Democracy unleashed: bringing agility to citizen engagement

Gerry Kirk
Gerry Kirk Consulting
Sault Ste. Marie, ON, CAN
gerry@gerrykirk.net

Abstract—Empowered individuals. Creative, participatory decision making. Connectedness and care for each other. These words apply equally to an Agile organization as to a healthy community. What might happen if we applied Agile values and methods to transform communities? The author shares his experiences from 2009-2011 to nurture citizen engagement in his home town and elsewhere, from a team kick start session for an elected council to citizen budget games to prioritize the budget. He covers tools and methods, trials and triumphs, how Agile applied to community differs from organization. This is bleeding edge stuff, an area of opportunity for Agile consultants to do work that transforms the world.

Keywords-agile, community engagement, community, civic, civic engagement, government, democracy, citizen

I. INTRODUCTION

I’ve worked as an Agile coach / Scrum master for about four years, and over time I’ve come to see Agile as a way of being which transcends the software world from which Agile originated. My core passion is community building, to bring people together to discover their true selves and together create the world they truly want to live in. For the past two years I’ve been taking what I’ve learned as an Agile coach/consultant and applying it to the work that citizens and governments do to create vibrant community. In this report I share four different experiments over the past two years to nurture citizen engagement.

II. AGILE IN FOUR CONTEXTS

A. ChangeCamp

Last June, I had the awesome privilege of organizing and facilitating an open space event for the first time. Called ChangeCamp¹, it was held in my home town of Sault Ste. Marie. ChangeCamp Sault² is both the fulfillment and start of a personal dream. I attended the first ChangeCamp at Toronto in January of 2009, then my first experience of open space. Over 200 participants actively engaged in answering the question: how can we re-imagine how government and citizens engage each other in an age of participation? It was an exciting day, full of shared ideas, new connections and belief that we can act to shape our collective future. I knew then that I wanted to create that same experience in my own city, which would be something entirely new. In open space, the people who come set the agenda and engage in open participatory dialogue. At the time the idea felt risky – how would people respond?

Figure 1. Session on getting citizens engaged in election

The event was held at Sault College in the Native Student Centre, a circular room with plenty of glass windows to let in the sun, a perfect gathering spot. We were pleased to have over 50 people register for the event, given a busy weekend of events and the start of summer holidays. The group had a healthy mix of old and young, men and women, newcomers and long-time residents. To my surprise, I knew hardly anyone there. Due to other events a number of people left early or came late, which made facilitating a little more challenging.

We chose to keep the day shorter by having 3 rounds of sessions, including a ‘getting to action’ time at the end of the day, and a brief lunch. My experience organizing Soo PodCamp a one day unconference on social media is that people run out of energy mid-way through the afternoon. This turned out to be a good choice. A number of people had left before the end, and those that stayed still had energy for the closing circle.

1 See http://www.changecamp.ca
2 See http://sault.changecamp.ca
Setting the stage during the opening circle felt like the most important part of facilitating the day. I shared some of the history that led up to ChangeCamp, including Ignite Sault and Soo Podcamp, two smaller event ‘experiments’ that were tried to test the waters. I asked people to get up and sit beside two people they didn’t know and, without instructions, people started introducing themselves – a healthy sign. The rules of open space: 1/n, bumblebee and butterfly were covered, and the grid explained. People were challenged to make the conversations they came to have happen.

Participants rose to the challenge by creating a diverse agenda for the day. Topics included:

- How to improve health care?
- How to use brown fields?
- How to engage community in election process?
- How do we recreate a sense of community?

1) What was the result?

“As a member of City Council, I found the opportunity to hear from and dialogue with so many diverse individuals, a unique experience. I liked the unconference format very much and found the style free flowing and open which contributed to excellent discussion.”

“The principles and practice of inclusiveness, seeking common ground and permitting the participants to set and control the agenda are important to me and ChangeCamp demonstrated that. Age, gender, political affiliations and other factors did not interfere with goal setting, [brainstorming] and problem solving. Bravo!”

Mark Kuznicki, founder of ChangeCamp likes to say that there are two outcomes to open space: the connections made and the content created. Both are valuable. Through being connected, people felt encouraged, with greater hope for our community’s future. One newcomer remarked that she now felt a part of the community.

My great epiphany is that these connections are the seeds of change. No matter our cause, our ambitions, our hopes and our passions, to bring about change, we must also invest in building community, for a connected community is at the root of all the change we seek. I’ve spent time on many causes and issues over the years, often feeling like little progress is being made, or that bringing about change is hard, at times grueling work. ChangeCamp showed me a different path. I’m having more fun and feeling more successful by nurturing community, through which change will occur.

B. Election Café

Soon after ChangeCamp came the municipal election. What better opportunity for citizens and political leaders to engage in conversations about what matters to the community? I set about creating an alternative to the familiar candidates’ debates which generate in my view more heat than substance.

The design was simple: everyone participates in a series of short, intimate conversations with candidates and other citizens, building on each other's ideas for what kind of community they want and what it will take to get there. Based on the world café format, I coined it ‘civic speed dating’.

![Figure 2. Vibrant Sault community tree created by participants playing Prune the Product Tree online Innovation Game®](http://innovationgames.com/prune-the-product-tree/)

Electoral candidates and citizens from across the city met online to share and prioritize ideas to create a vibrant community. They played an Innovation Game® called Prune the Product Tree³ which is also used by companies like Cisco for strategic planning and product development. I’ve used Innovation Games in my work with teams during retrospectives.

And now, communities. The premise behind these events is that given the chance, people will make a meaningful contribution. Given a creative, collaborative environment to work in, we as a community will get better results. Music programs for youth. Inclusive community. Turn Northern Breweries into multi-purpose facility. An Air Quality Sault committee. These ideas and more were discussed during the virtual election café.

How the game worked, as explained by Derek Wade, one of the professionally trained Innovation Games® facilitators:

---


“Thank you and welcome to the game!
My name is Derek and I’ll be your facilitator.
We’re going to be playing a collaborative game to help
the city of Sault Ste. Marie.
In the main window, you see a tree, and some apples to
the upper left.
This tree represents the growth of a vibrant, healthy
The apples represent ideas and projects that will help
support that growth.
Apples near the trunk (bottom) of the tree provide
quick benefit, and can be grown easily.
Apples near the branches (top) of the tree provide
longer-term benefit, but might not be so easy to grow.
Your job is to place apples on the tree where you think
they will provide the most benefit.
You’ll find that the tree has some initial apples to help
get you started.
You can move these around to where you like them.
You can even delete them by moving them off the
game board.
There are a limited number of apples that this tree can
support. So you will need to collaborate with your fellow
players.”

Youth were well represented, to no surprise. 14 year
old Matt Kot dove in head first, sharing ideas and
encouraging everyone else to do the same:

Matt Kot: I am making another apple!
Matt Kot: The College! The youth go to college and
darn right they have 90% employment rate!
Matt Kot: we should be proud of the college, Algoma
U
Matt Kot: Okay then, this tree is pretty much the future
of the Sault.
Matt Kot: The apples represent certain factors
Matt Kot: factors that will help us propel to greatness.
Matt Kot: Greatness this city can use!

So what was the result? For me, the biggest outcome
was observing the engaged, meaningful dialogue
happening between people across our city. This small
experiment gave a taste of what is possible if we were to
scale these activities to involve thousands of citizens, a
sentiment shared by a couple of the candidates:

Kelly (Ward 3 Candidate): the only thing is i would
like to see more people participate….more people=more
ideas=better more improved tree
Debbie (Mayoral Candidate): I agree Kelly
Debbie: However once more people find out about
these opportunities I believe it will grow.

C. Budget Prioritization Game

The start of a new year means budget time once again.
Councilors have dozens, maybe hundreds of choices to
make, and the trade-offs aren’t often clear. It’s a daunting
task to make those decisions, especially for new
councilors. They want to better understand the priorities of
citizens regarding key budget initiatives, but how in a time
and cost-effective manner, in a way that people want to
participate?

Engagement with a twist: the city of San José brought
in community leaders on January 29, 2011 to try their hand
at making budget decisions. They played budget
prioritization games, a variation of an Innovation Game®
called Buy a Feature.

1) Game design

Diverse groups of 7-9 citizens sat together, each
possessing play money to purchase items. They were
presented 18 hypothetical funding proposals and 11
hypothetical reduction proposals which they could work
together to “fund” or “reduce”. The key is that no one has
even money to buy the items they care most about –
they have to persuade others to pool their money together,
and that’s the magic of the game. Each table group could
use reductions to free up money to spend, provided they
reached unanimous consent to cut something, like the
building of a new police station. To help citizens, subject
matter experts from the city were available to answer
questions.

I was there, at the invitation of Luke Hohmann, CEO
of Innovation Games, to work as a volunteer observer and
learn from the experience, in the hopes of holding a similar
event in the Sault. For corporations, this type of event isn’t
so unique, but for government, it’s pioneering stuff. My
task was to capture both quantitative data, like who spent
money on what, and qualitative data, like why an item was
purchased, how the discussions went, what items were
easy for the group not to purchase. After 90 minutes I had
30 index cards worth of data from our table.
So what was the result?

2) City perspectives

They learned that citizens generally supported proposals related to public safety and quality of life, and programs that citizens couldn’t do on their own:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I. TOP THREE PROPOSALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>By # Tables Funding</strong> (total tables = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Code Enforcement (10; 83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pavement Maintenance (10; 83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Graffiti (9; 75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE II. BOTTOM THREE PROPOSALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>By # Tables Funding</strong> (total tables = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday Parade (1; 8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossing Guards (1; 8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas in the Park (2; 17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HNVF CBOs (2; 17%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

City staffers also learned that about half of the tables decided to save money by not spending their remaining funds on other proposals, which have to be funded in full to be selected. The final report also revealed which districts supported which proposals, by the % of their total allocation of funds for each proposal.

3) Citizen perspectives

Participants told me the event went well beyond their expectations, based on their experience from previous years. One participant remarked “I expected it to be boring like last year but the game was extremely informative, very entertaining, really engaged me and everyone at my table.” One facilitator noted “They were unanimous in saying to us that, of all the planning sessions they had been in, that this day was the best.”

4) Facilitator perspectives

The team considered the games successful in engaging the players with their knowledge, passion and respect for each other. For me as an observer, the passion people have about their city was evident, the options they had to choose from mattered. They struggled between choices, like funding a children’s health initiative versus a fund for community-based organizations. One facilitator noted that “In explaining the why, others were convinced to join and bid. [People were] very respectful and listened carefully. Passion of reasons why were compelling to others and very moving.”

A true measure of an event like this is that besides better understanding citizen priorities, a community grows closer together. This event delivered on that. They heard each other’s stories and dreams. They shared their diverse knowledge to make better decisions, collectively, and they had a fun time getting to know each other.

D. Council Team Kick Start Session

Successful Agile teams focus on how they work together. I’ve witnessed the transforming power of teams who take time to understand each other’s needs and identify their gifts; who decide who they want to become as a team, and how they’ll work to get there.

Elected councils have the same need. They act as a board of directors, and together have to decide what to focus on and make decisions with major implications. A council that does not get along is not able to fulfill its role, which is what many felt happened with the previous council of Sault Ste. Marie.

The newly elected mayor wants to avoid this, so I proposed a one day council start up session, to build the conditions for success early. Specifically the goals were to:

- Build confidence working together
- Set the stage for council members to share work and become interdependent
- Relate to each other on a personal level, as individuals
- Rally around a common purpose and set of priorities

The entire day was designed to be fun, to inspire creativity. Each table had snack treats, squishy balls to play with, and a box filled with arts supplies. During activities, music played to keep energy levels up.
1) Step 1: Who are we as individuals?

I introduced councilors to the Journey Lines exercise I learned from Agile coach Lyssa Adkins. Each councilor drew a flip of their work careers, highlighting the skills, knowledge and experiences they felt were significant in their lives. The journey lines look like a line graph, each moment plotted on an xy axis based on chronological time and how positive/negative it was. Once prepared, each councilor presented their chart and told their story. Those listening were to jot on post-it notes the qualities, skills, knowledge and experiences they felt were valuable to the council.

This exercise was the highlight of the day. The combination of sharing and affirmation of each individual created a deep bonding. People hugged each other, laughed; even a few tears were shed. Positive energy filled the room.

2) Step 2: Who are we as a council?

Next, councilors worked on a vision for who they’d like to be as a council. I used a variation of Portia Tung’s Team Manifesto exercise here. Councilors brainstormed individually what the word ‘team’ means to them. I introduced silent work here, to get as many ideas out as possible in a short amount of time. That said, having politicians working silently is no easy task. They then took turns reading out their team attributes, worked together to group post-its by theme and name them. 7 themes emerged so, I introduced dot voting as a quick means to gain consensus on the values that matter most, a tool they could use in future meetings as well.

When it came to build a team poster of their values, the group struggled. Different people had different ideas as to what the poster should contain, what it should look like. At first, there were people working on 3 separate posters in different locations. After some prodding, they managed to find a way to put the different ideas together. It was a useful exercise in trying to work collaboratively, which at first did not come naturally.

3) Step 3: What are our priorities?

Having connected on an individual and group level, attention shifted to what they want to do together. I introduced Product Box, an Innovation Game. The goal of them playing Product Box was to get them to start thinking about what their shared priorities might be for the city of Sault Ste. Marie in a fun, relaxed way, in preparation for a prioritization exercise afterwards.

Each team of 3-4 councilors and mayor had to imagine they were selling the city of Sault Ste. Marie. They had to literally design a product box that they would want to buy. The box should have the key features, benefits, ingredients, etc. of the kind of city they feel are most important.

The group enjoyed the exercise, having lots of fun building their boxes using stickers, yarn, glitter glue and whatever else they found in their craft supplies box. There was some friendly competition happening as well, not surprising given their competitive spirits.

I didn't feel like the group identified many items to take into the prioritization exercise. The end products seemed to be missing key selling points, were somewhat general, so this felt like a missed opportunity. It might

---


7 See http://innovationgames.com/product-box/
have helped to encourage them to think about what isn't in
the product today that they want, or something that is there
that needs improvement or more of. Perhaps examples
would have helped. The value of the game I observed was
about collaborating together, coming up with a shared
product design.

The hardest part of the day was trying to define
Council’s priorities for 2011. Setting priorities is
something new for Sault councils. I was concerned that
there were different interpretations of what a priority is, so
we spent some time trying to come up with a shared
definition, a list of criteria to evaluate candidate priorities.

I then invited each councilor to write their two top
priorities on index cards. They then played a game of
20/20 Vision 8 to rank them, or at least they attempted to.
My fears were correct. The priorities were disjointed,
some small, some large, some felt more like tasks or out of
scope. This bogged down the game, and ultimately
stopped it. Frustrations appeared, so we debriefed what
had happened and made a plan to revisit in future.

With energies lowered from the prioritization exercise,
we moved to the closing circle, ending on a positive note,
with people sharing what they enjoyed about the day, the
group and what they will take away.

4) What was the result?

Three of the four goals were achieved. The attending
Council members left with an increased comfort level in
working together, in approaching each other to work on
issues. The high resonance from proclaiming each other's
gifts will serve them well when working through difficult
decisions. The process of creating their shared values
poster, now signed and displayed in Council chambers is a
visible reminder of the kind of Council they want to
become.

The mayor did not get her list of priorities. In
hindsight, it would have been better to review the priority
items before hand so they could refine their priority
definition to a workable one. Even then, I wonder if the
councilors were truly ready. Two of the veteran councilors
felt it was too early for new councilors to know what the
priorities ought to be. I observed how challenging it is for
a large group of high achievers in a political environment
to reach consensus. Agile facilitation methods could help
create the space for creativity and listening to occur.

III. HOW AGILE ENHANCES THE CIVIC PROCESS

These are ways I observed Agile can make a difference
in the civic process.

A. Creates space for innovation and creativity

The system in which people interact in directly
influences the results produced. Open space, world café,
and Innovation Games® are examples of tools that create
an environment where new ideas can take root, where
meaningful connections between citizens and government
can build momentum to carry actions forward.

B. Allows diverse voices to be heard and participate

The highly charged world of politics with competing
voices on sensitive issues often generates more heat than
substance. Skilled facilitation and event design can create
a safe space for diversity of thought.

C. Scales engagement

Open space, world café and Innovation Game® events
scale in-person engagement from a select few to the many.
Imagine town hall events where instead of one person
speaking in a microphone there are dozens of
conversations happening at once. Online Innovation
Games® can be played by thousands, even millions of
participants.

D. Focus on what's important

Governments have a daunting challenge to decide what
to prioritize amongst many competing needs. Games like
Buy A Feature provide both qualitative and quantitative
data governments can use to make informed decisions that
the public are more likely to rally behind, having been
engaged deeply in the process.

E. Fosters collaboration

Elected councils need to work together while also
representing the people who elected them. Finding that
balance in a political environment is hard. Introducing
tools like silent brainstorming, dot voting encourages
consensus decision making. Time spent understanding the
gifts teams have and who they want to be together
provides a foundation for future success.

IV. SIMPLE IDEAS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

You may be wondering how you can work in your own
community to bring about change, drawing from your
Agile experiences. My respected colleague Lyssa Adkins
likes to ask “What is the simplest step we can take towards
change?” That's where I started, with small experiments
leading to larger ones, using each one to learn and adapt,
to build confidence in taking another step.

Here are some ideas for you, the reader to consider in
your desire to be a change agent:

• Pick a group you are comfortable with, where you
already involved, or have a relationship with
someone in the group. Consider your child's

8 See http://innovationgames.com/2020-vision/
classroom, a favorite non-profit, church group, or a board you are a member of. You want to try in a safe environment, where it is ok to learn from experiments.

- Address a need they have. Transform boring meetings. Help with a strategic planning session. Enable a volunteer group to prioritize their work and learn how best to work together.
- Reach out for help. Talk to your peers and others in the community for support. Meaningful, purposeful work will attract others.

Every attempt I've made, big or small has been rewarding. Not all had great results, but in the end were worth doing because I learned from the experience, and people enjoyed a new way of engaging each other.

V. CONCLUSION

Agile values and principles are applicable in many environments. It is not restricted to software development. The work Agile coaches do to transform organizations and teams applies to governments and communities.

The examples given I believe are just the start, an appetizer for what is possible in how citizens and government can engage each other in ways that deliver more value, that honor diversity and open participation. All of us are citizens; we can begin to make change happen in our own neighborhoods, schools and organizations. Citizen engagement, stronger community – that’s worth investing in.