

Nigel Atkin

# Building Communities *Strategically*

In conversation with Coast Salish Elder Dr. Samuel Sam, OC, last year, I was told that “people can not respect what they do not understand.”

From a strategic perspective, this teaching can be helpful to all of us; full comprehension of the concept can lead to new or increased dialogue and better communication. That simple yet profound statement has implications for our communities.

I have heard many times from individuals—civil servants, politicians, women, aboriginal people, youth, environmentalists, Canadians, newer Canadians, even allied professionals—that “they” (whoever they may be) don’t understand us. And, if there is no understanding of “who” we are and “what” we do and “why” we do it, there might be that resulting lack of respect.

For relationship management to be successful, strategic thinking in communication is a primary skill needed to create mutual understanding. This, in turn, can lead to respect.

Allied professionals, especially lawyers, rely on strategic relationships to serve their communities. Noted for their analytical,

conceptual, and strategic thinking, some lawyers excel at synthesizing large volumes of information into brief, relevant, and precise documents for clients, community, and the law.

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## Critical Thinking

Many contend critical thinking inherent to strategy can always be enhanced and that it is a learned function important to all professions. Critical thinking is the basis of quality decision-making. It is also the most vital part of governance and citizenry. In terms of strategic relationships within our communities, critical thinking might be key to prosperity and harmony.

According to the Foundation for Critical Thinking in California, critical thinking can be seen as having two components:

- a set of information and belief-generating and processing skills, and
- the habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide behavior.

They believe, as I do, that the quality

of everything we do is determined by the quality of our thinking.

The foundation’s Website ([www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)) quotes William G. Sumner, who wrote in *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, in 1906, that:

(Critical thinking is)...the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances.

Education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty... A teacher of any subject who insists on accuracy and a rational control of all processes and methods, and who holds everything open to unlimited verification and revision, is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils. Men educated in it cannot be stamped... They are



slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence... They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.

There is an old saying that implores us to “question everything, even this.” In my own teachings, I urge students to study vested interests, consequences, and empathy, but this is just the beginning of critical thinking, which also looks at aspects of a question not only from clarity and accuracy but also from its significance, relevance, its breadth and depth, logic, fairness, and precision.

### **Into Strategy**

Critical thinking is a key element of strategy, which can also be a very expansive area of study. Academics and practised business people recognize that strategy is about thinking and the processes used to create vision and develop possible futures. Strategy, as defined by many academics and business practitioners, can be an art or a science and it gives maximum support to adopted policies. While much has been written about strategy, it boils down to the thinking, the logic behind actions at all levels of an organization.

It is no secret that our communities are changing, evolving to the impacts of globalization, technology, and demographics. Our children are different than we were. Some of us are getting old for the first time. As our positions shift chronologically, so do our relationships in community. As well, our assumptions about issues such as global warming change as we witness weather phenomena or the destruction of our forests through infestation or fire.

First Nations, the Métis, and other aboriginal people are re-emerging as cultural and economic forces. Immigration, too, brings countless new people into the hopeful pluralism of our Canadian communities.

New economic partnerships and models of governance between and

among the private, public, and non-profit sectors are developing. More people are starting to understand the logical benefits of community foundations. And, as contracts of agreement, performance, and accountability are being rewritten, words like *transparency* and *ethics* are becoming more used in relationship-building.

Our quality of decision-making is crucial to strategy and it is with strategy that we plan our futures. As our communities grow, the realities of all the interests in our community need to be deeply understood and respected.

Developing both understanding and respect takes time and effort. An example of this comes to mind in how first-year law students at the University of Victoria have, for the past couple of years, participated in a four-day cultural camp on the Tsartlip First Nation, to learn more about aboriginal people.

By being exposed to Coast Salish protocol, traditional law, songs, governance, customs, teachings, sports, humour, and more, students get direct access to Elders, their community, teachings, and ways; the students are developing a deepening respect as part of their education in law.

Strategically building communities requires this kind of initiative in all of the diversity we nurture. None of our communities are remaining static. Change can be managed strategically, but it takes critical thinking and that, in turn, takes understanding and most of all, respect. ▲

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