Practices for Community Innovation

A 5-year study of how Bush Prize winners contribute to community problem-solving

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What is the Bush Prize study?

The Bush Prize study is an ongoing qualitative and quantitative research study focused on how Bush Prize winners help solve community problems. The Bush Foundation annually awards the Bush Prize to honor and support innovative organizations with a history of reaching breakthrough solutions to problems faced by their communities. Winners are selected for their pattern of creating effective solutions to problems by using inclusive, collaborative, and resourceful community engagement processes and having leadership that fosters a culture of innovation.

Bush Prize winners receive a package of recognition, including a flexible grant of 25 percent of the organization's last fiscal year expenses up to $500,000. The Bush Prize is part of the Bush Foundation's Community Innovation program, designed to inspire and support community problem solving. Each year, the Bush Foundation selects winners from the region it funds: Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography.

In our previous research, we learned about how Bush Prize winners approach solving tough challenges within their communities by sharing ownership, fostering creativity, learning from failure, and committing to community. We identified these four characteristics through an analysis of key themes that arose during interviews with Bush Prize winners.

Our previous research found that Bush Prize winners approach community problem-solving by:

1. **Sharing ownership**: listening, building relationships, and recognizing expertise
2. **Fostering creativity**: welcoming ideas and being proactive about vetting and pursuing them
3. **Learning from failure**: reframing risk, emphasizing learning in instances of failure, and continuing despite setbacks
4. **Committing to community**: developing a shared community vision and representing the community

But it did not provide much information about how these shared characteristics translate into tangible organizational practices.

While our prior research highlighted the shared characteristics of winners' work, it did not offer much insight about tangible organizational practices that help people think outside the box when solving problems. We designed the most recent phase of the Bush Prize study to learn about these four characteristics in practice.

Our new phase of research sought to answer the following questions:

Which organizational practices position Bush Prize winners to pursue community problem-solving? How are these practices used and why are they effective?

Practices for community innovation

The most recent phase of the Bush Prize study identified six common practices that position winners to readily contribute to community problem-solving. These practices are:

1. Sharing organizational power
2. Being present in community
3. Building knowledge and support
4. Co-creating with community
5. Promoting diverse viewpoints
6. Debriefing with community

Please see Figure A for a graphic display of how these practices are related to each other; this section of the report describes these practices and their interconnections.

A.   Practices for community innovation – overview diagram
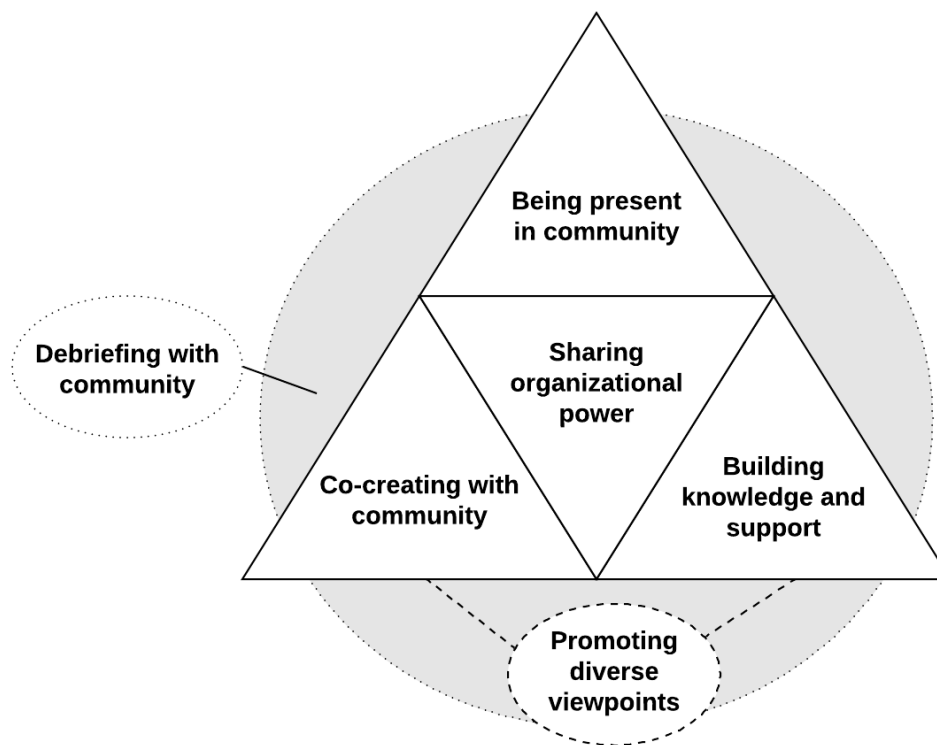
Practice 1. Sharing organizational power

This practice refers to Bush Prize winners sharing organizational power with community members. It relies on deliberately setting up organizational processes and structures so that community members can help direct an organization's work and access certain kinds of power through the organization. For example, one winner's financial

structure is designed so that business owners in their community can access opportunities to grow their wealth through the organization. Another winner provided the necessary liability insurance so that a group of community members could open a youth center. These organizational structures and processes are typically fairly "invisible" to people outside the organization, often taking the form of business processes, staffing models, or knowledge production processes. Overall, 31 Bush Prize winners of the total 38 winners from 2013-2017 mentioned sharing organizational power with community as an important practice for community problem-solving.

Our research suggests that the tangible display of these invisible processes and structures is seen primarily in the practices of "Being present in community," "Building knowledge and support," and "Co-creating with community"—which are detailed in subsequent sections of this report. That is why we represented these four practices in the triangular configuration seen in Figure A. In interviews with leaders of Bush Prize–winning organizations, leaders illustrate the practice of sharing organizational power:

> *We tend not to own anything alone. Almost everything we do is in direct partnership with others. Nothing is really 'our program.' And that's the mess of it. Supervising staff is messy. We have an organizational tree that depicts people reporting to me or the assistant director. Then in each of the program areas, they also report to the coalition they are working with. Part of that coalition's role is to provide feedback on that person's work. That's the biggest part of the staff review, and if there are problems they let us know. This work is about building and supporting coalitions. Our staff can please us, but that doesn't matter—we're accountable to others.*
> *– Leader interview*

> *[The community] doesn't have the money or staff time but they have ideas and energy. We are the backbone for them. We provide structure and support. For example, we work with parents and neighbors to help teens who live in five predominantly low-income neighborhoods. Because of that work, a mobile home is now a youth space and we provide insurance for that.*
> *– Leader interview*

> *There are not many businesses with a social mission around here. Our social enterprise program has become a social enterprise business incubator. We start off as 50% co-owner with businesses in our incubator program, then we offer for them to buy us out down to 25%. Our model is that we own 25% of these different profitable businesses that are mission-driven. But then we are not involved in running them. We're a 25% minority owner, with 75% owned by the workers and the business is managed by the workers.*
> *– Leader interview*

Practice 2. Being present in community

This practice refers to winners being present in their communities by attending community events, participating on community boards, volunteering regularly with community organizations, and more. A distinguishing characteristic of this practice is that these efforts are hosted and led by others; winners do not host or lead in this practice. For example, winners do not approach a community event as a way for them to learn about what community members think of their work or an idea they have; rather, they participate in

their community simply as an active and engaged community member. They show up, share their thoughts, and try to identify how they can contribute to goals that are shared. This practice provides winners with a deep sense of knowing their community,

Deep knowledge about the community and its context positions Prize winners to effectively help solve community problems. Many winners encouraged and expected their employees to participate in their community in this way, and some winners provided time and resources for their employees to do so. Overall, 25 Bush Prize winners of the total 38 winners from 2013-2017 mentioned being present in community as an important practice for community problem-solving. The quotes below illustrate the practice of being present in community:

> *We stress to staff that they shouldn't be sitting at their desks. We say that they need to get out into community. As an organization, we're still going to do that even if we're not getting specifically paid for it. We build the budget to make that possible.*
> *— Leader interview*

> *I'm a board member of the downtown neighborhood association because I live in this neighborhood, and the issues of our downtown neighbors come to the table all the time there.* *— Leader interview*

> *Last year we provided $50 to staff to invest in a community project of their choice, whether it's a baseball league or a local daycare or library. It was that kind of extra investment in staff and their community passions, to show our support of our communities.* *— Leader interview*

> *[Executive director of Bush Prize winner] is all over the place. She's out there and working with people. She was a past chair of the Chamber of Commerce; that's a rare thing for someone who is a leader of a nonprofit organization. She's been very involved in all fronts of our community. She's been a recognizable face, a community ambassador. Her ability to be more than just the face of her organization—that's important.* *— Stakeholder interview*

Practice 3. Building knowledge and support

This practice refers to Bush Prize winners gathering input, feedback, or support in the early stages of responding to a community problem, typically before they have a clear idea of how they might contribute to solving the problem. The main difference between this practice and the preceding practice ("Being present with community") is that, in this practice, winners are hosting the events and directing the conversations. Sometimes the practice of building knowledge and support is formal, such as hosting a community forum, conducting focus groups, or gathering elected officials to talk about a community issue. Other times, this practice is less formal, such as having "open hours" for community members to talk about whatever is important to them. Overall, 36 Bush Prize winners of the total 38 winners from 2013-2017 mentioned building knowledge and support as an important practice for community problem-solving.

Winners made a distinction between building knowledge and support with community members who hold formal positions of power (such as elected officials or nonprofit leaders) and doing so with community members who are not in formal positions of power. Community members in formal positions of power were typically called upon when winners needed access to resources or support to move forward with a project. Winners noted the importance of being focused, explicit, and clear when engaging positional leaders—and being clear about what they want these leaders to do.

On the other hand, winners convened community members who do not hold formal leadership positions when they wanted to understand an issue more deeply or when they wanted nuanced and diverse feedback about an idea for a program or service. Many winners noted the importance of seeking input from community members in engaging, ongoing, and convenient ways, such as through informal conversations in public places or large-scale community sessions. Leaders who demonstrate the practice of building knowledge and support share the following thoughts:

> *We have a community engagement calendar throughout the year. We make sure that the community engagement calendar creates diverse ways of engaging with the organization. You have to diversify your engagement. You shouldn't just have a town hall meeting four times a year. Instead of that, let's have two town hall meetings, two open houses, two community design gatherings. That calendar is a fundamental way for us to create many different engagement strategies. We do 10 open houses every year. That's a practice. And it has a practical function of connecting people to our work and the community constantly coming here also breaks down any invisible walls that are around the organization. For a number of years, in our lobby we had computers set up for public use. That prompted people who didn't have computers to start interacting with us—they had a fundamental reason to come here. We didn't manage it as a program. We purposefully kept it informal. Our goal was just to be more accessible as an organization.*
> *– Leader interview*

> *The challenge in involving positional leaders is different. With positional leaders, it is about making sure that you use their time well, that you don't keep them sitting around and not making progress. The problem with positional leaders is that they're very busy and everyone wants them. [Bush Prize winner] is very clear about what the commitment is. They tell them the amount of time it will take, the meeting schedule, the expectations for participating in the group. I know pretty clearly what is expected of me. The agenda is ready; it makes good use of people's time.*
> *– Stakeholder interview*

> *We have community meetings twice a year, in December and in June. All the businesses get together and all the organizations send a representative and everyone meets for a couple of hours and each one tells what's happening in their organization or their business and how we can partner together in projects to assist them. Maybe a construction company can help the school get a new sidewalk put in at no cost or maybe the grocery store will help to supply water and snacks for a volunteer group that is doing a clean-up campaign. We meet to talk about different projects that different groups are doing.*
> *– Leader interview*

Our research suggests that the practice of building knowledge and support is connected to the practice of being present in community. This suggests that when staff are engaged in being present in community, they are often contemplating how they can infuse what they hear into their organization's work and proactively thinking about how their organization could support the ideas and goals of community members. In other words, the practice of being present in community informs the practice of building knowledge and support.

Practice 4. Co-creating with community

This practice refers to Bush Prize winners guiding a specific project or initiative from conception to implementation with community members actively and meaningfully engaging in each step of that process. This practice usually occurs after winners have built knowledge and support with community members—and so have a clear idea of how they might help solve a community problem. Winners noted various approaches for co-creating with community, such as organizing a community board, providing structures and processes for constituents to direct a project, asking community members to serve on working committees, and generally engaging community members throughout the life cycle of a program or project. Some winners also talked about the importance of being open to changing their approach or plan based on what their community wants. Overall, 26 Bush Prize winners of the total 38 winners from 2013-2017 identified co-creating with community as an important practice for community problem-solving. Below are some quotes from leaders that illustrate the practice of co-creating with community:

> *Task committees are comprised of community members. [Bush Prize winner] helps task committees ... but they let the community take the lead. The meetings are never chaired by [Bush Prize winner]. They're facilitated by them but it's always community members who are in charge of the meetings.*
> *– Stakeholder interview*

> *There was a group of [our community members] in the western part of the state. We discussed with them an idea that we had for them—to form a cooperative. They were not interested in that. We changed our direction, listened to what they said. We concluded that their perspective was better than ours. ... They wanted to open a market. I wasn't sure it was possible, but we made the decision to support them in their plan—to not impose our plan. That is very unusual for a business developer. Most developers decide on a plan and then they go and find someone to implement their plan, rather than listening to what a community group says.*
> *– Leader interview*

> *We have a community board. We realize we're stewards of a community treasure chest, and our job is to have the greatest impact possible with these dollars. Recognizing that we have a fundamental obligation to leave the community better off—to be responsible, to be accountable, to be engaged in community—starts with a community board.*
> *– Leader interview*

Our research suggests that the practice of co-creating with community is strongly related to the practice of sharing organizational power. This connection stems from the way that winners explained how they work to us in interviews. By describing in detail how they

worked with community members to co-create programming or services, winners keyed us in to organizational processes and structures that allow them to co-create with community in this way. While these two practices are clearly connected, there is an important qualitative distinction between them—"Co-creating with community" refers to directly working with community members to create and implement a program or service whereas "Sharing organizational power" refers to designing and navigating the organizational processes and structures that support this level of collaboration with community members.

Practice 5. Promoting diverse viewpoints

This practice refers to Bush Prize winners promoting diverse viewpoints from a structural or process-oriented standpoint, such as conducting meetings in ways that promote open conversation, representing many parts of their community in their staff or board, or identifying important stakeholders and ensuring that they are meaningfully included in meetings and decisions. An important part of this practice is including and promoting the viewpoints of community members who are often not engaged regarding community issues that affect them. The impetus for this practice, according to numerous winners, is a commitment to collective knowledge and power, with one leader saying, "We can't come up with the ideas without the right people in the room. … It can't be us alone. It has to be collaborative." In particular, many winners talked about the importance of creating comfortable environments and situations that signal to all community members that their viewpoints are valued and welcomed. Overall, 28 Bush Prize winners of the total 38 winners from 2013-2017 mentioned promoting diverse viewpoints as an important practice for community problem-solving.

Our research suggests that this practice is most important when winners are co-creating with community or building knowledge and support—because this is often when a project's direction is clarified or when important decisions are made regarding a project's goals and how those goals will be accomplished. This is why Figure A depicts the practice of promoting diverse viewpoints as connected to these two practices ("Co-creating with community" and "Building knowledge and support"). These quotes from winners we interviewed demonstrate how they practice promoting diverse viewpoints:

> *"[Bush Prize winner] doesn't shy away from groups who are harder to access and require a different approach. When you meet with students, you don't go about it as you would for working professionals. You signal that their voice matters in how you set up that meeting and recruit for that meeting. You also need to work hard to level the playing field between positional leaders and families, especially moms who never went to college. They have been great advocates for leveling that playing field: when to schedule meetings, hiring language interpreters, having a significant number of students at the table so they feel that they have equal say in the conversation. [Bush Prize winner] inherently knows how to make these processes comfortable for the people we need to hear from."* — Stakeholder interview

> *"The committee that [Bush Prize winner] formed included everyone that was willing to come to the table, from law enforcement to executive directors to people who were just interested in the process. Then they went outside of that large committee that they formed to actually meet with the neighborhood where the project was going to be built. They talked with neighbors. The staff went door-to-door and talked with people about the project."*　　　*– Stakeholder interview*

Practice 6. Debriefing with community

Underlying these five practices is the practice of debriefing with community. Some winners were formal with their debriefing practices (such as scheduling debriefs regularly throughout a project) whereas other winners were less formal and did shorter, episodic debriefs as appropriate during the life cycle of a project (such as after an important meeting). Regardless of the level of formality, all winners approached debriefs with a constructive and non-punitive mindset, with one winner making a distinction between "real failures" (such as someone being worse-off because of a winner's efforts) and "expected failures"—that is, failures that are reasonable considering the complex problems that winners are trying to address (such as taking longer than expected to build community support for a project). An important part of this practice is involving community members in the debriefing process. Overall, 34 Bush Prize winners of the total 38 winners from 2013-2017 mentioned debriefing with community as an important practice for community problem-solving.

Our research suggests that the practice of debriefing with community is particularly distinct from the five other practices of community innovation—and that winners use this practice to inform all aspects of their work. This is why Figure A represents it as an "underlying" practice. The following insights illustrate the practice of debriefing with community:

> *"One week, a project did not go as planned. We had a check-in on Monday; we always have check-ins on Mondays. We talked about what went well, what didn't go well, and how can we change? And then the fourth question is what capacity do we need to change and do it better? We do those debriefs for every single project. We openly share what is working and what is not working. It is a mixture of formal and informal. Instead of being fearful of what we didn't accomplish, it creates an environment of being honest with what was not accomplished and getting support for that, too."*　　　*– Leader interview*

> *"We do iterative reflection [throughout a project], so there's daily check-ins, weekly check-ins, and then a debrief of the whole project. There is never any shame if something didn't go well."*　　　*– Leader interview*

How did we construct this understanding of the practices for community innovation?

Our understanding of the practices for community innovation is based on a relational analysis of interviews with the 38 Bush Prize winners from 2013-2017. Building on our previous research, we asked organization leaders and stakeholders about how Bush Prize winners share ownership, foster creativity, learn from failure, and commit to community—with a particular focus on how leadership, policies, and structures promote these characteristics. In total, we conducted 103 interviews with leaders and stakeholders; interviews typically lasted between 1-2 hours.

To make sense of the wide variety of responses from Bush Prize winners, we developed a taxonomy of codes to categorize how winners responded to questions about sharing ownership, fostering creativity, learning from failure, and committing to community. For each of these four characteristics, we first developed a distinct set of codes to organize winners' responses. While our previous research indicated that these four characteristics are not mutually exclusive, treating the characteristics as if they were mutually exclusive during this first phase of coding allowed the research team to more deeply understand these four characteristics and begin to see connections between them. Put another way, this analysis approach allowed us to simultaneously critique and build on the theoretical basis of our research.

After the first phase of coding, we analyzed to what degree the codes "overlap" with each other. We did this by identifying every time a winner connected multiple concepts in their responses. We intentionally looked for when overlap occurred between code sets—for example, between "Sharing ownership" codes and "Fostering creativity" codes—precisely because previous research indicated that these characteristics are not mutually exclusive. We refer to these instances of codes "overlapping" as co-occurrences.

We constructed the practices for community innovation from codes that co-occurred with each other at least three times, so each practice can be thought of as a web of co-occurring codes. In reality, this means that winners, in response to our interview questions, connected a multitude of ideas about how they share ownership, foster creativity, learn from failure, and commit to community. And so this relational analysis approach is particularly congruent with how winners responded to our interview questions. Winners did not talk about these practices as discrete phenomena; they talked about them as complexly interrelated.

In addition to allowing us to construct the six practices of community innovation, the co-occurrences provided us with useful insight regarding how the practices are related to each other. Figure B provides a graphic representation of the number of winners that mentioned each practice as important, the number of codes that comprise each practice, and the number of co-occurrences between practices. The blue boxes indicate the number of

winners that noted each practice as important and the number of codes that comprise each practice. The orange circles represent the number of co-occurrences between practices.

B. Practices for community innovation – detailed diagram
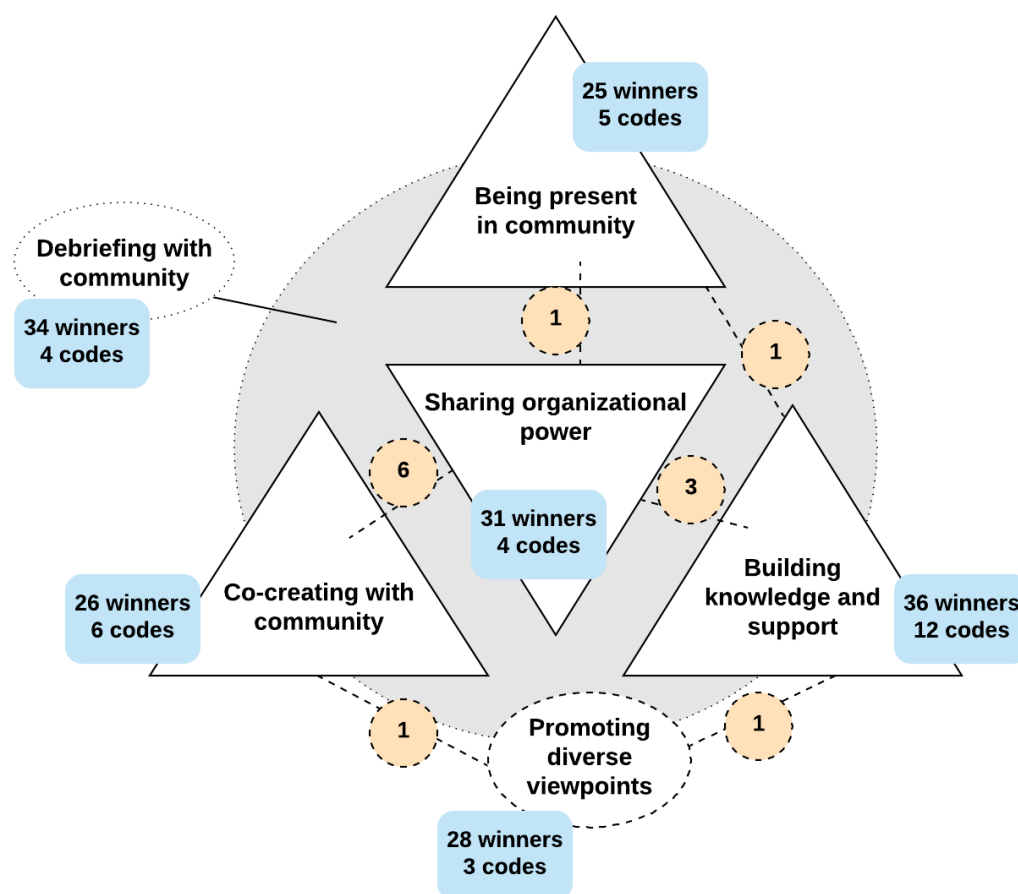
The three practices in the outer triangles ("Being present in community," "Building knowledge and support," and "Co-creating with community") shared substantive co-occurrences with the practice in the inner triangle ("Sharing organizational power"). This is why we chose to represent these four practices in this triangular configuration. Similarly, the practice on the bottom of the diagram ("Promoting diverse viewpoints") shared substantive co-occurrences with the two practices in the bottom triangles ("Co-creating with community" and "Building knowledge and support"). Our analysis also showed that "Co-creating with community" is particularly strongly connected to "Sharing organizational power" with six co-occurrences. We describe this connection in more detail on page 7. It should also be noted that while "Being present with community" shared one co-occurrence with "Building knowledge and support," deeper qualitative analysis indicated that both of these practices were more substantively connected to the middle practice ("Sharing organizational power") than to each other. Regardless, this co-occurrence points to a connection between these two practices, a finding that we describe on page 6. The remaining practice ("Debriefing with community") did not share any co-occurrences with the other

practices; this suggests that this practice is particularly distinct from the other practices. Based on this observation from our analysis and on how Bush Prize winners talked about this practice in interviews, we chose to represent it as an underlying practice because it informs winners' overall work.

Please see Figures 1-6 for the codes that comprise each practice. For each code, we also note from which characteristic it was derived—that is, sharing ownership, fostering creativity, learning from failure, or committing to community.

1. Sharing organizational power codes

Codes that comprise this practice	# of winners
Only pursue ideas that come from community *(Committing to community)*	22
Support community members to take the lead on solving a community problem *(Sharing ownership)*	20
Give community members autonomy to direct an organization's efforts *(Fostering creativity)*	9
Give staff power and support to create or change their work based on community input *(Sharing ownership)*	8

2. Being present in community codes

Codes that comprise this practice	# of winners
Attend meetings or is otherwise involved with different aspects of community *(Fostering creativity)*	16
Attend community meetings, is present in community *(Sharing ownership)*	14
Participate in community events, meetings, networks, etc. *(Committing to community)*	11
Have one-on-one conversations with community members *(Sharing ownership)*	10
Provide time or resources for staff to invest and participate in community *(Committing to community)*	10

3. Building knowledge and support codes

Codes that comprise this practice	# of winners
Host regular community meetings to hear from and talk to constituents, have regular communication with constituents *(Sharing ownership)*	22
Host regular meetings with community leaders *(Sharing ownership)*	16
Facilitate new relationships among community members, leaders via community meetings/Continue relationships between community members, leaders via community meetings *(Sharing ownership)*	16
Regularly seek feedback from community to improve work or address community issues *(Fostering creativity)*	14
Convene about a specific purpose/Facilitate problem-solving processes in community *(Fostering creativity)*	14
Have an "open-door" policy for community members, partners, and staff *(Sharing ownership)*	12
Share expertise and resources with community members *(Sharing ownership)*	10
Exhibit effective facilitation techniques *(Fostering creativity)*	10
Ground people in the vision for community or organization at community meetings *(Fostering creativity)*	10
Host retreats, lunches, or other ways of building relationships internally *(Sharing ownership)*	5
Share information with community members *(Fostering creativity)*	7
Regularly share lessons learned with staff, partners, and community *(Learning from failure)*	4

4. Co-creating with community codes

Codes that comprise this practice	# of winners
Co-develop or co-plan programming or services with community members *(Sharing ownership)*	15
Have a community board or a decision-making structure that requires community support or engagement *(Committing to community)*	14
Ensure that community members have equal say in decision-making *(Sharing ownership)*	11
Open to changing direction or goals based on what others say *(Sharing ownership)*	9
Flexible and gracious with the "final form" of an effort or activity based on community input *(Reframing failure)*	9
Support community members to set the agenda, determine focus for meetings, and/or facilitate meetings related to an idea or project *(Sharing ownership)*	8

5.   Promoting diverse viewpoints codes

Code that comprise this practice	# of winners
Represent of all parts of community on staff or board/Gather input from all parts of community *(Committing to community)*	18
Have a diverse staff – backgrounds, experiences, skills/Has diverse connections in community *(Fostering creativity)*	17
Ensure diverse opinions are shared/Ensures that appropriate people are in attendance at important meetings *(Sharing ownership)*	11

6.   Debriefing with community codes

Codes the comprise this practice	# of winners
Hold debriefs or conversations with staff, partners, or community about what went well and what didn't go well *(Learning from failure)*	20
Have an optimistic view of failure or setbacks *(Learning from failure)*	15
Explore different viewpoints or perspectives when debriefing *(Fostering creativity)*	13
Practice self-reflection or self-critique *(Fostering creativity)*	13

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

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The Bush Foundation invests in great ideas and the people who power them. The Bush Foundation encourages individuals and organizations to think bigger and think differently about what is possible in communities across Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geographic area.

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