



Good Cents Core Group: Lived diversity.

Initiative: Good Cents Porirua.

Theme: Creating and sustaining momentum

There is no disputing that bringing a diverse and committed core group together to help guide Good Cents towards being more embedded in the Porirua community and to thus catalyse increased financial wellbeing throughout Porirua was a good idea. Working together over time has, however, been an evolving, emerging and unpredictable experience that highlights both the achievements and challenges of sustained momentum.

The Core Group of Good Cents emerged from a *Beyond the Cycles of Debt: What would it look like?* Forum in Porirua in April 2010 and their energy for change was obvious!

Each member brought different skills and connections and also had different aspirations and intentions in their role within the group. For some, the function of the Core Group was seen as a vehicle for them to actively contribute to making a tangible difference in the Porirua community via Good Cents, complementing and working with the Good Cents staff and the wider Porirua community. For others, the Core Group has been envisaged as holding the various contributing threads of an aspiration together, with no firm pathway in place. In this spirit, what the group focuses on is always emerging and it may not necessarily 'do the doing':

"...for me it was new territory which means there doesn't have to be clear outcomes for the group. The thing that is needed is a clear destination. We may not yet know how to get there..."

In practice, both of these perspectives are important and finding a workable balance between them has proved tricky. For example, it took the better part of a year after the 2010 forum to get to

agreed themes and areas of focus for the group and some members became frustrated by what they perceived was too much of a “talkfest”, while staff at times felt burdened by what felt like a lot of extra work.

On reflection, those close to Good Cents, including members of the Core Group, now realise that the group needed more guidance in these early stages. Holding space for creative conversations is valued but so too is directing those energies and, for some group members, the amorphous nature of conversation during group meetings, rather than capitalising on the energies and skills within the group, may have instead stifled them to a degree. As well, and in hindsight, group members brought different levels of understanding about community-led development and these led to different assumptions about the focus and role of the group. Even so, over this time a business plan was developed and this is recognised as a significant outcome in and of itself.

The purpose of this plan <http://www.wesleyca.org.nz/good-cents-porirua-business-plan-released/> is to communicate “who Good Cents is, what we want to achieve, and how we think we can achieve it.” Reflecting the journey so far, it is recognised as an evolving plan that establishes a strategic vision and set of action plans, while also understanding that both the horizons and ways of reaching them may well “change and shift”.

The business plan helped provide a framework for the further thinking and development of Good Cents and accountability to supporters, funders and the community. It also revealed the many “small wins” that had already occurred and helped those involved in the Core Group to see the cumulative value in these. For example, a fortuitous encounter with Deputy Prime Minister Bill English when he visited the local WINZ office and sat in on a Good Cents course plus a connection with new National Party MP Alfred Ngaro through Inspiring Communities, culminated in Good Cents presenting at a parliamentary forum in May 2012 to an engaged audience of MPs.

Other small wins are closer to home. Individual stories of strength and change have been printed in the local newspaper and conversations of collaboration are happening with Pacific Island church Ministers through the Pacific Island Ministers Forum. These are achievements in their own right and, alongside the things that haven’t quite worked yet, they are also the incremental evolutionary changes that collectively illustrate the beginnings of fundamental change when it comes to financial wellbeing in Porirua.

Tim Harford (2011) talks about such incremental changes as “...the evolutionary mix of small steps and occasional wild gambles” as “the best possible way to search for solutions” in the context of adaptation. For him, such changes are critical because they are the products of “ongoing ‘works for now’ solutions to a complex and ever-changing” (p16) situations, such as that within which Good Cents works. Yet this can be a supremely uncomfortable situation because it is largely the result of trial and error: we don’t know if a tactic will work, but when it does rather than simply replicate it, we must grow it and adapt from it. This means that the process and journey are just as critical as any small changes. How things are done, is just as important as what is achieved and how these achievements are linked to produce whatever happens next. The challenge is in the process as much as achieving any outcomes (although outcomes are important too!).

For those in the Core Group, the journey (both how and what) is still unfolding. There is no map, but there are signposts. Being able to nurture and sustain the energy required, bringing those already engaged along too and growing the movement with others along the way means BOTH thinking and acting differently at an individual level, an organisational level and as a community.

Like the initial period of many cutting edge innovations, the 'results' do not yet exceed the efforts put in which means that the diversity and commitment of Core Group is all the more important. The art and creativity in weaving different skills, connections and aspirations is no easy or quick fix yet it is these processes that underpin the relevance and impact of any outcomes. Working to the strengths and skills of those who become engaged and seeking out those with skills and ideas to bridge gaps then allowing energy to mobilise in the areas those involved are most interested in allows people to shine. Done in a collaborative, leaderful way, it can also grow the capacity of others, who can then be supported to work to their own strengths and in their own areas of interest, including bridging gaps.

This can, however, feel quite disparate and disconnected at the same time as it is energising so the 'weaving' is as important as the pursuit of particular actions. As well, working in this way may mean individuals come and go as their energies and areas of interest fluctuate, and as Porirua's journey of community wealth shifts and change. Embedding and catalysing change requires a balance of continuity and change that builds on the existing strengths and character of Porirua, in all its diversity and taking a flexible strengths based approach allows people to work within their own capacity in ways that are most relevant and useful at a particular point in time.

More short term small wins will build on those already happening, growing strengths and bridging gaps together in ways that work and adapt for this community. And for the Core Group as well.

Intent: The Core Group helps to guide Good Cents towards being more embedded in the Porirua community and to thus catalyse increased financial wellbeing throughout Porirua.

Key learnings:

- Commitment to a particular initiative or cause from diverse perspectives means that understandings, aspirations and contributions can also be quite diverse, and difficult to align and/or feel like traction is being made. Having a clear common goal is critical and communicating how diverse perspectives can contribute to that goal helps bring alignment, understandings and traction.
- Working to strengths and where energy is naturally mobilising tends to yield small wins quickest. Sharing these wins grows the energy into new directions that also yield relatively quick small wins. Together, and incrementally, these become locally generated, relevant changes. Overall change will take time.
- Working in this way can feel disparate and disconnected which, coupled with a shifting and changing horizon, can be difficult to see significant changes from. Ensuring the various activities are linked, interwoven and even interdependent on some level helps to support the collective nature of community change. Some continuity and stability amidst the various efforts is important.
- Not everything has to be done by staff – the Core Group exists because individuals want to contribute! Let them!!

Key outcomes:

- The Core Group brings a range of interested and skilled people together for a common purpose that extends the capacity of Good Cents and offers opportunities to take Good Cents into new directions.
- The co-created business plan now helps focus and guide the next steps of Good Cents actions and development.
- Development of creative processes of working together are exposing members to different ways of doing things and forging new levels of respect for and understanding of one another, as well as for themselves as a collective.

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Reference: Harford, T, (2011). *Adapt: Why success always starts with failure*. Little, Brown. London.

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