

BCCFA 2025 Conference May 28, 2025

Plenary Session: Practical Engagement Tools for Community Forests

Session description: Join us for an energetic, hands-on workshop focused on boosting participation, strengthening decision-making, and fostering meaningful connections in the context of local land planning. In this interactive session, you'll get on your feet and experiment with practical, easy-to-learn tools that spark dialogue and support collaboration. By experiencing these approaches first-hand, you'll see how to bring transparency and relationship-building to the forefront of any conversation, meeting, or gathering.

Speakers

- James Whitehead, Special Project Manager, Mitigating Wildfire Initiative, SFU Centre for Dialogue
- Dr. Robin Freeman, Mitigating Wildfire Initiative, SFU Centre for Dialogue

Moderator: Garnet Mierau

Notes compiled by: Britta Barteski

Main Topics Discussed

- Community engagement strategies and principles
- Tools of dialogue for difficult conversations
- Importance of centering values and creating shared understanding
- Exercises and demonstrations for real-world application
- Preparation and facilitation planning for meaningful participation

Key Takeaways

- Effective engagement leads to better relationships, data, and outcomes on the ground
- Engagement should be intentional, inclusive, and values-driven
- Listening actively and preparing thoughtfully is critical to trust and collaboration
- Tools like the "Tiny Tools" resource can help navigate complex conversations
- Recognizing the harm caused by poor facilitation and black-and-white thinking is key to building shared understanding

“Tiny Tools” Postcard Advice

- Connect before diving into content
- Ask a powerful, juicy question that ignites curiosity
- Structure the conversation so every voice is heard
- Welcome opposing views
- Use a transparent decision – making process
- Turn conflict into a learning moment
- Harvest and share the insights

Important Details/Quotes

- “Keeping the community at the centre, and asking: why are we gathering?”
- “Dialogue practitioners: lean on the experts (your peers).”
- The Pineapple on Pizza exercise helped illustrate polarization and the possibility of shared values.
- “What does bad community engagement feel like?” – anxiety, silence, lack of presence, facilitator blame.

Connections to Other Sessions

- Builds on the trust-building themes in “Sticky Situations.”
- Aligns with “The Robson-North Thompson Coalition” session around community-centered communication and local collaboration.

Action Items

- Explore and utilize the “Tiny Tools” resource in upcoming engagements.
- Develop internal checklist for preparing gatherings: who should be there, purpose, structure of participation.
- Share lessons from the pineapple-on-pizza exercise with board/team for practice in recognizing shared values.
- Identify a local dialogue practitioner or peer for future engagement support.

Questions & Follow-Ups

- How do we assess the success of community engagement beyond attendance?
- Are there tools to help evaluate community sentiment before and after engagement events?
- How can we better prepare facilitators to handle tense or polarized situations?

Resources Mentioned

- Liberating Structures - <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/> . This website offers an alternative way to approach and design how people work together. It provides a [menu](#) of thirty-three Liberating Structures to replace or complement conventional practices.
- Sun and Moon engagement exercise to represent the balance and connection between two individuals.
- “Venn diagram” exercise that demonstrates the relationships between people(e.g. pineapple on pizza)
- Dialogue supports (leaning on peers, expert facilitators)

Thoughts/Observations

- The session offered very tangible, relatable examples of how to engage and prepare.
- The emphasis on values was powerful and helped connect abstract engagement theory to real-world practice.
- These tools will be useful across many aspects of community forestry and collaboration.