitator was asked to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix A). The World Café facilitator invited the table hosts to arrive 30 minutes before the event started, in order to provide these volunteers with a training session that focussed on the World Café methodology, the role of the table host, and the art of facilitating dialogue in the small group setting.

Upon arrival at the World Café, participants were welcomed, provided with an information pamphlet (see Appendix H), and asked to complete an informed consent form (see

Appendix C). In the large group, I introduced the facilitators and explained the purpose of the evening, in context of the research project. The facilitator assumed responsibility for the event, outlined the expectations for the evening, explained the methodology, and spoke about the etiquette involved in a World Café experience

The World Café was divided into three 30-minute sessions, with scheduled 10-minute social breaks, in which participants were offered refreshments. Within the larger World Café, there were three smaller cafés: (a) The Citizen Engagement Café, (b) The Leader as Host Café, and (c) The Measuring what Matters Café, each with a separate menu (see Appendix G).

Participants were asked to start their evening with a visit to one café, with the understanding that they would travel to all three during the event. Each café had designated table hosts, who welcomed the participants to their tables and assisted in guiding the dialogue and encouraged participants to generate written data. “Everyone at the table is responsible for supporting the host in taking notes, summarizing key ideas, and if so moved, making drawings that reflect interesting thoughts and insights as they unfold” (Brown, 2005, p. 166). The written data were captured on paper café tablecloths, flipcharts, and sticky notes. After each round, participants travelled to a new café table, allowing cross-pollination and the exchange of ideas and insights to occur.

At the end of the evening, participants were asked to return to their initial conversation table and debrief with the table host, generating key insights, themes, or ideas to be written on large sticky notes (Born, 2008, p. 102). An affinity exercise (see Appendix I) was facilitated, allowing the participants to listen, reflect on the generated data, and make note of possible connections that emerged from the collective data. These collaboratively generated data allowed me to start framing ideas into themes for consideration by the Focus Group. I built upon these merging themes to draft questions for the Focus Group session (see Appendix J).

At the conclusion of each World Café, participants were informed that a second opportunity to participate in the research project would be occurring within two months. They were told that a small focus group would be facilitated to assess the outcomes that were generated by the collective, providing an opportunity for a selected group to review and member check my findings. Participants were informed that I would purposefully select invitees to ensure that both World Cafés were represented, no one advisory committee was over-represented, and that both new and experienced committee members were included. Focus Group participants were directly invited by email (see Appendix D).

Upon arrival at the Focus Group session, the participants were welcomed and asked to sign informed consent forms (see Appendix E). The Focus Group was facilitated by a third party, and participants were informed that they were attending the inaugural meeting of a newly formed City of Waterloo citizen advisory committee. The facilitator guided the participants through the Focus Group questions. Participants were encouraged to write notes and reflections on question sheets (see Appendix J), while I scribed comments and observations in my research journal. In addition, the session was audio taped on a BlackBerry PlayBook and, at a later date, I distilled the audio tape recording for data.

### **Data analysis**

Stringer (2007) offered that “analysis may be envisaged as a process of reflection and interpretation” (p. 95) and suggested that successful analysis is a two-step process: First, a “categorizing and coding procedure that identifies units of meaning . . . and organizes them into a set of categories that typify or summarize the experiences and perspectives of participants” (p. 96) and, secondly, enriching and “illuminating the nature of those experiences” (p. 96) through further inquiry, reflection, and connection to literature. Glesne (2011) posited that “all

the words you gather through your research are not inherently meaningful in themselves. Rather, you make them meaningful through your analysis and interpretations” (p. 214). This approach guided me in my categorization of the large amount of raw data from the World Cafés and Focus Group, based on comparisons, connections, and common language. I personally transcribed the World Café data from the paper café tablecloths, sticky notes, and flip-charts and created a Word document that allowed the data to be labelled and colour-coded. The Focus Group generated written data, and my careful distillation of the audio recording generated further participant statements to enrich the data document.

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) challenged action researchers working in their own organization to be aware of their experiences, biases, and any pre-understanding of the organization, which implies both explicit and implicit knowledge of the system and the researcher’s role in it (p. 114). Several passes were taken through the growing body of data, as I considered emergent patterns and relationships. This was an iterative process, as each review revealed new connections, and I challenged myself to suspend my “own assumptions, values, and perspectives” (Glesne, 2011, p. 188) as I refined the analysis. To increase authenticity and check for personal biases, I compared the resultant Focus Group themes to those created by participants at the two separate nights of World Café sessions, and I also invited the Focus Group participants to member check the analysis, enabling “them to verify that the research adequately represents their perspectives and experiences . . . [and providing] opportunities for them to clarify and extend information related to their experience” (Stringer, 2007, p. 58). The latter confirmed that the preliminary themes were reflective of their World Café experiences.

**Ethical Issues**

This research project was conducted in accordance with the three guiding core ethical principles in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [Tri-Council], 2010) and Royal Roads University's (2011) ethics policy. The three core principles of the Tri-Council (2010) policy are respect for persons, concern for welfare, and respect for justice (p. 8).

**Respect for persons**

In ensuring respect for persons, the researcher must seek to fulfill the “dual moral obligations to respect autonomy and to protect those with developing, impaired or diminished autonomy, . . . [with autonomy defined as] the ability to deliberate about a decision and act on based on that deliberation” (Tri-Council, 2010, p. 8). In this light, this consideration was strongly linked to my role as an elected official with the City of Waterloo, in a perceived position of authority within the defined population. I must always remain aware of how positional power may be perceived by participants and the potential for perceived vulnerability to surface. As a result, the research process was crafted to maintain my role as the researcher-observer, while facilitation of the World Cafés and Focus Group was facilitated by a third party in order to remove any perception of bias or guiding of outcomes. This effort to temper positional power was extended to the advisory committee as the advisory committee did not participate in the data generation or attend the research events. The advisory committee had the opportunity to review the raw data, devoid of personal information, during the process, in order to lend credibility and validity to the final results. Member checking was conducted with a Focus Group largely made

up of citizens, minimizing the influence of council and senior staff in the final stages of data generation.

Additionally, autonomy was respected by ensuring that “free, informed and ongoing consent” (Tri-Council, 2010, p. 9) was gathered from the research participants. Respect for free and informed consent means fulsome information was provided to potential participants regarding the purpose of the research, the nature of the data generation process, and foreseeable risks and benefits. I also ensured that participants were aware that they were free to participate, or not, and to exit the process at any time (see Appendices C and E).

### **Concern for welfare**

In ensuring concern for welfare, the researcher must seek to protect the welfare of participants, including “their physical, mental and spiritual health, as well as their physical, economic and social circumstances” (Tri-Council, 2010, p. 9). This included the creation of a safe and respectful environment for a large group activity, bounded by the confidentiality agreement (see Appendix A) and informed consent forms (see Appendices C and E) signed by the facilitators and participants. This ensured that another contributing factor to welfare was satisfied: namely, “privacy and the control of information about the person” (p. 10).

### **Respect for justice**

To maintain respect for justice, the researcher must seek to “treat people fairly and equitably” (Tri-Council, 2010, p. 10). All potential participants in the defined population, which consisted of current members of Waterloo’s citizen advisory committees, were provided with exactly the same opportunity to participate in the research project World Café experience (see Appendix B). This equal access also ensured that “the benefits and burdens of the research participation [are distributed] in such a way that no segment of the population is unduly

burdened by the harms of research or denied the benefits of the knowledge generated from it” (p. 10). The invitation of all committee members: citizens, staff, and councillors, served to convey the message of equity and inclusivity. Each and every voice mattered in this dialogue. Participants for the Focus Group were purposefully selected to ensure that both World Cafés were represented, no one advisory committee was over-represented, both new and experienced committee members were included, and the collective voice of each World Café was reflected.

### **Chapter Summary**

The action research methodology, the appreciative inquiry framework, the inquiry tools, and the rationale as to why this dialogue-based and democratic approach was a fit for the City of Waterloo were described in this chapter. The criteria and rationale for the chosen participants and methods were outlined in addition to how the study was conducted, data analyzed, and ethical issues acknowledged. The action research methodology was successful in engaging a large and diverse group of stakeholders in an appreciative community dialogue about the future of the city’s advisory committees. The findings, themes, and conclusions of the research project are described in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ACTION INQUIRY PROJECT RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The research question examined in this action research project was: How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees? The following sub-questions guided my inquiry: (a) What role can citizen input play in council decision making, (b) How can the City of Waterloo facilitate effective committee performance, and (c) How do we measure effective committee performance? The findings from each method, conclusions drawn, and the scope and limitations of the inquiry are explored in this chapter.

The findings from the two World Cafés and the Focus Group reflect the perspectives of the research participants as they engaged in appreciative dialogue regarding their experiences as committee members. The World Café and Focus Group findings will be discussed separately, as the more intimate Focus Group was informed by and designed to build upon the findings of the World Cafés.

### **World Café Findings**

Data were obtained from three stakeholder groups: city councillors, staff members, and citizen volunteers as they gathered together in the World Cafés to converse about their shared experience as committee members. In total, 114 participants were invited to participate in the World Cafés, including six councillors, 12 staff members, and 96 citizen volunteers. The first café hosted 35 participants: three city councillors, six staff members, and 26 citizen volunteers. The second café hosted 26 participants: one city councillor, five staff members, and 20 citizen volunteers. In total, 46 citizen volunteers attended an event for a participation rate of 48%. Staff participation was high with 11 staff participating, four councillors attended, and each of the twelve City of Waterloo committees of council was represented by citizen volunteers. Of note,



the original citizen population estimate of 110 was reduced to 96, as 14 citizens are members of two committees.

As described in Chapter Three, each World Café event offered three menus (see Appendix G) for consideration: (a) The Citizen Engagement Café, (b) The Leader as Host Café, and (c) The Measuring what Matters Café. At the end of each café, the participants collaborated to theme their data through an affinity exercise (see Appendix I). In addition, I personally transcribed the data from the paper café tablecloths, sticky notes, and flip-charts. A set of potential themes emerged from this transcription, which were compared to and corroborated by the themes produced by the World Café participants. Themes identified included:

Theme 1: Create a learning environment;

Theme 2: Enhance how we communicate;

Theme 3: Leverage the experience at the table;

Theme 4: Foster effective relationships.

Each theme is discussed in depth and supported by anonymous comments from the two World Cafés (W1) or (W2), further categorized by the reflected World Café Menu (see Table 1). For example, a comment from the “Leader as Host Café” on the first night is labelled as (W1L), while a comment from the “Measuring what Matters Café” of the second World Café is labelled as (W2M).

Table 1

*Coding System for World Cafés*

	Citizen Engagement	Leader as Host	Measuring what Matters
World Café 1	W1C	W1L	W1M
World Café 2	W2C	W2L	W2M

**Theme 1: Create a learning environment**

Committee members placed value on the “opportunity to learn” (W1M) that committee involvement provided. They also identified potential areas for heightened learning: A need for “leadership training for the chair” (W1C) in order to ensure that the chair is effective and “plays a strong role” (W2C) in facilitating the group by being a “good listener” (W1L), “not getting bogged down by details (W1L), and understanding how to run a meeting (W1C). They also identified the need for knowledge about how to effectively communicate with council, as “sometimes what was heard isn’t what you wanted to say” (W1C), and commented about “the process of how committees work” (W1M), as significant gaps in understanding were noted.

A great deal of dialogue dealt with connectivity and role clarity, as committee members mused about their relationships with the organization: “What is the role of advisory committees versus governance? Is this clear to everyone?” (W2C) and sharing that staff and council “need to explain why decisions are made . . . [so committees] can understand the process in a transparent manner” (W2M). Participants noted that awareness of the broader system at play would allow members to engage in “big picture thinking” (W1L) and help participants understand a committee’s role in the system. Participants voiced that it starts with the basics: “committees knowing/understanding the structure of the organization” (W1M); and “understanding their mandate/goal/role” (W1M). They alternatively urged a “greater acceptance from staff/council that committee members and volunteers can do ‘real work’” (W2C), while also wondering about viewing the committees as conduits to the broader community: “How do we get more feedback from the public to the committee and council?” (W2C). There was a noted disparity in participant opinion about expected roles, which was further evidence of the lack of clarity.

**Theme 2: Enhance how we communicate with each other**

Participants frequently articulated a concern that committees do not have access to the information they need, when they need it. One participant wondered “do committee members have enough information to make the best decisions?” (W2C), while another spoke about the importance of timing, sharing that committees work best “when they are given the opportunity to be productive and creative vs. reactive” (W2L). There were concerns about the reliability of information, along with many suggestions regarding the practical nuts and bolts of effective information sharing, including “advance communication” (W2M) and receiving “timely agenda and minutes” (W2L). Another participant offered that a “committee should receive lots of input from various sources” (W1M) and reflected on leveraging the “amazing the depth and breadth of experience that people bring” (W1C) through “doing background work/research to share” (W1M) and purposeful “info sharing” (W1C).

At the World Café tables, this notion of inter-connectivity and communication frequently surfaced as participants noted the need to have a “mutual understanding of why everyone is involved” (W2M); establish “opportunities for dialogue and a chance to learn about and show appreciation for the work other committees are doing” (W1L); and have the ability to “increase effectiveness through committee collaboration” (W1L). These “cooperative connections” (W2L) were encouraged on many levels: “Summit of chairpersons of committees needed” (W1L); “ensuring multiple committees aren’t duplicating another’s work” (W2M); and “sharing knowledge/information between committees to increase overall understanding” (W1L).

The World Café events were designed to bring council, staff, and citizen members of all of our advisory committees together for a conversation, and it was noted that this was a rare event. The evenings included scheduled social breaks, in which participants were given the

opportunity to have a break from the exercises and mingle with their peers. It became very evident over the course of the evenings that participants were pleased to meet other volunteers and keen to hear about their personal experiences and committee work. This awareness was reflected in the data, as participants asked, “How do we find out about the other advisory committees? . . . [offering that they] don’t even know the names of the other committees!” (W1L). It was clear that this was a fundamental gap in awareness for the participants, unless they had served on different committees over the years.

### **Theme 3: Leverage the experience at the table**

Participants spoke to the importance of participating in “meaningful work” (W1L, W2L) and spoke to the intrinsic rewards in being able to “produce something to be proud of” (W1L) and “great satisfaction when we actually get a conclusion to a project” (W1M). They identified a sense of pride “if others you talk to take an interest in what the committee is working on” (W1L) or “people point out where success occurred” (W1M). One participant spoke to feeling “personally satisfied when I have an action or task assigned to me” (W1M), further illustrating the need that an individual may have to “contribute something based on my strength and skills” (W1M) or “contribute expertise I wasn’t expected to provide” (W1L).

Participants shared that feeling valued, respected, and appreciated is central to their committee experience. While one participant felt appreciated “when I felt that the city was listening to the citizens involved at the grassroots level” (W1M); others noted that we “may lose people if when they don’t feel appreciated” (W1L) or “committees may feel discounted” (W1L). It was clear that appreciation comes in a variety of forms and from different sources. Participants felt appreciated when “council showed interest and support for recommendations” (W1L); “seeing the committee’s voice in documents” (W2C); “appreciated by a member of the

community for volunteering” (W2C); “being formally ‘honoured’ by a fellow committee member” (W1L); or through “the simple act of being thanked” (W2L).

Participants expressed concerns regarding the composition of committees and suggested that “the selection process needs to be stronger” (W1M) and that council “needs to be diligent about the selection process” (W1M). One participant suggested that “committees lend themselves to vulnerability for self-interest being projected onto the agendas by a member with a hidden agenda” (W2M), while another stated that “self-perceived experts who aren’t team players can be problematic” (W1C). They offered that members should be “selected for a special skill set” (W1L), and committees should ideally have a “multiple skills background” (W1L), “diverse team members” (W1L), and “a good cross-section of personalities and skills” (W2L). They commented on the length of terms, wondering if “two-year terms might limit productivity and stop progress” (W2L) and “if there is a way to retain members on committees in an advisory capacity after their term ends” (W2L).

#### **Theme 4: Foster healthy relationships**

It was repeatedly noted by participants that city committees are one of the few opportunities that allow “council and staff to work as part of the team with volunteers” (W1L). It was clear that participants place a high level of value on “council involvement” (W2L), particularly when the “council member shows up and engages in/supports of the work of the committee” (W1M) as a member of the team and demonstrates a “willingness to learn” (W2M). One participant offered that “a councillor being on a committee equals a feeling of greater engagement” (W1C). Participants spoke to the supportive nature of committees, noting the high level of “commitment by staff and volunteers” (W2L) and the importance of “committees being well-supported administratively by staff” (W2L). One participant appreciated being able to

“meet like minded individuals” (W1M) through their committee work, while another noted the need to “support the ideas of someone who is new to the committee” (W1M).

A common set of reflections mirrored the need for healthy dialogue and respectful team behaviours. One participant shared that he/she was “satisfied with fulsome discussions and different opinions as long as no one point of view dominates” (W1M), while another noted that “voices are heard when there is a personal relationship” involved (W1C). It was noted that it is important to “listen and let the discussion happen” (W1M); nurture “respect amongst members” (W1M); and work to develop trust as a team (W1L, W1M, W2M). Of note was the lack of commentary about individual goals, agendas, or expectations of the committee members. There was a clear focus on the importance of the group or team, as reflected by a participant: “It doesn’t have to be my individual voice, but through consensus of the committee my voice is heard” (W2C), and others stressed the need for “common goals” (W1L) and the need to develop a “shared vision” (W1M). The facilitation of high-performance teams was identified as a key area of potential growth: having the opportunity to “explore ideas/vision/mission” (W1C) and the fostering of open dialogue and trust, with the understanding that “knowledge comes in different ways” (W1C), and it is “good to understand multiple points of view” (W1C).

These preliminary themes reflect the population’s experiences and perspectives and reveal this group’s high level of commitment to participation in civic activities at the City of Waterloo. Participants articulated challenges, successes, and a collective vision for what is possible in the future. These themes served to shape the questions for the Focus Group, which was regarded as an opportunity to affirm, challenge, and gather a deeper level of understanding about the emergent themes.

## Focus Group Findings

The Focus Group was comprised of one city councillor, one staff member, and four citizen committee members. I chose to ensure that both World Cafés were represented, no one committee was over-represented, and that both new and experienced committee members were included. Each finding is discussed in depth and supported by anonymous comments from the Focus Group participants, which are identified as F1 to F6.

### Theme 1: Create a learning environment

Focus group participants affirmed this World Café finding, offering that they all hoped to learn from their committee experience: “Develop an understanding of how things really work . . . what the path is between an idea or a request for something and where Council gets to” (F3); “an opportunity to understand issues/challenges faced by the city” (F4); and “learning from committee members about history, stories, [and] expertise of the community” (F1). One participant reflected that “every committee that I am on, I look forward to learning about the process and to be able to share learning experiences” (F6) and noted that “we are learning as we are going along” (F6). Of note, the word “passion” was used by four members (F2, F3, F5, F6) and was alternatively used to describe a high level of commitment to our city, a love of learning, or a keen desire to work with others.

The participants identified a desire to learn from other committee members through their experience and offered that each have a role to play: “Staff offers insight and training support for members” (F5), while councillors and staff can provide “insight into how council thinks . . . [and assistance in] guiding the committee in packaging the message so it is heard” (F3). Committee members spoke to the opportunity to tap into the “experience, knowledge, years of skill” (F2) and “the expertise of people who have lifetimes of knowledge, experience, and education in

areas that I don't" (F1) in their committee as they strive to a "greater depth of understanding of issues" (F1). The dialogue turned to a committee member's potential role in educating the community, as one participant reflected the desire to "help other citizens to increase their understanding of the process and what their role is in effecting change" (F3). Another reflected that "when you share the process with others, they are less apt to be as judgmental" (F6).

When asked about the role of the committee chair, members offered that "there are a lot of quality people who would never take on the chair position because we don't know what is expected, and no one has walked us through it" (F4); "being the chair is more of a technical position" (F6); and "the chair shouldn't be the subject matter expert on the committee; they need to know how to serve the committee" (F1). All agreed that a formal process of "training the chairs" is required, but it was clear that "is no internal capacity or process to train the chairs" (F5) at this point in time. They identified that the chair acts as the "voice of the committee" (F2); "is accountable to the committee" (F3); and "can be the public face of the committee in the media" (F6).

Participants shared their frustration with a general lack of clarity about city processes, suggesting that we need to "make the process common knowledge" (F6) and provide a "roadmap of how you can take an issue through the process" (F3). One member expressed frustration with the process, articulating that "I'm very puzzled about what my committee actually does!" (F2). Within this conversation, there was a general confusion about roles and responsibilities and a desire to "understand the mechanics of what's going on" (F6) and "how the committees work relative to what goes on in council" (F2).



### **Theme 2: Enhance how we communicate with each other**

The Focus Group dialogue affirmed the desire for “better access to information” (F6), with information primarily defined as “something you should always be willing to gain more of” (F6). One member shared a story about a committee experience in which “what all the members thought they knew and what they actually knew was very different” (F6), while another reflected on how a committee “went from dysfunctional to functional when we brought experts in to educate committee members about identified areas of interest” (F4). The issue of “recreating the wheel” (F2) was tabled, as participants mused that “background on what work has been done and what accomplishments have been achieved by a committee” (F2) would be helpful in determining committee work plans. One member shared that “there was a gap between my expectation and what the committee really does” (F3) and that if they had known more about the activities of the committee, they may have chosen to apply for a different committee.

Participants wondered if council and staff liaise members communicated with their peers about ongoing committee work, and it was noted that doing so would provide a “clear purpose and understanding of the mandate” (F1) and “serve to integrate the committees into the organizational culture” (F5) of the city. One participant offered that “by connecting with other committees, we were able to explain to them what our committee is about and learn about theirs. . . . The interaction between committees is so important and the silo effect is very detrimental” (F6).

### **Theme 3: Leverage the experience at the table**

The Focus Group affirmed the World Café finding of committee members wanting to feel that their expertise is valued and they are doing meaningful work. One member shared that “I want to feel like I’ve made a difference and that there’s been a success. There has to be a project

before there's a success" (F2). Another shared the story of being "part of a newly formed committee and seeing a vision come to life" (F6) and feeling satisfied. Subcommittees were offered as a possible tool to generating success: "Subcommittees can be comprised of experts and get to the endgame really quickly" (F4); and "Subcommittees are an amazing tool to get something specific done in a hurry" (F6). It was also suggested that smaller, splinter groups of a committee "can be dangerous . . . [as members] may feel that they know more about things than others do" (F4).

The data from the World Cafés also exposed concern about the current committee appointment process, with comments suggesting the need for a stronger, more purposeful approach. In the Focus Group, participants were specifically asked to dialogue about this topic and provided further insight. They shared that "what we are doing now isn't working" (F3) and that "everyone who applies is appointed" (F5). Another member disagreed and reflected that they are "amazed at the quality of people that I encounter on the city committees. . . . Everyone who applies is engaged" (F4). Participants identified the need to "tap people on the shoulder and ask for their expertise" (F2); "seek people that like to listen rather than hear themselves" (F3); "purposefully seek people who reflect our community" (F6); and be careful to not load a committee with "too many of any one background" (F3). It was suggested that "you need new blood to challenge things" (F2); and "some variety of new members bring the necessary 'why not?' mentality to a committee" (F6).

When asked about what effective recruitment may look like, participants suggested that the city must "do a better job of marketing this opportunity by using direct marketing" (F5) and that people could be "directly invited to apply" (F5), especially if it "fills a gap in diversity" (F6). One member suggested that committees "struggle with filling perceived gaps on their team

. . . [and there could be] some flexibility on the committees to do that outside of the council process” (F6). The participants agreed the youth voice is missing from the committees: “Once you get them in, they are engaged for life” (F6), especially for “issues that interest them like the environment” (F3). Additionally, it was noted that our city committees are not reflective of the ethnic diversity in the community and that “purposeful steps need to be taken to increase diversity” (F5).

Participants reflected on the role of staff members on the committees. One participant spoke to “the ripple effect of committees in the organization” (F5), and it was suggested that citizen committees must “become an expectation and be compensated accordingly within the organization” (F1), while another offered that “different committees have different levels of staff at the table” (F4), which may lead to inconsistent levels of access to information. Another participant wondered if the “right or relevant staff/connectors for the committees” (F1) were on the committees, after another shared that “now that senior staff and council are with us at the table, we feel they are hearing us” (F4). One participant summarized this dialogue by stating, “The most wonderful gift that a committee could give is to wake up an organization to be more than it is, and you have to provide the support it needs to get there” (F5).

#### **Theme 4: Foster healthy relationships**

The Focus Group participants were asked to share what they appreciated about the World Café experience and reflected that it was a “creative way to engage strangers in dialogue” (F2); “a great opportunity to talk about committees, without talking about the heavier city issues” (F6); “an opportunity to talk to staff and other councillors that I don’t know” (F4); and that “I met all kinds of people who have the same goals that I do” (F2). One person noted that “the opportunity for outside members to work directly with the bosses would never happen in my organization”

(F4), and they saw this as a unique benefit of participating in citizen committees and the World Café. It was suggested that the key element of the World Café was the “cross-pollination, and maybe once every so often, council could create the opportunity for this to happen again” (F5).

One member spoke to the importance of committee relationships by stating, “The whole thing has to be built on everybody respecting all of the participants” (F3), and another reflected that “maybe success is everyone feeling free to speak . . . [or having the opportunity to] mentor another committee member” (F6). One Focus Group participant identified his/her work on sub-committees to be particularly rewarding, as it allowed for stronger relationships to be developed: “We kept meeting because we saw the benefit of the social connection, and we have a ready-made subcommittee for our committee to use as they see fit” (F4).

In summary, the findings from the World Cafés and Focus Group have highlighted the challenges that are inherent in our current City of Waterloo citizen advisory committee program. The findings reviewed in these sections have reinforced the idea our citizen volunteers, staff members, and city councillors see the potential for a more meaningful and relevant advisory committee experience in the future and provide the foundation for establishing new programs and policies that will allow Waterloo City Council to optimize the engagement and effectiveness of these valued community partners. The conclusions arising from the findings are discussed in the following section.

### **Study Conclusions**

The study conclusions reflect the stories, opinions, and ideas shared by the World Café and Focus Group participants and are reflective of their current experiences as committee members, as well as their appreciative vision as to what the future may hold for these committees. An over-arching feeling that surfaced was the high level of commitment to the

community shared by the research participants: A collective enthusiasm for “what is possible” resonated throughout the process. The five conclusions that emerged from this community dialogue are:

1. Create a culture of learning to foster committee development;
2. Improve communications systems to enhance learning;
3. Make committee work meaningful and appreciated;
4. Create a purposeful recruitment and appointment process;
5. Work together to define and achieve success.

The first four conclusions are interconnected and foundationally supported by the need to regularly evaluate the appropriateness, currency, and efficacy of committee policy and programs. Together, they provide a complete picture for moving forward with a new approach to Citizen Advisory Committees at the City of Waterloo.

### **Conclusion 1: Create a culture of learning to foster committee development**

By volunteering for a city committee, members of our community are choosing to enter the dialogue and “be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole” (Block, 2009, p. 63). The findings suggest that a primary reason that citizens choose to participate is to learn: learning about the city and its processes, trying to understand council’s actions, or gaining knowledge about a favourite subject area. While these reasons may capture an individual’s attention and compel them to volunteer for a committee, it is worth considering what keeps them involved over the course of time, as the findings do indicate that people feel confused and unsupported in the current committee system. Wheatley (2006) shared her prescription for healing a system: “In order to change, the system needs to learn more about itself from itself” (p. 145). Research participants self-identified potential areas for enhanced learning:

(a) leadership training for the chair, (b) team building and capacity development for committees, (c) connecting with the other committees, and (d) developing clarity about their role within the larger system that is the City of Waterloo.

Block (2009) offered that “community building requires a concept of the leader as one who creates experiences for others” (p. 86) and posited that “the leader’s task is to structure the place and experience of these occasions to move the culture toward shared ownership” (p. 87). Central to this notion of creating a fruitful experience is equipping our citizen volunteers with the tools they need to emerge as successful participants. By providing individuals and teams with their desired learning opportunities, they will develop a greater level of understanding of organizational issues, the capacity to grow as individuals, and an ability to contribute as effective team members in the city’s decision-making processes. As one participant stated, “If we are truly going to engage these committees, and then look out here they come and they’re going to be skilful!” (F5)

Block (2009) suggested that “rather than focusing on our deficiencies and weaknesses . . . we gain more leverage when we focus on the gifts we bring and seek ways to capitalize on them” (p. 139). Kahane (2007) characterized this approach as choosing “an open way over a closed way” (p. 129), as participants purposefully engage in generative processes, acknowledging that “to solve a complex problem, we have to immerse ourselves in and open up to its full complexity” (p. 75). One participant shared an experience in which “what all the members thought they knew and what they actually knew were very different” (F6), which compelled the group to take steps to broaden their perspective through learning. The opportunity exists for the City of Waterloo to create a rich and diverse learning environment for our committee members,

one that focuses on the fostering the emergence and sharing of gifts, such as expertise, history, perspective, experience, from within our community.

### **Conclusion 2: Improve communication systems to enhance learning**

An important component of any learning environment is timely access to quality information and the ability to communicate effectively with fellow committee members. Block (2009) reflected that “every conventional gathering begins with the unspoken belief that whoever called the meeting has something in mind for us” (p. 128). He contrasted this mindset with the notion of ownership: “We want to shift to the belief that this world, including this gathering, is ours to construct together” (p. 128). If participants are wondering “do committee members have enough information to make the best decisions?” (W2C) and articulating a “general lack of awareness of the other committees” (W1L), there is a fundamental problem with how the City of Waterloo is sharing information with its committee members.

In the current structure, committees and subcommittees are not allowed to meet without a staff member being present. Designated staff liaises provide administrative support and act as the singular conduits for all communication and information sharing on the committees. While participants did not overtly state that they do not trust the process, elements of the preliminary theme of “Enhance how we communicate with each other” provided evidence that doubts about transparency and integrity exist on our committees. This lack of transparency also emerged with the observation that committees were working in silos, separated from the other city committees. What if they were replicating work or working at cross-purposes? How would they possibly know? As the emergent theme of “Foster healthy relationships” illustrated, committee members place value on respect-based relationships and feeling appreciated for their contribution, suggesting that purposeful steps need to be taken to change the way we share information.

Wheatley (2006) has described the traditional view of information as something “controllable, stable, and obedient” (p. 94), while suggesting a new reality may be more appropriate: “It is not the limited, quantifiable, put-it-in-an-e-mail-and-send commodity that we pretend it to be. In new theories of evolution and order, information is a dynamic, changing element, taking center stage” (p. 94). This characterization suggests the possibility of an active and open relationship involving giving, consuming, and sharing information with others, without the barriers of a mandated set of controls.

Wheatley (2006) posited that we need to

accept that information—freely generated, freely communicated, and freely interpreted—is our only hope for self-organized order . . . [in a chaotic world, yet acknowledged that] information overload is a major problem . . . [and] we are all suffering under the weight of information. (p. 166)

If we are interested in creating an environment that will empower all of our committee members to learn, it is necessary to break down the real and perceived barriers to effective communication and facilitate ownership amongst committee members. Hamilton (2008) highlighted the concept of “meshworking . . . [as the art of reframing] our fragmented, reductionistic, mechanistic, linear view of the city into one that is whole, integrated, natural and flowing” (p. 221), offering that these barriers can be reduced by the “building of bridges, connections, collaborations, and links between hierarchies and across self-organizing systems” (p. 173).

In light of the observation that “true leadership is actually practiced by those who interpret, negotiate and create the boundaries” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 114), how do we determine what the correct information is, who needs to see it, how do they gain access to it, and what will they create with it? The key to success lies in creating a system that allows the committee members (i.e., citizens, staff, and councillors) to self-determine the answers to these questions of



what, who, how, and why. Many participants viewed this as easily accomplished through technology and were excited about the potential to communicate more effectively in the future.

### **Conclusion 3: Make committee work meaningful and appreciated**

Moulder and O'Neill (2009) noted that "there is an important distinction between giving input and participating in the solution" (p. 26). There is also an important distinction between writing a quick email to complain about something and volunteering two or more years of your time to participate on a citizen advisory committee. Hamilton (2008) defined community as "a process of being in a relationship that helps us to adapt, change and become who we are, through co-emergent meaning-making, discovery and inquiry" (p. 200), while Block (2009) shared that "citizens show up by choice" (p. 29). It is important to consider that what compelled volunteers to initially show up may not provide enough meaning to keep them engaged in this community of committee work.

The emergent theme of "Create a learning environment" reflected the population's keen level of interest: They want to learn more, communicate more, and play a bigger role in decision making at the City of Waterloo. Li (2010) offered this willingness to move beyond observing or commenting to "become highly and personally engaged in a community" (p. 60) is the highest level of engagement. It reflects a level of responsibility and ownership, as well as a wonderful opportunity for the organization to leverage the gifts of this population.

Wheatley (2006) offered that in order to flourish, a system needs to be more self-aware: "It has to become more connected to the truth of who it is, more connected to its environment and customers, more connected to people everywhere in the system" (p. 146). She identified identity, information, and relationships as key areas for increased awareness (p. 146), suggesting that increasing a committee's capacity to become more self-aware of their skills, roles, and

relationships within the system will help them to determine what success looks like. Participants identified that feeling valued, respected, and appreciated is central to their committee experience. They want to know that the work they are doing is making a difference: This may look like having “the opportunity to be productive and creative versus reactive” (W2L), having “strong relationships with councillors and staff” (F6), when “committee work is validated by a council vote” (W2M) or the simple act of being thanked.

This challenge is magnified at the staff resource level, where the critical role of staff support was repeatedly noted, as participants reflected on the “impact on the work load of staff members” (F6); it being “unfair to staff members to be expected to be at all the sub-committee meetings” (F4); and the “ripple effect of committees within the organization” (F5). The diversity of what “meaningful” looks like suggests that it is imperative to strive for an “overarching goal of mutual appreciation” (W1L) and ensure that committee members feel that their contributions are valued and appreciated.

#### **Conclusion 4: Create a purposeful recruitment and appointment process**

As reflected in the emergent table theme of “Leverage the experience”, many participants expressed frustration with the current appointment process, offering that “committees are not representative of the community” (F5); “I often wonder why some people are even there” (F2); and committees are often populated by “too many people with the same perspective” (F3). They also expressed concern with the current system of appointing members for two-year terms, reflecting that “two-year terms might limit productivity and stop progress” (W2L) and suggested that we “stagger the renewal of committee members” (W2C). There was a common message that “community expertise is untapped” (W2C) and that the committee experience would be enriched by a “skills based” (W1L) recruitment strategy.

The current committee appointment process at the City of Waterloo is very open, as the majority of citizens who apply for a committee are selected. The historical approach has been one of encouraging broad participation. If an individual is keen to participate, the door is wide open for them to join. While it may seem counter-intuitive to develop a more purposeful process, Li (2010) cautioned that our optimistic open-door approach to leadership often backfires and advocated for “a disciplined approach to an open strategy . . . [as] open leadership requires forethought, planning, and structure. In fact, it requires that a leader be both open and in command” (p. 164).

Block (2009) discussed the nature of inviting citizens to actively participate in creating their future: “We begin with the question of whom do we want in the room. For starters, we want people who are not used to being together” (p. 113). There is a difference between leaving the door wide open and issuing a purposeful invitation, as the act of inviting involves careful consideration of who we are inviting, why we may need them, and offers the very real chance of rejection. If we view the primary role of elected officials as convening, we respect their ability to invite citizens to the table, with the understanding that this involves a level of vulnerability: “Genuine invitation changes our relationship with others, for we come to them as an equal” (Block, 2009, p. 117). Hamilton (2008) encouraged leaders to see the generative possibilities of this tension of “being both in competition and collaboration” (p. 203), as it creates opportunity for complex adaptive systems to thrive.

### **Conclusion 5: Work together to define and achieve success**

A key goal of this action research project was the determination of what success looked like to our committee members. The findings illustrated that success emerges in many forms. Some success is easier to evaluate by traditional measurement tools: A “presentation to council”

(W2L); “committee work being validated by a council vote” (W2M); or “seeing committee work reflected in a staff report” (F5) are all clearly visible and may speak of committee expertise and input being valued by Council. Another group of possible successes may be more difficult to define and measure: How do we quantify the relevance and power of the “Aha! moments, when things get cooking and we come up with a great strategy” (W2M); “feeling appreciated” (W1L); or “being able to contribute something based on my strength or skills” (W2M)? How do we measure the ability to “foster healthy relationships” or the efficacy of an enriched learning environment?

Patton (2011) suggested that creative thinking is required in tackling the evaluation challenge: “Asking questions about what makes sense and connecting the evaluation process to ongoing program development leads outside evaluation’s traditional boxes” (p. 56). It is this doing what makes sense approach that allows us to consider new ways of evaluating success. While traditional methods may measure the end-product or outcomes of a given process, what may evaluation of the process itself reveal? Patton positioned evaluation as supportive of learning and program development:

Developmental evaluation isn’t some particular set of methods or recipe-like steps to follow. It doesn’t offer a template of standardized questions. It’s a mindset of inquiry into how to bring data to bear on what’s unfolding so as to guide and develop what is unfolding. (p. 75)

Looking at evaluation as a learning opportunity allows us to consider new and different ways of measuring what matters to our committee members. It suggests that success and evaluation is not pre-determined or pre-packaged. It encourages us to engage with our committees in new ways, in order to glean what they want to know about themselves, what they value, and how they would like to develop.

Hamilton (2008) posited that the key element that is lacking in most indicator or measurement tools is “human consciousness” (p. 233). This element is reflective of the cultural and social complexities of the system and needs to be integrated into evaluation, as it links our experiences to the larger systems that we are connected to. The research participants illustrated this self-awareness by reflecting on their personal and committee connections with the larger city system by wondering how they fit into the big picture (W2L, W1M, F3) and reflecting on the challenges of operating in a hierarchical and siloed organization (W2M, F2, F5). They clearly sensed the possibilities, yet currently felt ill-equipped to tackle the boundaries.

This fifth conclusion is intimately woven throughout the previous four conclusions, as applying the developmental evaluation approach to measuring how we create a learning environment, determining our ability to successfully communicate and share information, gauging our willingness to leverage the experience of our community partners, and celebrating our ability to actively and effectively invite citizens to the table will be variable and challenging. It cannot be a prescribed set of tools, rather a culture of critical and creative thinking. Kahane (2007) suggested that “a problem that is generatively complex cannot be solved with a pre-packaged solution from the past. A solution has to be worked out as the situation unfolds, through a creative, emergent, generative process” (p. 101), suggesting that this experience will be unique to each committee. This final conclusion provides the foundation for moving forward with a refreshed approach to citizen advisory committees at the City of Waterloo, urging our committee members, citizens, staff, and councillors, to take an active role in measuring what matters to them.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Inquiry**

The primary factor influencing the scope and limits of my inquiry is related to the dual roles of researcher and elected official within my organization. Although my personal involvement was clearly identified at every juncture and purposeful steps were taken to mitigate my role as city councillor within the research process, it would be naïve to think that my presence or the involvement of my council colleagues went unnoticed. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) offered that as an insider, “your associations with various individuals or groups in the setting will influence your relations with others whom you encounter, affecting the character of the data you gather from them” (p. 120), highlighting the need for the internal researcher to make purposeful choices that mitigate the impact. This experience may have been magnified by my role as an elected official. Some committee members may have chosen to decline the invitation based on my hierarchical leadership role, while other may have seen it as a greater opportunity to effect change.

This dual role surfaced in another way, as my research project attracted local media attention, which created an additional set of challenges that needed to be dealt with. Primarily, I was contacted by community members who wanted to participate in the research, but fell outside of the population. This raised the question of adequate representation: Would it have been relevant to ask non-participating community members what the barriers to participation looked like? Although the results of the research aligned with the relevant literature and other municipalities may glean significant knowledge from the outcomes, any results and conclusions should not be generalized beyond the specifics of the study, which focused on the experiences and perspectives of current members of the City of Waterloo’s citizen advisory committees.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the findings of the World Café and Focus Group experiences, exploring the four main emergent themes that surfaced during my data analysis. Through reflection and current academic literature, I interpreted meaning and richness from the data to reach five conclusions, enabling me to glean valuable insight to my research question: How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees? By exploring the sub-questions of (a) What role can citizen input play in council decision making, (b) How can the City of Waterloo facilitate effective committee performance, and (c) How do we measure effective committee performance, we will pave a path forward for the creation of a fresh approach to engaging our citizens in the City of Waterloo. Finally, the limitations and unique challenges of this research project were identified. The inquiry implications of this action research project are discussed in the next chapter, including the key research recommendations and the organizational implications for the change process.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INQUIRY IMPLICATIONS

This action research project was designed as an opportunity for the community to participate in a series of community conversations, create a shared vision of what effective committee participation may involve, and lay the foundation for a new Citizens Advisory Committee Policy. The research question being explored in this action research project was: How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees? Sub-questions were:

1. What role can citizen input play in council decision making?
2. How can the City of Waterloo facilitate effective committee performance?
3. How do we measure effective committee performance?

The recommendations, organizational implications, and implications for future inquiry are included in this chapter. Each recommendation is discussed in depth and supported by anonymous comments or summaries from the identified World Café and Focus Group themes and conclusions as discussed in Chapter Four.

### **Study Recommendations**

In this final chapter, I have woven literature, research findings, and conclusions together to provide recommendations for the City of Waterloo to consider. At a high level, these recommendations pave the way for a culture shift for our citizen committees, as we work together to co-create a system that optimizes the capacity of our citizen volunteers, our city staff resources, and our city councillors. Practical implementation of the recommendations will be facilitated by the leadership of our organization's CAO, as he guides the development of requisite policy and program changes. Council members will play a key role in providing



leadership through this change process, as all other committee participants will look to their elected officials for genuine commitment to a new way of engaging with our citizens.

The recommendations to optimize the effectiveness of our citizen advisory committees are:

1. Build a framework of relatedness;
2. Create a learning environment for the committees:
  - (a) Develop orientation and training programs for participants;
  - (b) Develop a web-based communication platform for the committees;
3. Engage our committee members in meaningful work:
  - (a) Provide clarity around the work to be done;
  - (b) Actively seek diversity at the table;
4. Facilitate the measurement of success.

**Recommendation 1: Build a framework of relatedness**

A participant at a World Café reflected on committee members possibly “feeling like window dressing” (W2M), which spurred a dialogue about how committees and their members fit into the larger system and how they relate to staff and council. They wondered if “our voices [are] heard” (W2M), are our “opinions understood” (W2M), and “does Council really want us here” (W2M)? In his discussion of the changing nature of work, McGehee (2001) presented that “successful leaders are open—to new ideas, people and possibilities” (p. 52). Kahane (2007) offered that “if talking openly means being willing to expose to others what is inside of us, then listening openly means being willing to expose ourselves to something new to others” (p. 73). These concepts underline the notion of openness being the foundation of building resilient and productive relationships.

Wheatley (2006) focused on the importance of relationships in an organization: “Nothing exists independent of its relationships, whether looking at subatomic particles or human affairs” (pp. 163-164). While the City may originally strike a citizen committee to gather input or advice, it may make better sense to see committee participation through the framework of relatedness: (a) committees may be viewed as providing the opportunity for “people who are different from one another [to] make exchanges with one another” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 40), and (b) encourage leaders to “support those who question and inquire, not just those who have answers” (Westley et al., 2007, p. 84). By entertaining this notion of relatedness, we are able to wonder about our interactions with one another, the gifts that we are exchanging, and the nature of our relationships.

### **Recommendation 2: Create a learning environment for the committees**

My research determined that a major factor in committee participation is the desire to learn and grow. This emerged in a variety of ways as participants sought understanding about themselves, their community, and their government. This need to learn and evolve is not a surprise. Wheatley (2006) reminded us that “life is about creation” (p. 20) and offered that the thirst for information leads a living system to “a higher level of complexity, a new form of itself that can deal better with the present” (p. 21). Within the context of citizen committees, we are guided to the ideas of providing rich opportunities for members to develop skills and knowledge about themselves and each other, through learning opportunities and open access to information.

#### ***Develop orientation and training programs for participants***

As reflected in “Conclusion 1: Create a culture of learning to foster committee development”, World Café participants overwhelmingly noted the general lack of knowledge about basic organizational structure, city processes, and meeting procedures. This lack of clarity

reflects the need for the City of Waterloo to offer a means to build this functional knowledge in our committees through an orientation program for our members. The scope and content of this orientation program requires consideration. These identified structural bytes of information are important for alleviating confusion and can serve as an introductory piece. Participants suggested a “committee primer or manual” (F3); “a thumb drive with relevant info and reports on it” (F5); and a “mentoring program” (F6) for committee members. The research also revealed that there is no formal training process for staff liaison members within our current structure, leaving newly appointed staff members struggling for support: “There was no internal capacity available . . . and I had nothing to offer my committee, so we made it up” (F5). An orientation program may be crafted to fit the needs of all committee members, allowing them to learn together.

This knowledge gap was further manifested in the call for extensive training for the committee chairs, in both functional and leadership areas. The committee chair is regarded as a significant factor in a committee’s success, playing a role in “making the committee function” (W1L); “navigating relationships with council” (F4); “recognizing the talents at the table” (F2); and acting as a “strong spokesperson” (W2M) for the committee. This is not a simple skill set. In fact, it is a rare person who can effectively fill all of these roles on their first attempt, and, if committees are to be successful, we must consider the barriers to creating a pool of willing and able leaders. One Focus Group participant noted,

There should be a thorough training program for the committee chairs. My sense is that there are a lot of quality people, myself included, who would never take on the chair position because I don’t know what is expected and no one has walked me through it.  
(F4)

Many participants identified the procedural skills as integral to chair success, suggesting that familiarity with formal meeting procedures is necessary. However, Block (2009) challenged

us to consider that “every meeting or special event is that place where context can be shifted, relatedness built, and new conversation can be introduced” (p. 94), suggesting that another set of skills may trump the ability to keep a meeting running on schedule. He shared that “we change the world one room at a time . . . [and] creating the experience of belonging in the room we are in at the moment becomes the point” (p. 94). These skills appear to be more relational: “Ensuring that all voices are heard” (F2); “asking the right questions” (W2C); and fostering an environment of respect and trust. This shift in framework from conductor to host suggests that time and effort be spent developing a leadership training program for our committee members, nurturing their abilities to create and exist in the spaces that encourage creativity and growth. Developing these programs will enable the City of Waterloo to offer a tangible and meaningful gift to our participants, in exchange for the valuable experiences and perspectives that our committee members bring to the table.

***Develop a web-based communication platform for the committees***

In his discussion of systems archetypes, Senge (2006) described a system that rapidly grows and flourishes, then inexplicably begins to sputter, as “it eventually comes to a halt, and may even reverse itself and begin an accelerating collapse” (p. 390). The reason is simple: Limited resources create a stagnation, which eventually drives the demise of the system. This system archetype, aptly named “Limits to Growth” (p. 390), may explain the effect that limited or poor quality information and communication may have on committee performance. A typical committee scenario plays out like this: The City enthusiastically appoints a citizen committee to participate in a citizen engagement exercise and, through its policies and structures, takes steps to (a) control information through a singular input (e.g., staff); (b) limit interaction between committee members with prescribed meeting rules; and (c) erect barriers to the broader system

by keeping committees away from each other. Slowly, the effects are noticed as members disengage from the process. The broader systems impacts are also potentially significant: Disengaged committee members may resign, spreading their message of frustration to others in the community. In turn, the City may struggle with recruiting future citizens for important committee work and, ultimately, question the value of citizen committees.

Imagine if the reverse was true: The City enthusiastically appoints a citizen committee and takes purposeful steps to provide them with training, including connecting them to an information platform that all of their committee colleagues (i.e., citizens, staff, and council) have access to and co-ownership of. They have open and timely access to city data, reports, and documents. They are each able to upload information to share, adding information of their choice to the mix. They engage in dialogue with each other. There is a virtual café, where members of all committees can pop in to check in with one another, posting updates about their current work. Participants share information with each other in a new way, co-creating an expanding pool of knowledge.

Scharmer (2009) characterized a one-way flow of information as downloading, observing that this type of communication frequently exists in hierarchical organizations that operate based on policies and rules (p. 240). Conversely, dialogue is a shared systems experience. Scharmer (as cited in Kahane, 2007) highlighted the need for generative dialogue: “We listen not only from within ourselves or from within others, but from the whole of the system” (p. 92). In order to move from downloading to dialogue, purposeful choices must be made to create bridges, networks, and feedback loops. Scharmer (2009) theorized that innovation is necessary to forge these complexities, as well as “the open mind, open heart, and open will” (p. 242) to see the possibilities and take the necessary bold steps to get there.

The City of Waterloo is currently undergoing a major refresh of its corporate website, led by a steering committee populated by three members of my advisory committee, including my project sponsor. The City has also adopted a new strategic plan (City of Waterloo, 2011), which highlights public engagement as a key pillar, stating that “technology and communications is evolving at an ever increasing rate and with this evolution comes a public appetite for more information delivered in a convenient and timely manner” (para. 1). The timely and strategic use of this website project will enable the City to use technology to innovatively create a new means for committee members to develop productive relationships and share information.

### **Recommendation 3: Engage our committees in meaningful work**

Westley et al. (2007) hypothesized that connecting social innovators to the possibilities (p. 46) is the first step of creating change. They offered that each of us identifies that we want to evoke change, but wonder how to overcome the barriers to making it happen. Block (2009) offered that the small group is the “unit of transformation” (p. 95) and taught us that “the small group is the bridge between our own individual existence and the larger community” (p. 95). The World Café and Focus Group findings revealed a deep need for committee members to feel connected to meaningful work and to understand how their work impacts the community. Participants acknowledged the role of the committee in helping them affect change, by offering that “the more voices that are saying the same thing, it’s easier to gain attention” (F1) and “working together on something is better than working alone” (F3). Wheatley (2006) hypothesized that “discovering what is meaningful to a person, group, or organization is the first essential task” (p. 149) and described the awakening that occurs:

If we discover an issue whose significance we share with others, those others are transformed into colleagues. If we recognize a shared sense of injustice or a common dream, magical things happen to people. Past hurts and negative histories get left behind.

People step forward to work together . . . we have found something important to work on, and, because we want to make a difference, we figure out how to do the work, together.  
(p. 149)

These reflections suggest that meaningful may emerge in different ways: It may be the subject matter of work being done or, alternatively, the way that a committee engages in doing the work.

***Provide clarity around the work to be done***

In considering the type of work a committee is engaged in, the research suggested that it must be clearly linked to a “clear and defined organizational mandate” (W1L). Participants mused about a possible disconnect, reflecting a lack of understanding about what the organizational mandate may be, who sets it, and what a committee’s role is in meeting it, as reflected in theme “Leverage the experience” and the conclusion to “Make committee work meaningful and appreciated”. One participant offered advice to Council: “Council needs to make their definitions and expected mandate known as it will help to make decisions and measure success” (W2M). These open lines of communication will ensure that all “are on the same page” (W2M) and “committees don’t have expectations that can’t be met” (F5) by the organization.

The research also revealed that the current committee program may not adequately support staff members who act as committee liaisons. While participants shared that “staff are [seen as] integral to history, dialogue, keeping mandate moving” (W2C) and bring necessary perspective and expertise to the committees, concerns were raised that committee work may not be valued organizationally: “There are significant ripple effects within the organization” (F5), along with “staff burnout from the extra work expectations” (F5). Participants suggested that “we need to acknowledge this effect and plan for it” (F2), to the point that it “becomes an expectation and is compensated accordingly within the organization” (F1). If the key staff members involved

in committee work are under duress and sensing a fracture between their work and organizational goals, their capacity to act as effective facilitators may be compromised.

These gaps have exposed the possibility that the right questions are not being asked throughout the system: Are the current committees the right committees? Are the committees providing input on relevant strategic initiatives? Are the right people participating? Does Council know what they want or need from the committees? Do they have the tools they need to produce relevant outcomes? Block (2009) challenged us to ask powerful questions, the type of questions that draw people into the solution and “express the reality that change, like life, is difficult and unpredictable” (p. 106). Powerful questions are risky. They make us anxious and challenge our personal values (p. 106). They also open the door to a more meaningful existence. The research suggests that gleaning the answers to these powerful questions will assist in dispelling confusion and serve to increase the collective sense of clarity about the type of work being done by the committees.

***Actively seek diversity at the table***

A complementary aspect of meaningful relates to the process by which the work is accomplished. As reflected in “Conclusion 4: Create a purposeful recruitment and appointment process”, participants urged Waterloo Council to be more thoughtful in populating their committees, offering that the City’s current approach is not addressing the challenge of ensuring diversity and inclusivity at the table. A common solution emerged at the World Café tables and in the Focus Group: “You need to know who needs to be at the table” (F6), and, once you know, you “need to tap people on the shoulder” (F4), inviting them to participate. Block (2009) shared his perspective on invitation: “We constantly seek people in the room who are not used to being



together” (p. 118). This framework automatically leads to diversity, as individuals are invited based on what makes them different than the other invitees.

Kahane (2007) suggested that “simple problems, with low complexity, can be solved perfectly well . . . using processes that are piecemeal, backward looking, and authoritarian” (p. 32). Acknowledging that the large majority of community issues and problems are socially complex and require sustainable solutions, it follows that they can “only be solved using processes that are systemic, emergent, and participatory” (p. 32). Inviting a diverse group of individuals together to create an elevated level of social complexity carries a level of risk: Automatically, you are working with people who naturally see things differently and may have opposing expectations. It stands to reason that tension and conflict may arise, as diverse opinions surface and collide.

Scharmer (2009) hypothesized that “instead of encouraging diverse views and entering into a healthy debate, leaders discourage contradiction, deny disconfirming data, and silence other views” (p. 283). These actions serve to derail dialogue and lead to one-sided perspectives, as groups of like-minded individuals perpetuate their shared mandate. The research revealed a heightened willingness to engage in healthy dialogue; exchange diverse ideas; and purposefully seek out broader perspectives, as reflected in “Conclusion 1: Create a culture of learning to foster committee development” and “Conclusion 4: Create a purposeful recruitment and appointment process.” It was identified by Focus Group participants that applicants naturally self-select committees, based on identified areas of interest (F2, F1). This approach can be seen as self-limiting, as it leads to a “group of people, incredibly passionate and fairly knowledgeable about the subject” (F1), all potentially bringing the same perspective to the committee.

Shifting the recruitment and appointment processes to a purposeful framework of diversity is a shift for the City of Waterloo. It means turning away from an open-door, all-are-welcome approach to a structure that involves identifying what is needed and finding it in the community. It will require a level of boldness. Westley et al. (2007) advised that “change of this kind is always difficult. It often means stopping doing something that we’ve done for years. It may mean . . . abandoning an approach or system that has served us well” (p. 68). It also enables change to occur, allowing fresh ideas and perspectives to emerge.

**Recommendation 4: Facilitate the measurement of success**

In this research project, participants were asked to reflect on what success looks like to them and how they would know that their committee experience was worthwhile. Their answers were diverse and numerous, ranging from gaining practical knowledge to giving back to the community. Westley et al. (2007) offered that when change makers embark on a journey, they “don’t yet know enough to set specific goals or measurable targets; they also understand that different participants have different aims in the change process—and that these participants themselves should play a major role in goal setting” (p. 85).

Committee performance at the City of Waterloo is typically measured by visible achievements, such as: (a) making a report to council on committee night, (b) having input into a staff report, or (c) producing a document for the community. Little or no attention has been paid to the processes that lead to the end results. In light of the research conclusions, which revealed that committee members (a) seek learning opportunities in order to grow, (b) want to know more about each other, (c) want to participate at a higher level of engagement, and (d) value the perspective of a diverse membership, it is apparent that several variables co-determine successful participation. Patton (2011) offered that evaluation of a complex system should reflect the

dynamics of the system: Watching “for interactions and interconnections, circular and interlocking relationships that create internal feedback loops affecting how the entire system behaves” (p. 137). Accepting the challenge of moving beyond measuring the “static and fixed relationship between cause and effect” (p. 136) will result in a pool of feedback that “requires data owners to accountably self-assess and self-report against standards and best practices established in the design phase” (Hamilton, 2008, pp. 244-245) and serves to fuel the desired committee learning culture.

This recommendation does not suggest that the City of Waterloo develop a one-size-fits-all evaluation tool for its committees. Rather, it is recommended a process is developed that (a) allows each committee to self-determine what their individual and team goals are, (b) provides an opportunity for development, (c) offers a reflective framework for self-evaluation, and (d) facilitates the evaluative cycle over the course of time. This is, in effect, an action research cycle conducted on the individual and group level by the participants. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) posited that “the form of knowledge that action research aims to produce is practical knowing, the knowing that shapes the quality of your moment-to-moment actions” (p. 36). The notion of developmental evaluation is supportive of the other recommendations, as the reflective process will enable committees to (a) evaluate their enhanced learning and relatedness, (b) the relevance of their work, and (c) the diversity of experiences and perspectives.

### **Organizational Implications**

The research recommendations create an opportunity for Waterloo Council. Embarking on the change process required to achieve the goal of optimized citizen engagement will require a dedicated approach to creating policy and programs that reflect the spirit of the recommendations. This section includes a description of the proposed implementation plan, a

discussion of implications if the recommendations are not implemented, and leadership implications for organizational change.

**The implementation process**

While I, along with my advisory committee, have been intimately involved in this research project, it is important to note that successful implementation will require the interest and commitment of my fellow city councillors. Mr. Anderson and I will formally present the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations to Council in a public council meeting. This presentation will allow members of the public, including research participants, to see the outcomes of the action research project. Within the context of the organization's annual calendar, a new series of committee appointments will occur in December 2012. In conjunction with the council presentation, the following timeline for implementation of the recommendations will be presented, aiming for alignment with the December 2012 appointments.

***Spring 2012: Lay the foundation for change with Waterloo Council***

The purpose of this phase is for Council to engage in an open dialogue regarding the foundational pieces of this strategy: (a) building a committee system based on relationships, and (b) choosing to engage our citizens in meaningful work through our advisory committees of council. The advisory committee will bring forward draft policy that reflects two key elements: (a) providing clarity as to the strategic reason for committees, and (b) purposefully seeking diversity in appointing citizen members. Both of these points require the collective vision of Council to make purposeful choices about their committees and will involve a dialogue about, but not limited to: (a) the appropriateness of current committees, (b) linkages to strategic goals, (c) opportunities for council leadership, and (d) what it means to purposefully seek diversity.

Bolman and Deal (2008) reminded us that “political leaders focus their attention on building relationships and networks” (p. 365), a simple concept that lays the foundation for Waterloo Council’s role in this committee process. This is an opportunity for the City’s political leaders to actively leverage their community connections, seek expanded networks, and foster healthy relationships with engaged and fulfilled committee members. They will know that each committee is providing strategic and timely input and is representative of a diverse citizenry. By embracing these foundational constructs of fostering relationships and engaging the committees in meaningful work, councillors are taking steps to initiate a cycle of respect and credibility.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) offered their perspective on credibility:

Above all else, we as constituents must be able to believe in our leaders. We must believe that their word can be trusted, that they’re personally passionate and enthusiastic about the work that they’re doing, and they have the knowledge and skill to lead. (p. 37)

Through this lens, it is clear that committees are a valuable tool for councillors as they work to achieve personal and collective political goals. Formal policy development will provide clarity to all as to the organizational commitment required to ensure diversity in future committee appointments.

***Summer 2012: Create a learning environment***

The focus of this phase is the development of an orientation program, exploration of opportunities for capacity training for committees, and development of a leadership training module for the committees. There is opportunity in this step to further engage committee members in formal dialogue regarding real and perceived gaps, opportunities, and challenges.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) posited that a “climate of collaboration [is needed] to determine what the groups needs in order to do their work” (p. 223), suggesting that a cross-committee team of

citizen volunteers be asked to work on this project, as committee members will know what they need to succeed.

Additionally, as identified in the recommendation to “Develop a web-based communication platform for our committees”, the City of Waterloo is currently undergoing a major refresh of its corporate web site, led by a steering committee populated by three members of my advisory committee. Linking our efforts with this new web site project will enable the advisory committee to successfully bring the web-based learning platform to fruition.

***Winter 2012: New opportunities emerge***

The winter of 2012 will see the first implementation of the new policy regarding diversity on our council committees. Council members will be actively involved in recruitment, as they consider their community connections and “tap people on the shoulder” to participate. As the re-populated committees convene, orientation programs will be rolled out for councillors, staff, and citizens. Committee members will know what they need to know and feel valued, as key elements of the city team. The learning environment will emerge as a key element of the committee experience, as the web-based platform is unveiled and participants start to co-create the committee online community. Opportunities will arise for leadership training, capacity building for committee members, and purposeful steps are taken to cross-connect committees as Waterloo Council hosts a committee summit.

As discussed in the recommendation to “Facilitate the measurement of success”, it was recommended that the complexities of committee learning be reflected by a developmental approach to evaluation, offering individuals and committees the opportunity to self-determine goals and engage in self-reflection. Westley et al. (2007) characterized this approach as “[offering] a way of asking the right evaluation questions at the right time and asking them in a

way that energizes rather than stifles” (p. 83), highlighting the goal of learning for participants. Kouzes and Posner (2007) reminded us that “strengthening others is essentially the process of turning constituents into leaders—making people capable of acting on their own initiative” (p. 269). Ideally, a cross-committee team will work together to determine the best approach to achieving this goal.

### **Implications if the recommendations are not implemented**

As evidenced by the research findings, participants enjoy their committee experiences and value the opportunity to actively contribute their insight and abilities to the city. However, they also sense barriers to participation and often wonder if they are adding value to Council’s mandate. One participant boldly stated that “barriers crush or cancel passion” (W2M), while others reflected that “committees feel discounted” (W1L) or “feel like window dressing” (W2M). Another participant reflected that “throwing together a committee is an easy thing for council to do. It’s what they do with it that’s really important” (F2), challenging Council to take stock of the current situation and consider opportunities for strategic change. Wheatley (2006) reminded us to walk away from the status quo, as “in venerating equilibrium, we have blinded ourselves to the processes that foster life” (p. 77). By embracing the message delivered by the population of committee members, Waterloo Council has an opportunity to create a new, meaningful reality for their constituents. This implication also relates to the concept of political credibility. It is clear from the research that committee members are actively seeking the opportunity to play a legitimate role in decision making at the City of Waterloo. It is imperative for the councillors to optimize their experience.

A second implication of inaction was discussed under the recommendation to “Develop a web-based communication platform for the committees”, in which the systems impacts of

controlling information were described. Westley et al. (2007) offered that information is not meant to be hoarded or controlled, rather, they urged: “Don’t just gather information, share it” (p. 158), and allow it to flow freely. This notion of freely-accessible information makes people nervous, as it automatically forces controls to be lifted and a previously closed system to become vulnerable to feedback, new energies, and disequilibrium (Wheatley, 2006, pp. 78-79). Wheatley (2006) painted a positive picture of that emerging unsettled state, as she reminded us that systems that recreate themselves give up life-creating energy and develop the “innate ability to reorganize themselves to deal with new information . . . [and] are adaptive and resilient rather than rigid and stable” (p. 80). Embracing the notion of shared information and ownership will allow committees to thrive in an adaptive and resilient manner.

### **Leadership implications**

The major leadership implication for organizational change lies in the commitment for the City of Waterloo to organizationally embrace the collective responsibility to create the space for learning and innovation to happen for our committees of council. Westley et al. (2007) urged political leaders to

invite social innovators to the table. Whether what they propose is in line with your preferences or not, they are valuable sources of grassroots information about trends, potential tipping points and new directions in the political economy. Treat them respectfully as information allies. (pp. 122-123)

This thought underscores the necessity for Waterloo Council to foster open and curious relationships, demonstrate a willingness to seek new perspectives and accept diverse feedback, and encourage the flow of information throughout the system. The best way for councillors to lead the way will be to actively participate in the process. Kouzes and Posner (2007) challenged leaders to “take every opportunity to show others by their own example that they’re deeply



committed to the values and aspirations that they espouse” (p. 75). Staff and citizen volunteers will be looking to their councillors to demonstrate their leadership throughout this innovation.

This approach requires commitment and a change of perspective. It forces us to think of an elected official’s role in a different light. Block (2009) posited that

elected officials are a special case of how we think about leadership and the art of convening. We have put elected officials in a difficult role. We distort them into service providers and suppliers. We relate to them as if we are consumers, not citizens. We want them to solve for us those issues that we should be solving for ourselves. (p. 90)

This perspective places the elected official in the centre of a network, actively seeking ways for new connections to be created, gaps to be identified and rewoven, and innovative possibilities to emerge. It implies that the leader plays a very special role in bringing people together, as they work to create their future.

A reality of municipal government is a regular cycle of change in leadership, as elections inevitably bring new community members into office, along with a potential shift in political climate. A key leadership challenge will be creating a program that sustains this current iteration of council. Bjorkman and Sundgren (as cited in Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) noted that “obtaining management attention, creating interest among colleagues, creating and maintaining legitimacy, and allocating time and financial resources are key issues” (p. 59) to consider in choosing an action research project that will create sustainable change. While the citizen advisory committees report directly to Waterloo Council, it is important to nurture organizational support for this change initiative. In this context, I purposefully enlisted the CAO of the City of Waterloo, Tim Anderson, to act as project sponsor for my OLP.

Mr. Anderson is well-respected, genuinely liked by his colleagues, and is committed to optimizing our organizational capacity. In my opinion, he is an excellent role-model, consistently

demonstrating the benefit of sustaining healthy relationships. As a new CAO, he is still fresh to the role and has been very open to dialogue regarding organizational effectiveness: We have a strong and open reciprocal working relationship, and he was instrumental in helping me develop organizational trust, particularly around my role as a governor/researcher. Mr. Anderson's leadership will be integral to the success of this change initiative.

### **Implications for Further Inquiry**

In the process of my inquiry, possible areas for further inquiry presented themselves for consideration. First of all, the described research process was limited to current members of the City of Waterloo's citizen advisory committees. This approach limited the inquiry to individuals who were currently engaged in the committee program, but was unable to glean information about potential barriers to participation in the broader community. Further exploration regarding what causes a community member to take that step and submit a committee application may reveal important information for the City of Waterloo, such as the transparency of city processes, real and perceived barriers to engagement, and trust in the political process. If we accept the idea that inviting others to the table is a key facet of political leadership, it is worth inquiry as to why specific community groups (i.e., youth and multicultural groups) are choosing not to participate.

A major deliverable of this action research project is the creation and implementation of a web-based communication platform for the committees. The ability of this platform to achieve the goals of increased interconnectivity, enhanced communication, and an elevated flow of relevant and meaningful information is beyond the scope of this research, yet is worth evaluating as an independent study. Li (2010) reflected that "business leaders are terrified about the power of social technologies, but they are also intrigued and excited about the possibilities" (p. 8) and defined "open leadership" as "having the confidence and humility to give up the need to be in

control while inspiring commitment from people to accomplish goals” (p. 14). This construct lies at the heart of this research project and carries organizational implications that reach far beyond the scope of citizen committees.

### **Chapter Summary**

This inquiry was designed to purposefully glean “the history, stories, and expertise of the community” (F1) through invitation to participate in a series of community conversations about the City of Waterloo’s citizen advisory committees. Born (2008) shared that “community conversations are a deliberate form of listening to the people in a community in an effort to learn to agree, to become committed and engaged, and to create a place in which discovering the obvious is possible” (p. 20), suggesting that elegant solutions are often right in front of us, if we take the time to find them together. The recommendations contained in this chapter are not radical or earth-shattering. Rather, they are simple, sustainable, and aligned with a culture of openness, healthy relationships, and a commitment to diversity. There is an intimate relationship between each of the recommendations, as the foundational notion of relatedness and interconnectivity provides the theoretical support for the functional elements of policy and program development.

### **Coda**

Organizationally, I am not responsible for the implementation of these recommendations. My ongoing dialogue with my sponsor, Mr. Anderson, has enabled me to put forward recommendations that are feasible given current organizational budgets and existing timelines. Mr. Anderson has committed to championing the recommendations and proposed implementation schedule at the senior management table and as part of the website refresh project team (T. Anderson, personal communication, February 14, 2012). The sustainability of

these recommendations will be the dependent on the collaborative efforts of all parts of the system as: (a) Waterloo Council provides leadership in demonstrating commitment to the change process, (b) city staff share expertise and policy development abilities to create functional items, and (c) committee members come together to co-determine a shared vision of what works for them.

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**APPENDIX A: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Masters of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University, Karen Scian (the Researcher) will be conducting an action research study at the City of Waterloo to investigate how the City of Waterloo can maximize the effectiveness of its citizen advisory committees.

The Researcher’s credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Program Head, MA-Leadership program, School of Leadership Studies, at [email address].

Research Team Member Role Description:

As a volunteer Research Team Member assisting the Researcher with this project, your role may include one or more of the following:

- supporting the logistics of the data-gathering methods, including observing, assisting, or facilitating in a World Café or Focus Group;
- taking notes, transcribing, or analyzing data

In the course of these activities, you may be privy to confidential research data.

In compliance with the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Policy, under which this research project is being conducted, all personal identifiers and any other confidential information generated or accessed by the research team advisor will only be used in the performance of the functions of this project, and must not be disclosed to anyone other than persons authorized to receive it, both during the research period and beyond it.

Recorded information in all formats is covered by this agreement. Personal identifiers include participant names, contact information, personally identifying turns of phrase or comments, and any other personally identifying information. Personal information will be collected, recorded, corrected, accessed, altered, used, disclosed, retained, secured and destroyed as directed by the Researcher, under direction of the Royal Roads Academic Supervisor.

Action Research Team Members who are uncertain whether any information they may wish to share about the project they are working on is personal or confidential will verify and confirm this with the Primary Researcher, Karen Scian

Statement of Informed Consent:

I have read and understand this agreement.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print)

Signature

Date



## APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE WORLD CAFÉ

### Please join us for a World Café!

When: November 23, 2011 OR November 24, 2011 (please choose one to attend)

Where: Forbes Hall, RIM Park

When: 7:00 PM

Please RSVP by Nov. 15, 2011 to [worldcafe11@gmail.com](mailto:worldcafe11@gmail.com)



You are invited to a **World Café** to participate in a community dialogue with other City of Waterloo Citizen Advisory Committee Members, city staff, and Council members.

This World Café is part of a research project being conducted by Councillor Karen Scian as part of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Leadership program at Royal Roads University.

#### *What is a World Café?*

A World Café is a conversational process where citizens come together to discuss things that matter to them, to each other and their community. The unique café design allows people to converse with different groups of people, moving between groups allowing for the cross-pollination of ideas and discover new insights into the issues that are most relevant to them.

#### *Why are we hosting a World Café?*

The World Café at the City of Waterloo aims to discover how the City of Waterloo can optimize the effectiveness of our Citizen Advisory Committees.

This is a great opportunity to share your thoughts about your committee experiences to date and your ideas about what you see for the future.

#### **Come help answer the question: What do we want to create together?**

The World Café will take approximately 3 hours.  
All participants sign a consent form and confidentiality agreement.  
Refreshments will be provided.

**APPENDIX C: RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM: CITY OF WATERLOO**

**CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS AT A “WORLD CAFÉ”**

My name is Councillor Karen Scian, and I am conducting a research project which is part of the requirement for a Masters of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Program Head, MA-Leadership Program, School of Leadership Studies, at [email address].

This document constitutes an agreement to take part in my action research project designed to investigate the question: “How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our Citizen Advisory Committees?”

The action research project will take place on November 23/24, 2012 at 7pm. The session will be facilitated by a third party, due to my position as an elected-official at the City of Waterloo. I will be in attendance as an observer and to answer any questions participants may have.

The research will consist of a number of open or closed-ended questions to be considered with other committee members at a World Café. The time required would be approximately 3 hours. The benefits of participating in this research project include having your voice and opinion about citizen advisory committees heard. There are no perceived harms or costs to you.

Information discussed at table group conversations will be recorded in handwritten format by the table host, a third-party facilitator. Participants will sketch, make notes and doodle at their tables. The facilitators will present what was discussed at each table at the end of the World Café session. This presentation/sharing of information by the large group will be audio recorded. All sketching, notes and doodling will be collected by the researcher. The information will be summarized in anonymous format in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand.

It is impossible to guarantee anonymity due to the fact you will be participating in a group activity where others will hear your responses and ideas.

No videotaping and picture taking can be undertaken without a secondary release from the participant.

All raw documentation will be kept strictly confidential in a locked cabinet. Raw data will be archived and destroyed upon my graduation from the program.

The findings from this research project will be shared with Royal Roads University, City of Waterloo Council, and City of Waterloo staff. It may be published in a relevant professional journal, in the University Library, in the National Archives of Canada, and the Thesis Canada portal.

The research findings will be summarized as a public report, presented to Council in open chambers after the completion of the project. The research findings may be published and shared by the City of Waterloo on their website and in informational documents.

Prospective research participants are not compelled to take part in this action research project. Participants may withdraw at any time with no prejudice. If a participant chooses to withdraw mid-study, data generated by the individual within the group exercises up to that point will remain and no further data will be collected after that time from this individual. Please note, due to the collaborative nature of the World Café, it will be impossible to completely withdraw a participant's influence on the data.

In the signing of this form, the individual gives free and informed consent to participate in this research project.

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE FOCUS GROUP**

Hi all,

Happy New Year!

The data from the World Cafes has been processed and themed ... The results are truly incredible and I am very excited about the possibilities. The next step in the process involves presenting these high-level findings to a smaller focus group, designed to affirm/tweak/challenge the findings. After that, we move into action!

I am hoping that you are available to join us for a 1.5 hour focus group that will serve to "member-check" the results.

Thursday, January 12th  
7pm  
Green Room, Waterloo City Hall

Please RSVP asap.

Thanks!

Karen

**APPENDIX E: RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM: CITY OF WATERLOO**

**CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN A FOCUS GROUP**

My name is Councillor Karen Scian, and I am conducting a research project which is part of the requirement for a Masters of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, Program Head, MA-Leadership Program, School of Leadership Studies, at [email address].

This document constitutes an agreement to take part in my action research project designed to investigate the question: “How can the City of Waterloo optimize the effectiveness of our Citizen Advisory Committees?”

The action research project will take place on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at 7 pm. The session will be facilitated by a third party, due to my position as an elected-official at the City of Waterloo. I will be in attendance as an observer and to answer any questions participants may have.

The research will consist of a number of open or closed-ended questions about committee participation to be considered with other committee members in a focus group. The time required would be approximately 3 hours. The benefits of participating in this research project include having your voice and opinion about citizen advisory committees heard. There are no perceived harms or costs to you.

This presentation/sharing of information will be audio recorded and volunteer observers will scribe the proceedings. The information will be summarized in anonymous format in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand.

It is impossible to guarantee anonymity due to the fact you will be participating in a group activity where others will hear your responses and ideas.

No videotaping and picture taking can be undertaken without a secondary release from the participant.

All raw documentation will be kept strictly confidential in a locked cabinet. Raw data will be archived and destroyed upon my graduation from the program.

The findings from this research project will be shared with Royal Roads University, City of Waterloo Council, and City of Waterloo staff. It may be published in a relevant professional journal, in the University Library, in the National Archives of Canada, and the Thesis Canada portal.

The research findings will be summarized as a public report, presented to Council in open chambers after the completion of the project. The research findings may be published and shared by the City of Waterloo on their website and in informational documents.

Prospective research participants are not compelled to take part in this action research project. Participants may withdraw at any time with no prejudice. If a participant chooses to withdraw mid-study, data generated by the individual within the group exercises up to that point will remain and no further data will be collected after that time from this individual. Please note, due to the collaborative nature of the Focus Group, it will be impossible to completely withdraw a participant's influence on the data.

In the signing of this form, the individual gives free and informed consent to participate in this research project.

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F: TIPS FOR TABLE HOSTS

### 😊 Tips for Hosts 😊

**Keep it simple, folks! Being a waiter in a World Café is a *listening* task. A**

**few points to remember:**

- ✓ Try not to facilitate conversations. Simply refer participants back to the menu questions.
- ✓ There is no “right” or “wrong” direction the group can take. This is an activity in creative dialogue and exploration among members. They will sort it out!
- ✓ Watch for emerging themes and BIG ideas.
- ✓ When one round of discussion has finished, simply welcome the incoming group and time permitting, either orient them to the conversation that had just occurred, or refer them to the notes on the charts left on the tables.
- ✓ Have fun with the role! Make it a great conversation.

**APPENDIX G: WORLD CAFÉ MENUS**

The World Café menus were crafted to reflect the three research subquestions:

<b>Research sub-question</b>	<b>Café Menu</b>
What role can citizen input play in council decision making?	The Citizen Engagement Café
How can the City of Waterloo facilitate effective committee performance?	The Leader as Host Café
How do we measure effective committee performance?	The Measuring what Matters Café

**Measuring what Matters Café**

**Appetizer**  
Tell us about a time that you gained personal satisfaction from being involved in your committee...

**Entrée**  
Share an example of how you have contributed to the success of your committee...

**Dessert**  
Describe what committee success looks like from your perspective.

**Citizen Engagement Café**

**Appetizer**  
Share a story about a time that you felt your individual voice was heard...

**Entrée**  
How can we leverage the expertise available to us?

**Dessert**  
Tell us about a time that you felt your committee’s voice was heard...

**The Leader as Host Café**

**Appetizer**  
Tell us about a time that you felt appreciated...

**Entrée**  
In your experience, what are the ideal conditions for a team to shine?

**Dessert**  
How could our committees work together?



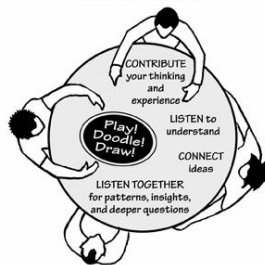
## APPENDIX H: INFORMATION PAMPHLET FOR WORLD CAFÉ PARTICIPANTS

The World Café participants were provided with a pamphlet, which included the following information regarding process and Café etiquette. The facilitator reviewed the content with all participants prior to the commencement of the Café experience.

The World Café is an “innovative, yet simple methodology for hosting conversations about questions that matter. These conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important in their life, work, or community. As a process, the World Café can evoke and make visible the collective intelligence of any group, thus increasing people’s capacity for effective action in pursuit of common aims.”

– Brown & Isaacs, 2005)

### CAFÉ ETIQUETTE FOCUS on what matters!



To start your Café experience, please choose from the following restaurants:

*The Citizen Engagement Café*

*The Leader as Host Café*

*The Measurement Café*

At each Café, you will have a chance to taste the appetizer, entrée and dessert ... take your time and enjoy the experience! You will visit each Café tonight ... you won't miss a single delicious course!

## **APPENDIX I: AFFINITY EXERCISE**

As the World Café draws to a conclusion, participants will be asked to return to their initial conversation table and debrief with the table host, generating key insights, themes, or ideas to be written on large sticky notes. The participants will actively participate in theme generation, via an affinity exercise.

### Materials:

Generated data from World Café tables.

Large wall space/white board for collection of sticky notes.

### Step One:

In groups (facilitator to guide), participants will gather their sticky notes and take them to the determined work space. Working silently, participants arrange their written suggestions into affinity groups or “like” clusters. They are allowed to move a sticky from one group to another. They may move both theirs and other individuals’ notes. This process continues until all table ideas have been brought forward.

### Step Two:

The process often creates “orphans”, ideas that seem to belong in no obvious group. Encourage all to do the best they can to incorporate these orphans, until they have organized the sticky notes into natural clusters of ideas. Allow ample time for participants to consider the data and clusters.

### Analysing the Data:

The researcher will consider the raw table data and generated clusters from each World Café and create a set of high-level themes and recommendations to present to the Focus Group for their consideration. The Advisory Committee will also be presented with a summary of the data and recommendations, in order to ensure that that are aware of the outcomes along the way.

Adapted from: [http://librarycommons.gatech.edu/about/docs/affinity\\_exercise.pdf](http://librarycommons.gatech.edu/about/docs/affinity_exercise.pdf)

## APPENDIX J: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Analysis of the World Café data resulted in a preliminary set of themes, which allowed the researcher to identify possible areas for further and deeper dialogue by the smaller Focus Group.

The preliminary themes and subsequent Focus Group questions were:

### Creating a Learning Environment

- What do you hope to gain from your experience as a committee member at the City of Waterloo?
- What do you hope to give?

### Enhancing how we communicate with each other

- How would better access to information help you perform your duties as a committee member?
- What does this look like to you?

### Leveraging the experience at the table

- Who else should be here?
- What would it take to get them here?
- What will it take to keep them here?

### Fostering healthy relationships

- What was it about the World Cafe process that you appreciated?