



The Impact of Strategic Doing in Public Health

Meet Cerro Gordo Public Health

CG Public Health (CGPH) is an accredited public health department based in Mason City, Iowa, the seat of north Iowa's Cerro Gordo County. This mid-sized public health department serves roughly 42,000 people across 10 cities and multiple townships.

The department has dramatically expanded its services since it was founded in 1990. Originally focusing solely on public health nursing, CGPH now provides many additional services through the work of six divisions:

- Disease Prevention
- Population Health
- Environmental Health & Preparedness
- Home Care Services
- Research, Innovation, & Education
- Finance and Administration

In 2018 CGPH became the second public health organization in Iowa to achieve national accreditation, solidifying the department's reputation as a leader in the field.

The Work of CGPH

As the services CG Public Health offers have expanded, and as the public health challenges faced by the region have become more complex, strong community partnerships have become critically important to carry out the work effectively. Collaboration and partnerships are now key elements of the CGPH strategic plan.

Some of the complex challenges facing the region CGPH serves include substance misuse, the child care crisis, teen mental health, insufficient healthcare workforce, and more. These are complex issues with no clear owners and no clear solutions; that require the collaboration of many agencies, organizations, experts, and community members to address; and that require thoughtful experimentation and collective learning to develop solutions that work specifically for the region CGPH serves.

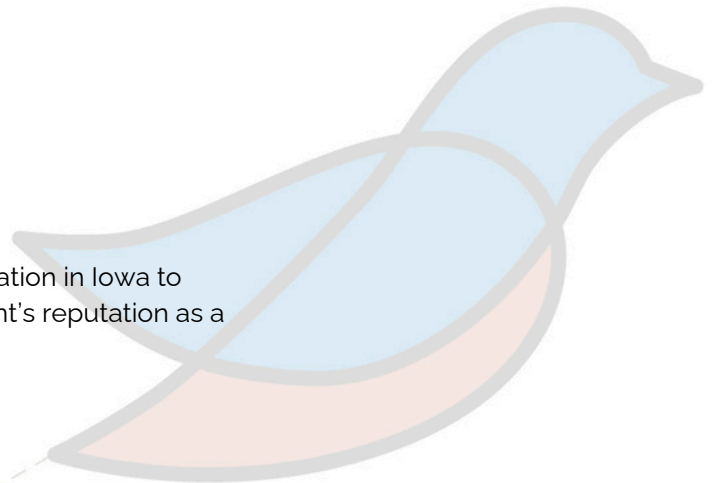
In other words, they are exactly the types of challenges Strategic Doing is designed for.



Jennifer Horn-Frasier

Principal, Bluebird Sky, LLC
Fellow, Strategic Doing Institute

- Strategic planning
- Implementation guidance
- Facilitation services
- Strategic Doing training



These complex issues are exactly the types of challenges Strategic Doing is designed for.

Enter Strategic Doing

Strategic Doing was introduced to CG Public Health by a consultant engaged to guide a community collaboration related to substance misuse. Subsequently, two staff leaders completed Strategic Doing Practitioner Training and added the methodology to the tools used by the department. A year later, in 2023, CGPH saw enough promise in Strategic Doing to send 11 more staff members to training.

Because so many CGPH colleagues completed Strategic Doing Practitioner Training together, they were able to apply their new skills during the training itself to complex challenges CGPH was addressing at the time. Upon completing the course, the 11 wasted no time incorporating Strategic Doing into their everyday work.

As the new practitioners experimented with different ways to incorporate Strategic Doing into their work, they developed a practice of supporting one another by serving as Table Guides and Knowledge Keepers for each other's projects. Some guided full Strategic Doing workshops, while others focused on using specific Strategic Doing skills that were especially useful in a given context.

Some of the ways Strategic Doing became especially valuable to CGPH practitioners are these:

- Developing guiding skills to create space for and encourage input from everyone around the table.
- Effectively and efficiently uncovering the assets available for a group to use.
- Creating confidence in the work because of the thoughtful framework provided by Strategic Doing.
- Using the Strategic Action Plan to track progress and help new people easily join the work.
- Promoting engagement and accountability among members of work teams.

Fast forward to today: Strategic Doing is used to address adaptive challenges across most of the department. One CGPH practitioner estimates she guided 15 workshops in the first year following her training. And as Population Health Division Manager Kelli Gerdes observed, "We probably use Strategic Doing in some form every day."

Strategic Doing

is a research-based, practical tool for designing and guiding collaborations to create solutions to complex challenges.

By applying ten simple rules, starting with building trust, teams develop shared direction and learning to quickly innovate solutions.



"We probably use
▣ Strategic Doing ▣
in some form
every day."



Unleashing the Power of Collaboration Child Care Works

The impact of the work CG Public Health has done using elements of Strategic Doing is significant and wide ranging. One notable initiative is Child Care Works.

This project was not organized as a traditional Strategic Doing project that progressed from a 3-hour workshop to Pathfinder Project. It was, however, designed with Strategic Doing principles embedded throughout.

CGPH had received substantial grant funding to address a critical lack of child care options in the region and, therefore, started the work by convening a regional coalition to explore opportunities to make quality child care accessible, affordable, and equitable. Because of the external funding source's requirements and the technical support provided by the funder, the project began with a six-month period to study the situation and identify key data and root causes. This process enabled the group to collectively imagine a future in which the child care crisis was mitigated because root causes had been addressed.

The group's research pointed to two primary root causes of the child care shortage: low wages and insufficient workforce. The group believed the low wages could be addressed in the relatively short term, while the workforce shortage would require a longer-term effort. Operating from the Strategic Doing perspective of "doing the doable" and getting to action quickly, CGPH organized a 1.5-day workshop for the work group to design a wage supplement program for the regional child care workforce.

It was at this point that Strategic Doing was more explicitly applied. The workshop featured hallmarks of Strategic Doing such as:

- **A coalition of the willing at the table:** Every person in the room had a vested interest in the issue, controlled assets that could be useful in designing a response, and was willing to take action on behalf of the project.
- **Uncovering assets:** Care was taken to identify the assets controlled by those at the table that they were willing to contribute in the service of the project.
- **Thoughtful experimentation:** Test cases were developed and analyzed during the workshop itself, and then the group used the learning from the hypothetical test cases to design the actual next steps they would take.
- **Micro-commitments:** Every person around the table offered actions they could commit to taking to move the work forward.
- **Doing the doable:** The action plan developed during the workshop was grounded in reality, based on the preliminary data, used the assets uncovered within the group, and pointed toward the shared vision of the future.
- **30/30 meetings:** Following the workshop, the core team regularly convened to review what had been done and learned and to determine the next steps for each person.



Key Issue Addressed:

Critical lack of child care

Primary root causes:

- Low wages
- Insufficient workforce

The Impact of the Workshop was swift and remarkable.

Despite an extremely compressed timeline resulting from changes to a key funding program of the State of Iowa, the team was successful in obtaining about \$375,000 in initial funding commitments from the regional community. This evidence of the coalition's effectiveness caused the state to increase its funding match from 1:1 to 2:1, for total funding of about \$1 million. In turn, this allowed the wage supplement program to launch in January 2024, raising employee pay at qualifying centers by \$2 per hour to make the average wage more competitive and the industry more attractive for workers.

Once the short-term need of increased wages was addressed, the group would be in a position to turn its attention to the long-term need for systemic change in how the child care industry is viewed and funded. Given the group's track record with the wage supplement program, it's likely there will be similarly positive outcomes for this work, too.

the ROI of Strategic Doing Training

The child care crisis is far from the only wicked challenge addressed using Strategic Doing at CG Public Health. Challenges ranging from teen mental health to HIV and STI prevention to a lack of career pathways in public health have all been tackled by the CGPH team using Strategic Doing. Research, Innovation, & Education Division Manager Jenna Heier notes that the department's work is much more interactive and engaged with community partners since implementing Strategic Doing. This, in turn, leads to better outcomes for the community. Using Strategic Doing as the operating system for tackling complex public health challenges has helped CGPH more effectively engage the community in co-creating solutions that work.

Professional development takes time and funding, two things that tend to be precious and scarce in public health. Public Health Director Kara Vogelsson believes that supporting her team in completing Strategic Doing Practitioner Training has been time and money well spent and that CGPH has seen a high return on the investment. She observes,

“Although many public health departments have small training budgets, investing in Strategic Doing is worth it to engage stakeholders, tackle complex challenges, develop innovative strategies, and actually achieve outcomes swiftly.”



A Remarkable Achievement

\$375,000 local pledges

\$650,000 in State match

\$2.00/ hour increase
in local workers' wages.



Let Bluebird Sky help your organization take flight.

Bluebird Sky strategy consultancy works with companies, nonprofits, and coalitions to tackle complex challenges, from planning to problem-solving. Contact us to explore how we might help you turn your plans into action and your ideas into innovation.

BLUEBIRD SKY
GETTING THERE FROM HERE



BluebirdSkySolutions.com
319.936.0831
jennifer@bluebirdskysolutions.com