

Building Community Within
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For more than a decade, I have been directly involved in community building efforts as a volunteer, a non-profit executive, and as a consultant to hundreds of communities and organizations. In the mid-90s I began to focus most of my attention on working with corporations. After two years I decided to refocus my attention on communities of place – towns, cities. Most organizations I worked with were simply unwilling to make the changes necessary to be truly effective communities. I found it much more fun and rewarding to work with communities of place.

Community building, in a variety of forms, is gaining favor as a method to solve problems and create healthier partnerships in towns (communities of place) and organizations (workplace communities) all over the world. Yet the organizations – nonprofits included – that promote these concepts in their own work often lag behind in their efforts to create a sense of community within their own workplaces. Yet, community building within an organization is vital to better serving one's mission, being more effective and efficient, fulfilling the deep human needs of organizational members, and to fully contributing to the well-being of the larger community.

This article, then, is a challenge and a beacon. It provides a survey of the leading thinking and practice in workplace community building. It also introduces you to a true workplace community, where the inclusive, participatory culture is one of its most important strategic advantages.

Community building is probably best experienced rather than defined. The Foundation for Community Encouragement often quotes one of its workshop participants, a federal judge: "Community is like pornography. I don't know how to define it, but I sure as hell know it when I see it." Though it may be elusive, most leaders in the community building field would agree that community is a process of both nurturing community spirit and encouraging collaborative skills. It involves weaving together the passions, talents, insights, and experiences of a wide range of people who are committed to a common purpose. It is:

- inclusive
- reflective
- respectful of differences
- embracing of conflict
- characterized by authentic communication and relating to others with respect
- a group where each person is responsible for the health and success of the group
- an ideal consensual decision-making body

Several themes emerged as I revisited the leading books on the subjects of community building, participation, democracy, organizational learning, and leadership. To put a real face on these principles and practices, I talked with Dick Prouty, CEO of Project Adventure, Inc. (PA) based in Hamilton, Massachusetts. PA is one of the finest organizations I know of that is practicing workplace community building. Members of the organization have made community building an explicit part of their work, in spite of several factors that make such an exercise difficult: with more than 100 staff members sprawled over four offices throughout the country, the organization is also divided into several business units. Nevertheless, a sense of community permeates PA's culture.

Alignment Around Purpose and Values

In our work, many of us we carry a strong purpose and a set of behavior-guiding values; unfortunately, we often don't have the opportunity to reflect on these values and share them with others. In workplace community, purposes and values become an organizational asset. "All organizations are merely conceptual embodiments of a very old, very basic idea--the idea of community," organizational consultant Dee Hock tells us. "An organization's success has enormously more to do with clarity of a shared purpose, common principles, and strength of belief in them than with assets, expertise, operating ability, or management competence, important as they may be."

With this premise in mind, Project Adventure spent more than over two years reaching a consensus on its core values. "These core values are what I call the glue factor, because they are what holds us together day to day," says Dick Prouty. "We spent a lot of time talking about personal and team interpretation. We wanted to be sure everyone understands how they can act upon these values in their

jobs, in their teams and how this relates to the whole organization.” Dick believes the investment of time and money spent on this process was very worthwhile because these core values now serve as the focus of PA’s internal processes and external relations. For example, the core values are described on the inside front cover of the organization’s 1998 Workshop Schedule and are an important part their recruiting process. “As the leader in the field of Adventure Education we are looking to hire the most talented people, but we look for a culture fit as well as a skill fit,” says Dick. “We are looking to hire people who share our core values. This includes an openness to change, flexibility, understanding one’s connection to the whole, and a deep commitment to ongoing learning and personal growth.”

Reflection questions: In your organization, are there processes in place to uncover and weave together employees’ values and sense of purpose? Are there processes in place to check for alignment between your organization’s values and what people experience in their day-to-day work?

Open Communication and Sharing of Information

Many companies are discovering that the best decision-making grows out of the best information. Inclusive, participatory decision-making requires open communication and the sharing of information, thoughts, feelings, and ideas. These also happen to be attributes of an effective community. In a workplace community, opportunities are created for interpersonal feedback, cross-functional information sharing, and system wide communication. And in communities much more than just data is shared -- joy, frustration, anger, and a contingent of other emotions are just as essential as the hard data. Yet it takes a special organizational structure to sustain this type of communication and information sharing. According to Dee Hock, “The governing structure must not be a chain of command, but rather a framework for dialogue, deliberation, and coordination among equals.” This, in a nutshell, is a workplace community.

Since its inception, Project Adventure has committed itself to a culture of openness and sharing. Using its own community building tools, including the Full Value Contract, PA explicitly helps staff members share not only information, but thoughts and feelings as well. For example, every employee is trained in effective interpersonal communication, and the organization has recently begun using Lotus Notes software which enables its team members to communicate with each other even from the most remote locations. PA also uses more low-tech communication tools: every month PA “family” members receive the organization’s internal newsletter, *Bridge-It*, which includes staff hires, organizational updates and even family tidbits, and recognizing the importance of face-to-face communication, PA staff frequently get together for interoffice meetings and all-staff gatherings.

Reflection questions: As you think about your organization, are staff members encouraged to share information within the organization? Do all the people in your organization have opportunities to promote their personal and professional development? How are feelings communicated?

Decision-Making by Those Most Affected

In workplace communities, people are involved as both thinker *and* doers. Those responsible for implementing a strategy are involved in every step of the decision-making process, in partnership with others who have expertise and experience to lend. Job titles are not important; expertise and experience are. The stakeholders represented are diverse, not to increase “buy-in” (a term I have heard all too often in both companies and communities), but because but to ensure the best solution.

Some organizations have found creative ways to ensure that their decision-making practices are inclusive. The Center for Creative Change, in Hamden, Connecticut, for example, employs a tool it calls “Perspectives on People.” According to the organizations director, Dave DePalma this tool measures the level of inclusiveness of all individuals. It helps organization uncover the working relationship between the staff. The tool employs a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum -- that of least involvement -- people are viewed as “passive” and/or behave as “recipients.” At the other end of the spectrum -- the highest level of involvement -- organizational members are perceived as “active” and engaged as “contributors” to a process. These people are co-creators.

Of all the community building principles, this is the hardest to fully implement, admits Dick Prouty. “We are always trying to get clear which decisions are made by teams and which by the appointed leaders. Our teams and offices make a lot of decisions within the strategies we have all co-created. Once in a while we need to deviate from this, which is usually an issue of time. Team decisions tend to take longer and at times we need to act more quickly. So our norm is to get input from the entire team, but

occasionally leaders must make decisions on behalf of others.” Many organizations, in fact, use lack the time as an excuse for not moving to a more inclusive workplace community. Project Adventure is taking steps to overcome this challenge by scheduling major meetings at times when they are not so busy. “For us, the summer months are extremely busy so some of these team decision making practices go by the wayside. The challenge is to work within these cycles, so that overall we are doing what we agreed upon.” When decisions must be made without team input, the organization capitalizes on the high level of trust it has cultivated by involving staff during other times. Even if they can’t be involved as they might like, staff members know their perspectives have been considered.

Reflection questions: In your organization, is involvement in decision-making based on skill and experience? How do you view people in your organization? Do your views encourage or limit people’s involvement? Are “clients” looked to as resources?

Interdependence and Mutual Support

It is not unusual for organizations – for profit and nonprofit – to use teamwork and team building to accomplish goals. Community building raises the bar to an even higher standard, one that requires interdependence and mutual support. Although the two are similar in that they lead to increased efficiency, fulfillment, creativity, and the like, the benefits of community building are even more far-reaching.

In a workplace community, the benefits of interdependence and mutual support run up and down, as well as across the organization. Because members of the community are organized around a shared purpose, they are likely to seek assistance and support from people at all levels of the organization.

Project Adventure believes that interdependence and mutual support are a major factor in the organization’s success. Its various business units collaborate to produce comprehensive products and services and it is not unusual for different teams to work together to serve a single client. Says Dick Prouty, “One of the commitments we share is to work toward our personal and organizational goals. Once these goals are clear, the support and teamwork come very naturally.”

Reflection questions: Are your staff members encouraged to work together in interdependent and mutually supportive ways? What are some of the benefits of this interdependence to your organization and your clients/customers?

Personal and Organizational Learning

In a workplace community, capacity building is an ongoing process at both the personal and organizational levels. Doing new things or old things in new ways are stimulating and further the learning process. Learning happens in both formal and informal ways including mentoring and mutual support. In most successful organizations learning is focused not only on technical skills, but on community skills as well. In their book, *The Quickening of America*, Center for Living Democracy co-founders Frances Moore Lappé and Paul Martin DuBois reported on ten skills that people in the most successful nonprofit, business, and community groups demonstrate. These “Arts of Democracy,” as they refer to them, include active listening, using conflict creatively, negotiating, dialogue, public judgment (group decision-making), and reflection. All of these skills are necessary for effective, collaborative problem solving and community building.

The most effective workplace communities make a commitment to building human and organizational capacity. They know that it is not necessary to hire a consultant for every learning opportunity because the most effective teachers are already part of their community. Project Adventure’s commitment to learning is demonstrated in its Challenge by Choice philosophy, used by thousands of organizations around the world. Challenge By Choice invites individuals to set goals for personal development and to then work toward them on their own timelines and terms. Within PA, this means that “people are encouraged to learn in ways that are personally and professionally rewarding,” says Dick Prouty. “People bring their whole self to work, so we need to feed that whole self.”

Reflection questions: Does your organization include training opportunities to develop the skills necessary for effective participation? Do members mentor one another?

Reflection, Celebration, and Renewal

Reflecting on the degree of alignment to core values, acknowledging individual and collective achievements, and recommitting to or revising an organization's vision are essential to sustaining a participative workplace. Only through an ongoing process of reflection and renewal can an organization maintain its attention to purpose and values; as the organization's membership changes, external forces "nudge" the organization in new directions, and as the organization matures, its purpose and values are bound to change. If the organization's mission, services, and processes don't reflect these changes, the result will be misalignment, decreased effectiveness, and an erosion of community.

Project Adventure has embraced this philosophy. As in many organizations, PA has yearly all-staff meetings and some teams also meet weekly and others quarterly to take stock and look ahead. But reflection, celebration, and renewal all part of everyday life at Project Adventure. As Dick explains, "Not everything we do is a formal celebration. In one office we have a refrigerator covered with workshop photos, press clippings, letters from customers and photos of staff members' children. In another office, running down the hallway is a long mural of pictures from our workshops." PA is proud of what it does, and these small celebratory practices are part of its reflection and renewal processes.

Reflection questions: What rituals or practices allow your organization to reflect, celebrate and renew? Besides formal celebrations, how else does your organization extol its accomplishments? How often do you revisit your vision, core values, work processes, products, and services?

Conclusion

As nonprofit organizations, we exist to serve the common good. But shouldn't our commitment to enhancing relationships between people within our organizations be just as important as our commitment to enhancing the relationships within our community? And if creating a workplace community is compelling from a humanitarian standpoint, it is also important to realize that there are sound business reasons for doing so. With more than ten million dollars in revenue, only a small percentage of which is from grant sources, Project Adventure provides a valuable model for the nonprofit world. "The trend today is that customers are choosing companies for fit as well as for their product or service. Who you are is becoming more important than what you sell. Shared values between the provider and the buyer drive choices," says Dick Prouty. "Clients, donors, and funders want to feel like they can identify with who you are."

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