

Exploring Unintended Consequences in Community Development

By Bruce Schwartz, Mary Ann G. Hennen and Michael Darger



The 21st century poses complex challenges - and opportunities - in our communities. Community development or policy-making changes are usually enacted with the best intentions in mind, but experience tells us that unintended results or consequences of decisions can also occur – negative or positive! For example, reducing the speed limit from 50 mph to 30 mph on an open highway near a school intersection may actually increase the number of traffic accidents. If a budget cut forces restructuring, previously complacent workers may develop more creative solutions to issues they could not previously tackle. Understanding the possible positive and negative consequences when making a decision can help guide decision-makers in formulating better choices.

In 2008, the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) invited University of Minnesota Extension’s Center for Community Vitality staff to join them in learning a new decision-enhancing approach that helps civic leaders think strategically in these complex times. Created by futurist Joel Barker through 30 years of research and experimentation, the Implications Wheel® (a visual process of ‘cascade thinking’ taught by

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the Institute for Strategic Exploration) helps organizations explore the possible unintended consequences of ideas. His strategic exploration method has been used mainly by private industry to scout the second and third order implications of new products, processes, and acquisitions.

Joel Barker notes that strategic exploration should be conducted before forming a strategic plan. To describe this process, Barker uses an analogy of an American wagon train. The wagon master’s role was to make the final decision about their route, but he sent out scouts in many directions to inform him about the geography ahead. Today, we see the wagon master as the ultimate decision maker of an organization and the scouts are the diverse people who help explore the possible consequences of the decision. Barker notes that “cascade thinking” goes beyond brainstorming. This process recruits participants from differing status levels to look further into the future to explore the broad range of positive and negative implications of major decisions. It allows participants to be creative, yet safe, with their input since the criteria are that the implications might happen, even if only a one-in-a-million

chance. Decision-makers can then view more of the possibilities in front of them and make strategic plans that lead them to the most desired outcome.

A driving motivation for AMC, Extension, and others invited to learn this process was to see whether this resource could be used by county and other local government leaders to investigate the positive and negative consequences of potential public policy changes. One policy explored at an early working session was concerning how and where short-term offenders should be housed. Analyzing possible changes helped county commissioners and their lobbyists understand the potential impacts of decisions on prisoners, families, county finances, prison officials, sheriffs’ deputies, court employees, elected officials, and others. After delving into these implications, AMC was more clearly able to determine their preferred direction and the steps necessary for guiding the policy to a desired outcome.

Building on what they learned with AMC, the U of M Extension Center for Community Vitality led an I-Wheel® Strategic Exploration process as an

Questions (Scale of 1 = Not at all; 6 = To a great extent)	Average choice	Average of facilitators
How practical is this process to enhance decision-making?	4.34	5.17
How comfortable were you in sharing your ideas?	5.03	4.00
How applicable is the I-Wheel→ process to informing decisions in the public sector?	4.41	5.33

Table 1. Survey Results.

opportunity to use and assess how this process could be applied in the field of community development. In forming a possible response to an RFP, they explored the implications of relocating a regional center for community development to Minnesota. They invited University faculty, Extension educators, EDA board members, non-profit directors, and others to participate in a combination of three smaller sessions (3-10 participants each) and a large group session (40 participants).

A successful I-Wheel® process requires trained facilitators and many informed participants. A cadre of educators was trained to facilitate the small group discussion and use the software to capture the implications generated. All participants viewed a short Joel Barker video and were given an overview of the process and steps for the first 45 minutes of the large session. Certified Wheel Trainers who completed three days of instruction with the Institute for Strategic Exploration conducted this training.

After completing the I-Wheel® process, surveys were distributed to collect feedback from the participants and facilitators as well as the leadership team that received the implications that were explored. See Table 1.

It appears that the people who receive more I-Wheel® training are more confident in the process. One might hypothesize that the facilitators' deeper understanding of each step in the process explained this differential. Participants in the November 2008 sessions only generated second- and third-order implications that built upon the first order implications that were determined by a leadership team.

The evaluation surveys did indicate that some of the facilitators did not want their comments to interfere with others, so they did not share as many ideas. This may indicate that the facilitators need to be encouraged to offer neither more

nor less ideas than other participants. The majority of participants felt it was a safe environment to share ideas. Seventy percent answered with a rating of 5 or 6. Here is a typical comment "The facilitator in my group did a great job of pulling everyone's ideas out and pushing us along to get it done."

Comments about the technique's practicality in enhancing decision-making were as follows:

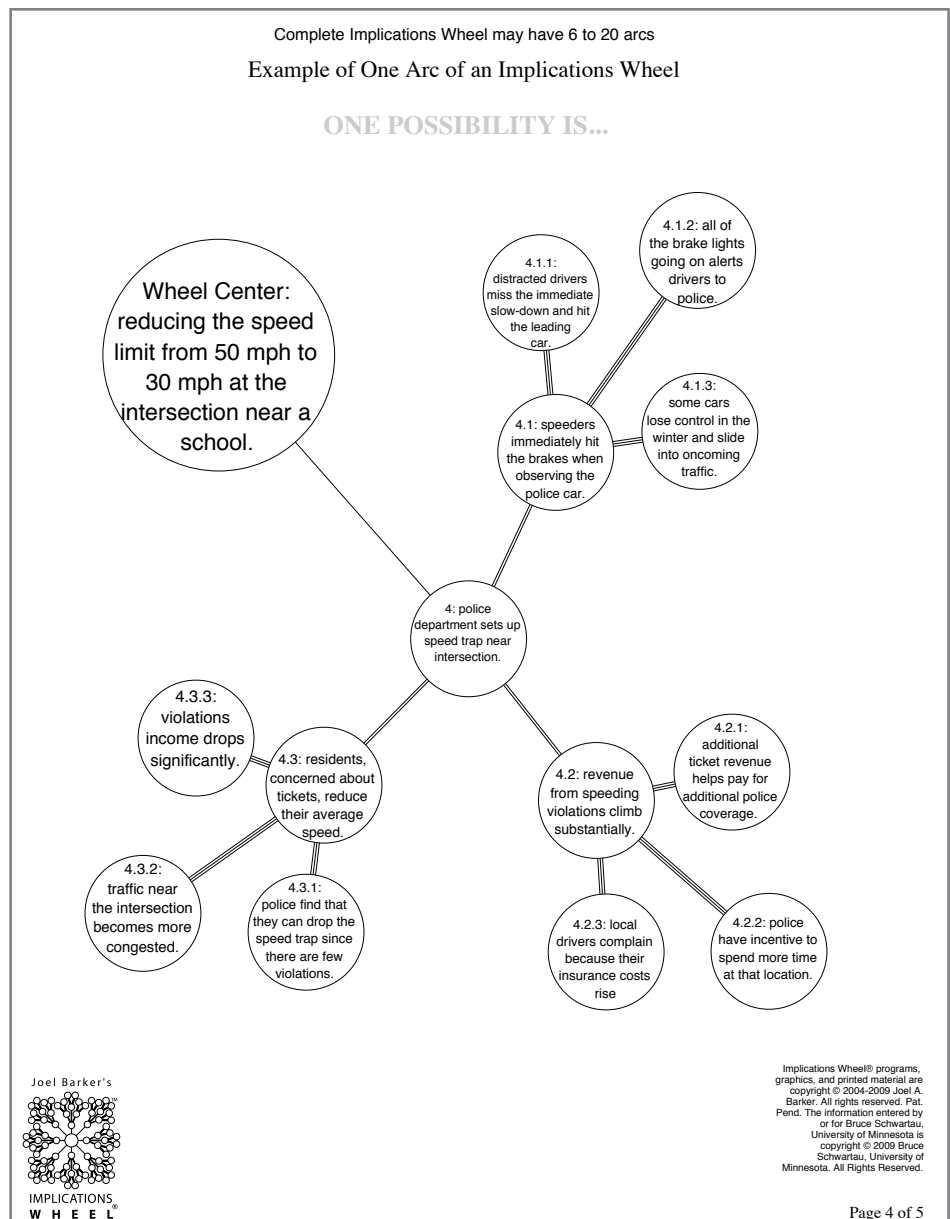
- "... the more complex and important

the decision, the more practical the I-Wheel process."

- "... it's not so practical day-to-day. However, for a big decision, it seems quite "practical" in that it takes in diverse perspectives and teases out 'what ifs' in a quick and seemingly thorough form."

Comments comparing I-Wheel are represented by the following:

- "Is much better because it seems more driven."



- “This engages everyone at a deeper level – they are actively providing input the full time.”

Conclusion

The Implications Wheel® has been used for many years in the private sector. The Association of Minnesota Counties has now used it. U of M Extension invited participants with experience in public policy to join them in using the Implications Wheel® to analyze a major organizational decision. Evaluations indicated that the process may have some potential for major decisions but is not as useful for making day-to-day decisions. Comments made by some of the participants reinforced the need to be clear about what their role is in the process. Participants will not be making the decision, but rather they are informing decision makers of possible unintended consequences that managers might have missed.

University of Minnesota Extension has not made any decisions about using the process in their Community Vitality programming with the public. Two areas that may be investigated are to make it

an optional offering when we are helping a community analyze a major project with an input/output analysis or when a business retention and expansion program is looking at a major project. 🏠

Authors' Picks for Further Reading

For more information about the Implications Wheel® visit 📄 www.implicationswheel.com where there are more case studies and a sample of the software. There are also research papers that differentiate this process from other methods of decision-making.

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References

Joel Barker's Implications Wheel® Strategic Exploration Tool. Find the Future Faster™. Leader's Guide. Copyright © 2001-2005 Joel A. Barker, Infinity Limited, Inc.

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