

Strengthening Collaboration Through Equity-Centered Strategy Planning: Sebago Clean Waters (SCW)

Sebago Clean Waters is a collaborative of 11 non-profit organizations which operate in partnership to sustain and enhance clean water and healthy forests in the Sebago Lake watershed to support thriving human and ecological communities.

The Collaborative has a long track record of cross-sector projects that provide innovative solutions for the health and vitality of the region which relies on Sebago Lake for its drinking water.

The Collaborative began equity and racial justice training during the pandemic, and by 2024 they were interested in fully integrating their learnings within their next strategic plan on equity. Nico Chin and Cathy Kidman of Up With Community were hired to guide SCW through an equity-centered planning process and help build their implementation plan. Nico and Cathy have worked together for over 10 years, developing shared organizational development, equity and strategic planning practices to strengthen. Through an iterative practice of shared learning and application they support organizational capacity to fully face difficult strategic questions and tackle conflictual issues.

To strategize thoughtfully, UWC started by conducting in-person interviews with the group, where they identified strengths, challenges and specific needs. Through this process they identified the specific strategy questions and core questions and tensions that had been lingering unresolved for several years. UWC provided recommendations on how best to co-create their strategic plan, operationalize their equity learning, and improve the efficacy of their collaboration. This six month road map included:

- Applied equity and racial justice training to teach the practices of implementing these values in day to day work and support alignment of the partners around equitable thinking

- Answering strategic questions; and building an innovative, inspiring strategic direction for the Collaborative - including whether the group acts as a collaborative and how that impacts how they do their work?
- Integrating a concrete, action-oriented vision for how equity could be integrated into their programs
- Deepening the relationships between a diverse set of collaborative partners, and strengthening their trust and ability to work effectively together
- Co-creating new processes, meeting and decision-making practices.

Learning Through Co-Creation

Up With Community uses strategic planning processes to develop the capacity of team members to lead stronger strategic decision-making conversations in the future. We invited Sebago Clean Waters to create a team to provide guidance, which SWC aptly named the Guiding Team. The team's role was to steward the relationships of learning and growth through

- Maintaining communication throughout the process
- Co-design the meetings and activities
- Deciding which additional stakeholders to include when needed
- Guiding the drafting and feedback processes of the strategic direction

Up With Community coached Guiding Team members in the skills of collaborative facilitation and deeper member engagement. Partnership Director Karen Young said of the experience, "We developed a very productive, collaborative way of working together that produced more thoughtful, clear and eloquent products that any one of us could have alone." Most importantly, she said, the Guiding Team had fun in the process. "We really enjoyed our time working together because we were all learning from each other."

Effective strategic planning starts with strong relationships, and a clear sense of individual self and group context. The Guiding Team engaged SCW members in redefining what being a collaborative meant to them today, and how they would use this new awareness to approach their greatest challenges.

How It Worked

UWC and the Guiding Team facilitated a multi-month learning and application process to begin answering the core strategy questions the Collaborative were seeking to address. Each month, UWC would share a new practice or skill for applied equity and/or improve strategic thinking. Members of the Collaborative would then take that skill or practice and apply it directly in planning conversations: co-creating the answers to their strategy questions, and drafting components of their [strategic direction](#).

Maximizing adult learning, this incremental and iterative approach allowed members to build on learning from previous months, and to integrate an insight as they moved on to new stages of learning and developing strategy together. The interactive meeting designs reinforced deepening relationships and greater understanding of the opportunities the Collaborative had to make change.

Over 6 months, an invigorating and clear purpose emerged for the work of the Collaborative today. Weaving together their commitment to equity and racial justice, the Collaborative identified the most innovative and impactful strategies to focus their efforts on each day. They also identified areas to grow inclusivity, power sharing, and equity within the Collaborative structure for years to come.

Organizations are often reluctant to invest time upfront in the self-evaluation, equity training, and relationship building necessary for sustainable change. Karen Young said the time that Up With Community invested in their people made everyone ready to move forward. “They [UWC] facilitated powerful equity training that was clearly working to open minds and hearts, and shift strategic thinking in our group.” The self-evaluation was a powerful tool for demonstrating to partners that we were already evolving and integrating equity into at least some aspects of their work, and could build on a strong foundation together.

Moving to Action

UWC supported the Collaborative in designing new working groups to put their new strategic direction into action. UWC also coached the Guiding Team through developing implementation plans with members, and the Guiding Team was ready to take on facilitation of moving to action on those plans. Young said of the experience, “It was so helpful to have UWC involved in this phase as we transitioned from planning to implementation. Rather than

an abrupt shift, there was continuity to the approach, as well as structure to provide a foundation.”

A Collaborative with Clear Purpose

SCW worked together to become a stronger, more powerful team because of the time they invested in an interdisciplinary approach. Young said, “UWC has bolstered learning and equity awareness and helped shift the culture and nature of relationships within the Collaborative. All of these things will help support the implementation of our strategic direction.”

Collaborative members cited feeling more prepared to move through their work with courage and confidence, better able to embrace conflict, be clear about power dynamics, and challenge assumptions to better understand their partners around the table. They recognized that individually and collectively, they benefited from the deeper working relationships they developed throughout the iterative learning and application process.

The Collaborative became stronger and clearer in its goals. The Collaborative now clearly understands that onboarding and integrating new members is essential to its mission. Sebago Clean Waters is prepared to welcome new voices into their current and future conservation work together.