BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development)

BUILD, which began in 2006, is a social enterprise, non-profit contractor and training program for people facing barriers to employment.

BUILD retrofits lower-income family homes with insulation, high-efficiency toilets, and water-and-energy-saving devices. Not only does this lower utility bills and decrease greenhouse gas emissions, it positively impacts neighbourhood employment rates as local people are hired as much as possible. The impact of hiring local people with limited experience in the labour market cannot be understated. People with very little training, many of whom have not completed high school, do not have a driver’s license and may have been involved with the criminal justice system, have experienced growth and prosperity. The opportunity for local residents to experience gainful employment, further their education and receive a wide range of supports, including family support has had a positive impact on the neighbourhoods they live in.

Not only have many lives been changed, there have been many beneficial changes to homes in lower-income neighbourhoods. As of March 15, 2012 875 homes have been insulated and 3,288 water retrofits have been completed. The resulting dollars saved by this work is at least 1.1 million each year.

Some Challenges

The first type of challenge is at the individual (worker) level. People are often hired due to connections as well as skills. Many local residents do not have any experience in trades and do not know anyone in the field so have no way of entering this workforce. Many people who have been hired by BUILD had not completed high school, did not have a driver’s license, were in poor health due to lack of a healthy diet and may have criminal records. All of these issues are clearly barriers to employment. Addressed one at a time by providing tutoring services, healthy food, driver’s license training and family supports, gradually individuals achieve success in each area and demonstrate to the working world that they can hold down employment.

The second type of challenge is at the government level. BUILD provides very specific services and government tenders for contracts are often set up to accept bids for the job as a whole (e.g. overhaul an entire apartment complex), not for a specific service (e.g. putting in new toilets). BUILD had to convince Manitoba Housing that parts of large jobs could be taken on by BUILD with other service suppliers doing the rest of the job. This has benefited both the community which was previously shut out of this type of work as well as government which, by partnering with community, are getting better value for taxpayer dollars.

Thank you to Shaun Loney, Executive Director of BUILD for sharing his experiences and lessons learned. For more information about BUILD, please visit: http://www.warmupwinnipeg.ca/
Another challenge has been in working with government to make changes before something technically comes to the end of its life cycle. For example, even though a toilet may work, it is still beneficial to change it to a high-efficiency toilet which will save money and energy in the long term. This required a shift in thinking.

LESSONS LEARNED

Be prepared to respond to needs that you might not have thought about in the beginning. Loney explains that the vast majority of what is being done was not planned, but has been in response to needs. BUILD originally set out to insulate homes and ended up becoming involved with tutoring, driver training, parenting programs and provision of healthy food - things that were never considered within the scope of this enterprise. In many cases, when needs were identified, government turned down initial requests for funding. BUILD learned that if something seemed to make sense, and if they put in the time and energy to keep fighting for it, often they could convince government to assist with funding.

For the greatest true and long term impact, you must move beyond thinking about "charity" to a "shift of power." Poverty reduction is not just about money but is achieved through empowering people and promoting self-sufficiency.

Think in an entrepreneurial way and learn from other social enterprises. Loney explains that there are two kinds of government money – there is government funding (which there is never enough of) and the real money (actually doing the work for government) and this is where social enterprises have a niche. This won’t fit everyone, but in this case the model of providing a service for government and getting paid for it works.

Make sure both the public and decision makers are on side. In this case, they have quickly grown from a 500 thousand dollar a year organization to a four million dollar a year organization and “not one nickel has been over spent” says Loney. He indicates that it is important that both the public and decision makers be kept aware of things like this. By being open and honest, people in the community have seen that the motives of BUILD are good and that people are not involved for personal gain. In addition, having a completely volunteer board ensures that the only motivation is in bringing community interests to the table.

Integrity is also very important for ongoing sustainability as government (a key funder) is impacted by risk. BUILD typically does not accept payment until the work is done. It is very important to be transparent and have checks and balances so that you are accountable to funders and the community. Building trust and partnerships at both the community and government level is key.

While community involvement is important, Loney suggests restraint in "community consultation" before a true plan is in place. He has learned that if you consult the community about something that doesn’t happen, or happens in a different way than originally presented, you may be perceived as dishonest and it can be hard to regain trust.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Be transparent, build trust and partnerships.
- Learn from each other - take good things you see in other models and apply them to your situation.
- When you see something that most might perceive as negative, think about how this can be an opportunity and ACT on it.
- Believe in yourself and be prepared to fight for your beliefs.

BUILD has been successful because they believe they have the common sense and moral authority to push an issue when government is not originally supportive.

BUILD has been successful because they believe they have the common sense and moral authority to push an issue when government is not originally supportive.