

RECIPES FOR CHANGE



BRINGING
NEIGHBORHOOD
PROJECTS TO LIFE,
BLOCK BY BLOCK

Asset-based community development (ABCD)

For the uninitiated: what is asset-based community development (ABCD)?

ABCD is about going into a community and working off of what's already there—its existing assets—to help it develop. An asset could be a street, a senior center, a school, a corner store, a long-time neighbor—or a new neighbor, an empty lot, a park, a playground, a church... You name it!

How did ABCD begin?

It was developed by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, and its premise is to start and stay positive. In any type of social enterprise, we're always seeking to solve a problem: crime, illiteracy, the school-to-prison pipeline, what have you. When we go into our work focusing so much on those negatives, we can miss some of the positives. ABCD keeps leaders focused on the assets they already have.

How does ABCD relate to the types of neighborhood projects ioby leaders do?

WHO WE SPOKE TO:

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Say you want to start a community garden, but the only space you can find is an old parking lot. Think of the lot as an asset and go from there: even if it's all paved over, you can make a raised bed garden. It's still something you can use; it's an asset. If you're doing a project in a school, an asset could be the space you use to host the kids, even if it's not your dream space. Of course, the kids themselves are not the problem to be solved—they're also your assets! ABCD is all about identifying and using what you have, instead of dwelling on what's missing.

How can leaders explain the benefits of ABCD to their stakeholders who might not be familiar with it, or who are skeptical?

Remind them that what we're doing in social enterprise is inherently collaborative. It just doesn't make good long-term sense to do it any other way. Ask them to put themselves in

residents' shoes. Say, "Think about your neighborhood. What if changes started occurring there without your knowledge. How would that feel to you?" They would probably feel slighted and wouldn't be invested in the project going forward. It wouldn't be sustainable. It's just the Golden Rule.

What are some alternative approaches to ABCD? Can you explain why they're not as helpful to the success of neighborhood projects?

When a leader just comes in and dictates, we call that a God complex. It doesn't work because it's exclusionary and can even cripple communities. When I was in AmeriCorps, we talked a lot about how short-term missions don't work. Like the American church group who traveled to rural Africa to install a well in a village—but they didn't teach the villagers how to fix it. So when it broke, the villagers had to wait a year for the Americans to come back. They stayed reliant on the church instead of being empowered to lead themselves. It would have been better for the church to ask who among them would like to learn how to maintain the well. They could have been creating community wealth and employment instead of resentment and dependency.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- The Asset-Based Community Development Institute
- The Center for Transforming Communities (This Memphis organization uses ABCD very well)
- The book "When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself"
- The book "Community: The Structure of Belonging," by Peter Block

How can I use ABCD?

Before you do any project—before you even start using ABCD as a methodology—make your first step figuring out if the neighborhood actually wants to do what you have in mind.

Often, when government or other local leaders come into a neighborhood from outside and say, "We're going to do XYZ here" and don't ask people first, residents won't feel good about the change and won't help it to succeed. So before you get started with anything, make sure to ask around—on the street, in church, at school—if people like the idea. If you get positive reactions, you can start pulling in public participation.

- Hold public meetings, open houses, and focus groups
- Conduct surveys door to door and ask people who like the idea if they want to help.

Do they have any changes to suggest to the proposed plan? Would they want to help reach out to local elected officials? Could they brainstorm fundraising ideas with you?



People need to feel a stake in the process. They need to feel empowered and have a voice, or they won't stay involved. (Plus, of course, these people's skills comprise some of the assets your project will need to succeed!) Inviting this kind of leadership involvement is also the key to keeping momentum once your project is underway.