

Community Leadership in Municipal Climate Justice Planning

Lessons on integrating equity, justice
& decolonization principles into
climate work



TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Background and context	2
Purpose and hopes for sharing these lessons	3
Illustrating the six key lessons learned	4

SECTION 2: SIX KEY LESSONS & INSIGHTS

Lesson 1: Necessity of personal transformation	5
Lesson 2: Importance of beginning well	6
Lesson 3: Reimagine project management for complexity	7
Lesson 4: Cultivate a caring space for community to do their best work	8
Lesson 5: Have radical trust in community-led and authored work	9
Lesson 6: Translate thoughtfully and skillfully into implementation	10

SECTION 3: CONCLUSION

Concluding thoughts and what comes next	11
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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

HISTORY OF CLIMATE ACTION IN VANCOUVER

The climate crisis is one of the defining issues of our time, with impacts negatively affecting communities and ecosystems locally and globally.

The scientific community agrees global warming must be limited to 1.5°C in order to avoid the catastrophic impacts of climate change, which means taking urgent climate action for future generations and for planetary health. Climate action is top of mind for communities and policy-makers alike, as regions around the world are experiencing extreme and devastating climate change impacts.

We know that the burdens of failing to act on climate, and of increasingly frequent extreme climate-related events, are impacting some more than others. We also know that our local climate plans aren't adequately responding to these inequities. Past and present policy and planning decisions have contributed to the continuing oppression of Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, and other disproportionately impacted communities. As a result, certain communities are more impacted by issues of poverty, lack of services, and unequal opportunities.

Since the 1990s, Vancouver has been a global leader in tackling climate change. In more recent years, staff have begun working to ensure that climate adaptation and mitigation policies consider systemic inequities, acknowledging that disproportionate climate impacts will continue to be compounded as the climate changes, unless action at these intersections is taken to achieve just outcomes.

ESTABLISHING VANCOUVER'S CLIMATE EQUITY WORKING GROUP (CEWG)

In 2019, Vancouver City Council directed staff to establish a "Climate and Equity" working group to provide guidance on the City's efforts to transition off of fossil fuels in ways that prioritize those most vulnerable to climate impacts and most in need of support in transitioning to renewable energy. The establishment of Vancouver's Climate Equity Working Group (CEWG) marked a commitment to integrate equity, justice, and decolonization principles in all municipal climate work more meaningfully.

In 2020, the CEWG was formed to help shape the [Climate Emergency Action Plan](#), guiding staff to consider equity impacts throughout the plan. Sixteen members brought a rich mix of perspectives including new immigrants, people with disabilities, people with low income, and urban Indigenous peoples.

In 2021, a second iteration of the CEWG was established with two objectives:

- advising City staff on climate-related policies, programs, and engagement efforts; and
- authoring [A Climate Justice Charter for Vancouver](#).

This group was brought together with the understanding that a different planning approach was needed in order to better embed equity, justice, and decolonization in our processes and to achieve just outcomes related to climate policies and initiatives. Working at this intersection offered an opportunity to try new approaches, and to think differently about what just climate action can look like in a municipal planning context.

Read more about our work with the Climate Equity Working Group and the development of A Climate Justice Charter for Vancouver [here](#).

PURPOSE AND HOPES FOR SHARING THESE LESSONS

This report summarizes the six main lessons we have learned about integrating equity, justice, and decolonization principles into our municipal climate work through engagement with the CEWG since 2021. The six lessons are:

1. Necessity of personal transformation
2. Importance of beginning well
3. Reimagine project management for complexity
4. Cultivate a caring space for community to do their best work
5. Have radical trust in community-led and authored work
6. Translate thoughtfully and skillfully into implementation

These lessons have been gathered up and documented here so that they can be shared with our colleagues working toward climate justice in Vancouver, with climate leaders in community, and with climate and sustainability practitioners in other cities and network-serving organizations as our small way of giving back to a community of colleagues from whom we've learned a great deal.

UNCOVERING THESE LESSONS

The six lessons included in this report were derived using developmental evaluation (DE) as it provides a structured and intentional process to continually act, reflect, learn, and try again when working on complex, uncertain, non-linear challenges with no clear and definitive solution or end point.

DE helps a group to pay attention to, observe, and capture the important and emergent patterns of change and impact in a process as they arise from the real-time activities, learning, action, and reflection. The process of evaluation can be a systemic intervention in its own right, and we treated our evaluation practice in this way throughout this work.

LESSONS TOLD FROM THE PROJECT TEAM PERSPECTIVE

The “we” voice in this document comes primarily from the core project team of City staff (“project team”) which is made up of white sustainability professionals, and important contributions from individuals on the consulting team with intersecting equity-denied identities as well as the Working Group members themselves. The quotes that you see woven throughout the lessons come from the project and consultant team members as we reflected on our shared work as it came to a close in early 2023.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to be on the unceded and traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

We are working to innovate within a colonial institution, and are particularly grateful for the gifts of knowledge about Indigenous ways of thinking, being, knowing, and doing that we have received, and are doing our best to integrate into our selves and practices each day.

We are grateful to each and every member of both Climate and Equity Working Groups, the consultants, staff, and the senior and elected leaders who are actively working toward climate justice and who enabled this work.

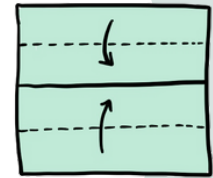
We acknowledge that this work stands on the shoulders of many who have come before, and we hope that by sharing the lessons learned in our experiences in co-creating the Climate Justice Charter that we help with building some strong foundations for what is yet to come.

ILLUSTRATING THE SIX KEY LESSONS LEARNED

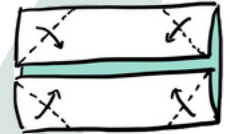
Throughout this document, the six core lessons are illustrated using a paper canoe motif which is meant to represent the many decisions that are made over the course of any project; while some decisions or folds may have to be unfolded and adjusted slightly to reach a desired outcome, the crease remains a part of the final product.

We hope that these lessons will inform how sustainability practitioners approach future climate projects, investments, collaborations, decisions, and discussions with the intent of integrating equity, justice, and decolonization principles into their work.

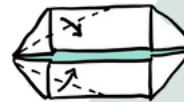
**Lesson 1:
Necessity of
personal
transformation**



**Lesson 2:
Importance of
beginning well**



**Lesson 3:
Reimagine
project
management for
complexity**



**Lesson 4:
Cultivate a caring
space for
community to do
their best work**



**Lesson 5:
Have radical trust
in community-led
and authored work**



**Lesson 6:
Translate thoughtfully
and skillfully into
implementation**



LESSON ONE

NECESSITY OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Everyone involved in this work - staff, consultants, and members of CEWG - brought with them varying experiences, knowledge, expectations, and ideas as well as an openness to do something different. We all acknowledged that this process required a different paradigm to orient our thinking about this work, and what 'success' and 'outcomes' might look like.

LEANING INTO THE DISCOMFORT OF A NEW WORKING PARADIGM

City staff typically work well in the dominant office work mode, with fixed agendas, rigid schedules, a focus on 'productivity,' narrow conceptions of professionalism, and other features that characterize white dominant organizational culture. Because of this, it was necessary for everyone to unlearn tendencies toward these typical ways of working and ultimately sit in the discomfort of a different process.

This was a "different" process (by City standards), and can inspire culture change. This exists in a space of not knowing and discomfort. I think that discomfort and disruption is necessary."

Throughout the entire process, from assembling a project team to wrapping up this iteration of the CEWG, staff constantly checked our assumptions and resisted falling back on our tendencies to follow a familiar process. Together we learned and practiced competencies and capacities to design and hold space differently - as individuals, as our project team, and alongside the consulting team.

"We had to be aware of larger patterns of power, privilege, and inequities within our own team, and how hard it felt to disrupt these. We had to work with fears in an ongoing way - name them, work with them, surface them, step into all the uncertainties and ambiguities."

UNCOVERING EXCITING NEW WAYS OF WORKING

When an orientation to learning and unlearning is held, different process-oriented priorities emerge. For us these included:

- reflections on self-in-the-system
- specific areas for (un)learning
- skillfully inviting and holding peoples' full (emotional) selves as part of processes like this
- honestly naming of all the things that are stuck and problematic about the ways that we currently work in the public sector.

Within these spaces, we found that exciting and creative work emerged.

"I found this way of working to be very exciting, interesting, dynamic, appropriate to purpose, learning-filled, and creative."



LESSON TWO

IMPORTANCE OF BEGINNING WELL

Beginning well involved defining what success would look like, identifying the skills and expertise needed to get there, and developing a process that would create a meaningful experience for members of the Working Group.

PROCESS FRAMING

In the early framing phase of this process, the project team recognized that a different approach than typical policy development and community engagement processes would be needed for our work with the CEWG to be successful.

For example, prior to reconvening a second cycle of the CEWG, we made the decision to hire a member of the first iteration of the CEWG to do some scoping work for what a climate justice charter might look like. This helped staff visualize what might be possible and to begin with this shape in mind, while at the same time giving space for the second CEWG to shape their own process and outcome.

Once the initial CJC development process began to take shape, it became necessary to shift our thinking about how and what we value in this type of work: What is a successful outcome, and how do we know when we've achieved it? Qualitative measures that consider the 'feel' of something, prioritize relationships, build trust, and recognize the significance of deeply collaborative work are all important outcomes. It is essential to consider these values and evaluands as (at least) equal in value to quantitative measures.

"This involved a lot of learning and stepping back to let others who know other ways of working take the lead to do what the group needed."

ASSEMBLING A PROJECT TEAM AND WORKING GROUP

The project team was set up differently than usual, where there tends to be one project manager who leads the project, and a team of others to support the work in specific ways. Instead we had a collaborative organizing model with a core team of four people who each had distinct roles based on our strengths.

When recruiting members for the CEWG, we reached out to communities by starting with existing relationships we had, and asking people to encourage folks they knew of with related interests and expertise to apply. We took time to connect one-on-one with individuals to explain the intent of the working group and the types of perspectives we were looking for, which did not require being a climate expert. In our selection process, we considered intersecting identities and lived experiences as they relate to climate and/or justice.

We brought on a group of consultants to fill gaps within our staff project team. Together, the project team worked collaboratively with the consultant team, and within our procurement guidelines, to co-create an approach to project and process management that allowed for collective experimentation and learning.

Efforts to ensure a diversity of perspectives was present throughout the entire working group term. It was difficult to gauge when there were enough people involved to bring the needed multitude of ways of thinking about climate justice to the work. Maybe that certainty isn't really possible, and a better approach is paying ongoing attention to what perspectives are not yet considered and included.



LESSON THREE

REIMAGINE PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR COMPLEXITY

Project management took some distinctly different pathways than our team typically employs in our work.

We knew that the process would be somewhat non-linear due to its complexity, and not knowing exactly what 'finished' might look like. In order to make room for this, we planned for extra time, iterations, and varying levels of intensity at different stages of the process.

Our approach to project management was based on knowing that we were working in the space of complexity, where what is conventionally considered to be 'expertise' doesn't usually help, and that we needed to learn, practice, and skillfully apply different techniques. We brought in social innovation, systemic design, and equity-centered processes and practices.

"Everyone stayed open to learning and to paying attention to what was emerging, rather than thinking that 'expertise' was the way to approach this."

TAKING A LEARNING-ORIENTED APPROACH

Throughout the process the project team and consulting team held a responsive, adaptive, supportive, and learning-oriented approach to the process design and facilitation. We regularly met to reflect on what was and wasn't working about the ways that we were designing and facilitating the process with CEWG, and adapted in response. We stayed flexible and experimental, and regularly shifted and tried new things in the processes we used.

We made sure to be open with Working Group members about this experimentation and uncertainty, ensuring we were all moving along this path together. We did our best to give ourselves some spaciousness and flexibility so that we didn't get locked into anything too early that would limit the ways that the process could unfold as it needed to.

We regularly reconnected with how this work with CEWG needed to be in allyship with other equity, justice, and reconciliation transformation work happening in the City, and how we might best do this through our approaches to process design, facilitation, and relationship building.

STAYING FLEXIBLE AND EXPERIMENTAL

At all steps along the way, the project team, consultants, and the CEWG had to sit with the uncertainty of what the CJC would be exactly. We had to trust that there was value in the work, and value in what the output ended up being as representing our collective best thinking about what this moment needed. This required willingness by the staff and consultant team to support extending the timeline to allow for another round of revision to ensure a good, respectful, and community-centered process.

"A key moment was the meeting when we thought we were finalizing the CJC, but had to quickly pivot when it became clear that CEWG was not satisfied with it yet. Being honest that we didn't have an answer immediately about how to resolve this, felt big."

"I want to emphasize on the overall team's ability and capacity for holding changes that are sometimes sudden and which required the embracing of fluidity while developing solutions."

In the end the timelines didn't stretch that far beyond what we had originally planned, and we were able to build and strengthen relationships and significantly increase the quality of the work at the same time.

"We stayed flexible and experimental, and regularly shifted and tried new things in the processes we used. This meant letting go of somewhat arbitrary timelines established early in the project, which wasn't that hard - the world didn't end."



LESSON FOUR

CULTIVATE CARING SPACES FOR COMMUNITY TO DO THEIR BEST WORK

A tension between the urgency of climate action and the thoughtful and relational approach required to properly integrate equity into climate work was identified at the outset of this project. Everyone that was a part of this work co-created and cultivated a community of care, which took many different forms.

WAYS WE CULTIVATED A COMMUNITY OF CARE

- In each meeting we brought practices of mindfulness, cultural tradition, embodiment, joy, and connection. It was important to prioritize this work when the group was together (virtually) in order to help us all feel more connected to one another, and to the work we were doing together.
- We financially compensated CEWG members' time and expertise through honorariums, and also offered resourcing for child care and transit.
- We prioritized being highly accountable to, and respectful of, the time and contributions CEWG provided to our work. We gave ourselves prescriptive timelines prior to and after meetings to provide resources, meeting agendas, and meeting notes, and maintained monthly communication with relevant updates about how CEWG contributions impacted either proposed climate policies or drafts of the CJC.
- Understanding that all CEWG members had varying levels of interest and knowledge, we provided flexible a/synchronous ways to meaningfully engage with staff when providing feedback such as writing or calling with comments and providing written comments on materials.
- We knew that CEWG members were participating for different reasons and had different interests and capacities. The consulting team designed an engagement process for the development of the CJC that allowed for different interests and capacities.
- At the end of the CEWG term, we celebrated and honoured the work that had been done with a blanketing ceremony, witnessed by the staff and consulting teams.

"I emphasize what I perceived and experienced as a project that cared about the relational health of project members. This was a very significant area of care and thought put into designing interactions and engagements to be relational rather than transactional. While tough, I commend the spirit that everyone brought to the project."

ITERATING AND ADJUSTING OUR APPROACH ALL THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

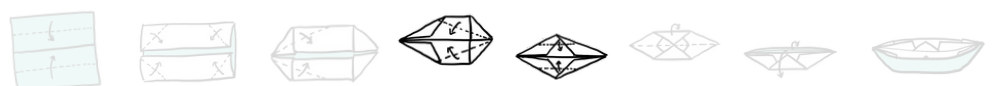
As the project and consulting teams remained flexible and experimental in our approach, we often found ourselves reflecting on if what we were doing was working.

"I spent a lot of time thinking about how we as staff worked with the CEWG. Was there a power imbalance? Lack of trust? Was this work together on climate justice too big to tackle? Did they have enough information to meaningfully contribute? Did they have enough guidance and support from us?"

We demonstrated openness to changing content and processes based on feedback received about what was working and what could be improved. This openness allowed us to focus on how we can do our very best work together while centering the thinking, expertise, and interest of all members of the CEWG.

Making adjustments all throughout a process while cultivating a community of care requires dedicated time to build relationships that is often not budgeted in typical engagement processes. This project was more expensive in terms of staff time and financial resources than our typical project management approach which required us to consider costs- versus values-generated in this project.

"Determining the value of all of these things is hard to measure. Definitely not in dollars over the course of one contract. How much does it 'cost' when staff break trust, harm relationships, and don't set strong foundations?"



LESSON FIVE

HAVE RADICAL TRUST IN COMMUNITY-LED AND AUTHORED WORK

The City most often uses the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation to guide how we work with community and stakeholders in our planning and policy making processes. We knew that we would need to stretch beyond this framework in developing the CJC, and use power sharing, co-design, and equity-centered ways of working differently with community.

SHIFTING POWER TO COMMUNITY

Many complex challenges - like the one of who holds power - are enormous and generational in nature. They require us to continue to make wise and meaningful moves in the right direction. Working in local government has inherent power dynamics built in, so extra attention, intention, and honesty is required when working to share power from this position.

A critical decision in this project was the shift from the plan for the CJC to be co-created between the City and CEWG, to having the CEWG be the lead author. This meant that community members could lead the work based on their expertise, and be supported by the project and consulting team to write the CJC in a way that they thought was best.

"The fact that the CJC is community-developed and owned is a landmark win for me. To be able to witness the development of this charter with CEWG and the team created a different space for the creation of this Charter."

In typical planning and policy making processes, staff retain power and control of the framing and writing, with senior decision-makers also editing the work before it goes through its final decision-making process. The community-led approach taken here avoided the internal review process which would have changed the content in ways that likely would have created significant tension with the CEWG. This was a significant shift in the ways that the project and consultant teams typically work, and required a great deal of reflection and checking in with ourselves and each other to make sure we were carrying through with our commitment to this approach at every step along the way.

REBUILDING TRUST

In order to shift power to community, staff had to realize that earning, building, and repairing trust in City staff had to be handled with a great deal of integrity at every step along the journey, and never be taken lightly.

Building trust-based and high-quality working relationships with community meant that authentic staff leadership needed to be present, active, and ongoing.

It took time to build and nurture trust, and as staff we aimed to base this trust on actively demonstrating (with evidence) that CEWG's work and feedback was influencing the City's thinking and practice. This continues on even after CEWG's term is finished, as staff continue carefully and seriously hold the trust that they have placed in us to carry the work forward.

The work proceeded with a rhythm and pace that isn't typical in the development of climate policies and initiatives. Having the flexibility and upper management support to prioritize relationship building with community contributed to a high-quality and deeply personal CJC that called on the City, as a colonial institution, to commit to advancing climate justice and share power with community.

"Without taking time to build that trust, this project would not have succeeded."



LESSON SIX

TRANSLATE THOUGHTFULLY AND SKILLFULLY INTO IMPLEMENTATION

The transformation that the CJC describes is visionary and expansive. Once the words of the CEWG had been written and brought to life in this CJC, the work to integrate equity, justice, and decolonization principles into municipal climate work officially began.

IMPLEMENTATION CANNOT BE OUTSOURCED

Initially staff planned for the consultant team to be quite active in helping with the transition into CJC implementation. In reality, almost all this work required active staff involvement. Shifts in understanding and approach need to happen among staff for CJC implementation to happen in a way that holds the integrity of the vision. Implementation will require both inner- and outer transformation, and this cannot be outsourced.

"It's challenging to now translate all of this into implementation. We need to relentlessly and lovingly reinforce that this is personal and cultural transformation work and not an item on a checklist. How can this be resourced - not just staff time and money, but emotionally and relationally?"

CLIMATE JUSTICE IS EVERYONE'S WORK

Our implementation approach emphasizes that responsibility rests with all staff that have a role in planning and implementing climate-related work, and not only those with 'equity' or 'reconciliation' in their formal job title. Justice work is work for every staff person to do, in collaboration with one another, regardless of their starting point. Work on climate justice is in solidarity with all other justice, equity, and reconciliation work - it's all connected.

We are figuring out how to create a constellation of staff who are building their competencies, skills, knowledge, and practices alongside one another. It feels like the biggest constraint at this stage is time, and making sure that everyone working on climate action has the time that they need to improve their practices.

BEGINNING WELL, AGAIN

In early conversations about implementation, staff found ourselves in a similar position as we were at the outset of this project. We needed to recommit to learning and unlearning, sitting with discomfort when using different processes, and examining our power and positionality in climate decisions.

Resisting the sense of urgency to jump quickly into action is giving us more space to think critically about beginning well - again. It is also giving us time to consider the resourcing needed to do this work well. We do not currently have staff with expertise in climate, equity, justice, reconciliation, and decolonization work. And while we know this work requires this specific expertise and talent, it also requires everyone to shift their work. So how can we also resource everyone working on climate action to embed equity and justice into their work programs?

"There's a need to push back and resist the urgency of what's next - rushing into implementation risks us automatically reverting to the normal way of doing things instead of taking more time to do things differently."

THEORY OF CHANGE FOR TRANSFORMATION

Within our approach to implementation, we are developing near-term actions that work to adjust our existing systems. Alongside this we are establishing brave spaces for deeper learning and experimentation so that we can make sure our actions are working toward systems change. Both approaches are required to truly achieve the outcomes that are called for within the CJC. We need to resist the temptation to focus our efforts on the easier, shorter-term, and more surface level changes to programs, policies, and services and make sure that we are also transforming hearts, minds, and culture.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND WHAT COMES NEXT

In addition to the six main lessons on what we've learned in this process, we also wanted to share key outcomes from this work:

- A common definition, principles, and goals of climate justice as an approach to understand and respond to the impacts of climate change.
- Evidence of being able to share power and collaborate, as government and community, to advance climate justice.
- Shared understanding that climate change impacts everyone differently, and that local climate action must address these inequities in planning and implementation.
- Direct communication pathways between CEWG and City staff working on climate action to build and nurture trust, transparency, and accountability.
- An understanding that the CJC builds on existing work toward equity, reconciliation, and climate action. This understanding, and these organizational commitments, are foundational to centering climate justice principles in our work going forward.
- Calls to action to hold staff accountable.

CALLING US ALL IN TO DO OUR VERY BEST

Justice, equity, and decolonization in climate work is a complex, uncertain, non-linear challenge with no clear definitive solution or end point. It is not a neat, itemized list of tasks that will someday be checked off and considered finished. It calls us all in as civil servants, to do our very best with the agency and responsibility that we hold, and to be of service to current and future generations and to the land and waters.

It is now the responsibility of staff to carry this work forward intentionally and in a way that demonstrates transformative climate action. We have many questions about embedding principles and practices of equity and justice within ourselves and throughout our work. We are also buoyed with hope and commitment.

At times, feelings of overwhelm can arise when working to address equity, justice, and decolonization. Injustices exist - where can we find opportunities in our work to counter them, however small? Every step forward is important. We can't solve it all at once, but we can make everything a bit better with everything we do – what a gift to be in that position.

We're reminded that even when this work gets really hard, there is always a next wise move available. We hold tight to the first principle in the Climate Justice Charter - néca?mat tə šxwqweləwən ct - the Musqueam concept that reminds us that we are of one heart and mind.

We hope that this gathering of lessons serves your own thinking and practice, and that it might inform future projects, investments, collaborations, decisions, and discussion.

