Partnering with communities to improve health care is a core value of family medicine. How can new generations develop the wisdom and humility to facilitate a match between a community’s needs and a consultant’s ideas? In the 90-minute seminar “The Dynamics of Developing New Community Programs,” the painting “Breezing Up” by Winslow Homer can stimulate and organize learners’ approaches to community program development.

Description of “Breezing Up”

Homer’s classic 1873 oil on canvas “Breezing Up” can be viewed by searching the www.nga.gov Web site of the National Gallery of Art, which owns the painting and also sells reproductions from its gallery shop.

As Bear observes, Homer depicts a man and three small boys in a small wooden sailboat. The soft blue sky and puffy white clouds take up two thirds of the canvas, leaving the bottom third for the water and horizon. The day is sunny, the air and water are alive, wind fills the sails, and the boat drives hard through an exciting, brisk, and choppy sea. The long shadows cast by the setting sun suggest that they are heading home after a successful fishing venture. The oldest of the boys, at the high end of the stern, looks comfortable with and proud of his responsibility to steer the boat. The other two boys rest by the bow where water washes over as the craft bounces through choppy seas. The older of these two stretches out across the deck while the other sits upright on the deck with his feet resting inside the boat. The man’s expression has suggested to some that he is taking a temporary break from other matters on his mind. There is a sense of mutual effort being exerted for everyone’s common good and delight.

Inspiring Personal Leadership

Our class looks at “Breezing Up,” and I ask, “What features would make for a good voyage?” They might say “good weather,” “a team that shares the work,” or “someone to look out for the sharks,” and so on. Complimenting their ideas, I introduce the concept of CAPTAIN as a shared leadership role. We discuss how it relates to preparing for both a literal voyage and community-oriented change.

A responsible captain is:

C: Concerned. The captain has great concern for the crew. A captain is vigilant, anticipates weather conditions, other crafts, and the length of the journey. The captain regularly wonders: what are the possible risks, and how can we best deal with them?
A: Adventurous. A captain enjoys adventure. Perhaps captains are dissatisfied with the status quo, and their restless spirit propels them to explore new possibilities. The captain anticipates risks but when they come unexpectedly, finds ways to enjoy the challenge and excitement.

P: Provides. The captain provides the right equipment, food, water, and proper sails. Maintaining a “taut” ship focuses on the safety and well-being of the crew and the successful completion of the journey.

T: Trains. A captain trains others to sail by generously sharing information, asking questions, and providing feedback. A captain understands that success depends on everyone being informed and competent.

A: Assigns. The captain assigns key roles. Once information has been shared and training has begun, members of the crew begin to take over responsibility. The captain gets out of the crew’s way and turns the tiller over.

I: Inspires. A captain inspires by sharing an exciting vision of what lies ahead. More importantly, the captain asks the members of the crew where they would like to sail to and works hard to honor their aspirations.

N: Notices. The captain notices what the crew is doing, listens to their feedback and concerns, and celebrates their contributions and successes.

Assessing the “Fit” Between a Community’s Needs and the Proposed Solutions

I then ask the class to imagine that the captain has a dream of starting a sailing school for children. The captain is on land now—unfamiliar terrain—and looking to match with a community that shares this dream. We discuss the VOYAGE concept to assess the fit between community needs and suggested program solutions. At times, I’ll share my own successes and failures.

V: Values. How congruent are the values of the community and the proposed program? Is a sailing school too radical an idea? Or, is this a community that would like to be on the cutting edge of such a novel idea? For example, I wanted to provide a seven-session “asthma club” for children at an elementary school. I proposed this in a phone conversation to a supervisor of school nurses, who agreed. Such a program was in accordance with her values. Great. But at the face-to-face meeting, one of my colleagues asserted that the school should include an ambitious research component. This was a major values mismatch. The supervisor wanted our efforts exclusively devoted to service. We were unceremoniously dismissed. This level of research was just not on this school’s value agenda, and we had not been sensitive to that. But, we learned. We modified the plan, approached another school, and enjoyed success in establishing the program.

O: Obligation. Does the community feel an obligation to implement such a program? As health care providers, we felt a responsibility to do something about children’s asthma. A school’s first responsibility, however, is to educate children. Whether the children have asthma may actually be less important to them in this context. Success came when we discussed how asthma caused missed school days and inhibited learning.

Y: Yield. What yield does the community expect to receive in return for its effort? Community organizations ask themselves: is this idea worth it? We were willing to facilitate the asthma club ourselves. By not asking the school to use staff, we eliminated the financial burden and increased the overall yield.

A: Ability. How much ability, eg, time, resources, person power, and supplies can the community orga-
nization commit? We initially proposed after-school meetings for the club. This was rejected. Why? The administration did not have the ability to coordinate the transportation home for the children. But the teachers solved the problem. They proposed that the asthma club be offered as a science enrichment class during the last period of the school day. Transportation home would not be a problem.

G: Governance. What internal governance and politics might encourage or discourage this new program? We went to another school and met a building principal with a reputation for innovation. This principal felt that a school asthma club could be a source of pride as it was responsive to a real community need.

E: Enemies. Are there individuals in the community or in the consultant’s organization who are not supportive? These are the sharks in the water. Certain individuals may feel threatened by a person presenting an innovative, responsive idea. The skilled captain recognizes such dynamics, looks to understand resistance, and finds ways to collaborate.

Closing Suggestions

Showing “Breezing Up” as you discuss the elements of CAPTAIN or VOYAGE sparks energy and insight. In future classes, I plan on augmenting “Breezing Up” with video clips from movies such as “The Perfect Storm.” I am enthused about catalyzing learners to plan voyages that help people live better and longer.

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REFERENCE