

A healthy community is good for everyone's bottom line



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A partnership with the Dixon Hall Mill Centre provides carpentry skills training to Regent Park youth, who constructed 180 planter boxes and 285 balcony side tables as homeowner gifts and other decorative elements featured around the neighbourhood.

As business leaders we have a lot of responsibility. We are, of course, responsible to our partners, shareholders and team members for achieving a bottom line that not only allows us to stay in business, but to grow and prosper.

Although it may not be as obvious, we are also responsible to the communities in which we do business and to the people who live and work in those communities. A healthy community is good for everyone's bottom line.

We have the wherewithal to mobilize substantial resources to help bring down the barriers that hold so many back. The big challenges are staring us all in the face — hunger, inadequate housing, physical and mental health issues, and the language and cultural literacy barriers faced by new Canadians.

Although these are huge mountains to climb, there are concrete, practical ways to climb them and a significant role for the private sector to play. The business community has the money, and can write the cheques. But we have so much more to bring to the table, including “creativity and connectivity,” the secret sauce of 21st century corporate social responsibility.

We have the power to effect change, engaging with local community partners to develop and support literacy and apprenticeship programs, create employment opportunities, and build new pathways to affordable rental and ownership housing.

We can also leverage our purchasing power to enormous benefit through social enterprise procurement. Whether it's our catering contracts or the art we buy to display on our office walls, we have the opportunity to spend our dollars in ways that maximize social impact.

Although we shouldn't sit back and wait for government to change the world, we can and should embrace partnership models with governments at all levels. Some examples in the City of Toronto are the TIFF Bell Lightbox; and development of the Pan Am Athletes' Village, with a long-term legacy including affordable rental and ownership homes, student housing and a YMCA.

The revitalization projects being spearheaded by Toronto Community Housing in Regent Park, Lawrence Heights and Alexandra Park, are demonstrating that public/private partnerships can change both the face and foundation of social housing.

Although still early in the process, it is clear from the work at Regent Park — a housing complex formerly known to the city's residents for gangs and drugs — that magic is possible when public, private and local community interests are aligned, and when the private sector jumps in with both feet, bringing a good measure of creativity and connectivity to the partnership table.

Rogers Communications, for example, partnered with Focus Youth Media Arts in Regent Park to create a radio and television station, with Rogers team members actively engaged in mentoring programs. As a result, the youth living here are learning journalism and broadcast skills, a healthy alternative to guns, gangs and violence.

Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment is bringing everything in their toolbox — their brand, their teams, and their convening and fundraising power to partner with the City of Toronto and TCH in creating the Regent Park Athletic Grounds.

And from the start, RBC has been training and hiring local residents, playing a significant role in a robust employment program facilitated by Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS).

Other commercial partners, including Sobeys, Tim Hortons and a host of construction trades and social service agencies have embraced local employment initiatives, and as a direct result of the revitalization a total of 768 local residents hired.

The Daniels Corporation has also been involved in several community-building projects in Regent Park, including a partnership with the Dixon Hall Mill Centre to provide carpentry skills training to local youth, who constructed 180 planter boxes and 285 balcony side tables as homeowner gifts and other decorative elements featured around the neighbourhood.

There are many lessons to learn about engagement philanthropy from the Regent Park experience. Here are just four:

Engage your networks Clients, suppliers and industry colleagues represent a wealth of potential impact. Get on the phone, use your connections and get people involved.

Engage your team Every company has a wealth of talent and expertise. Harnessing that power in community engagement will be an investment that keeps on giving, both in the community and within your company.

Engage your creativity Problem solving is at the heart of every successful business. Use that skill to find new solutions to old problems.

Listen and learn Throw away pre-conceived notions and conventional wisdom. Listen carefully to the people whose work and programs you want to support. The right solutions come from the ground, not from the top down.

Every one of us — individuals and business leaders — has the power to unleash creativity and connectivity to build health, vitality and social justice into the fabric of our communities.

Mitchell Cohen is President of The Daniels Corporation, the homebuilder spearheading the Regent Park Revitalization in partnership with Toronto Community Housing.