

**ICMA**  
PRESS

# *IQ Report*

Volume 41/Number 4 2009

## **Community Building: How to Do It, Why It Matters**

Today's complex and difficult problems cannot be solved by government alone. To have a higher quality of life—higher educational performance, lower crime, and better physical and mental health—a city or county needs to focus on building a stronger community. Building community develops trust between residents and government and generates a partnership between them. It creates an environment in which there is almost no issue that cannot be resolved, leads to better ideas and solutions, encourages people to be responsible for and committed to improving the quality of life in their communities, and makes the job of the local government manager easier.

This report describes what community building is, why it is important, and how to achieve it. In so doing, it defines the various roles of local government in building community and presents concrete examples of those roles as well as listing some of the lessons that have been learned along the way. Through this report, you will come to understand not only the power of community building but also the way that community building relates to the reasons why many of us were drawn to the profession of local government management in the first place.

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**ICMA IQ Report**  
**VOLUME 41/NUMBER 4**  
**ITEM NO. E-43508**

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# Community Building: How to Do It, Why It Matters

Ed Everett recently retired as city manager of Redwood City, California, a position he had held since 1992. He has a passion for helping cities understand and implement “community building/civic engagement” and for sharing his research and practice in this field. In 2007, Ed was awarded ICMA’s “Award for Career Excellence.” He would like to credit Peter Block, Meg Wheatley, John McKnight, Robert Putman, and Angeles Arrien for providing ideas and inspiration to build community in Redwood City.

Many cities are well run, efficient, and effective; they use performance measures, benchmarking, innovation, and technology. All these tools are important and necessary, but they are not sufficient. Successful cities, towns, villages, and counties must have a goal, a vision, or a core purpose, as well as a passion, to build communities. Redwood City, California, developed a core purpose—“To Build a Great Community Together”—which provided a sharp focus for how we deal with our community.

If cities are not working to build community and are worrying only about their physical city, they are failing their residents and falling short of their potential.

## A Definition and Assessment of Community Today

After a lot of reading, thinking, and experimenting, I have come to believe that community is best defined by four feelings:

1. A feeling of *belonging* to something or some group
2. A feeling of *pride* in our group, be that a neighborhood, service club, sports team, hobby club, or whatever
3. A feeling of being part of something *important*, of being *included*
4. A feeling of *not being alone*, of knowing that others in our community will help us even if they don’t know us.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putman studied the rise and fall of community, or what he calls “social capital.” The data show that from 1960 to the present, there has been a continual decrease in

- Membership in service clubs, PTAs, unions, and national organizations
- Volunteer hours (although recent data suggest that we may have bottomed out and may now be increasing in this category)
- Attending public meetings, church, and school affairs
- Having friends over to the house for dinner or going to friends’ homes for dinner
- Belief that we can trust other people.<sup>1</sup>

Putnam also cites national surveys that tell us that

- A majority of the public don’t know 50 percent of their neighbors
- Seventy-five percent of the public thinks “break-down in community” and “selfishness” are “serious” or “extremely serious” problems
- Eighty percent of the public believes that there should be more emphasis on community even if that puts more demands on them.

***“Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world: indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”***

***—Margaret Mead***

When was the last time that 75–80 percent of society agreed on anything, especially if it “puts more demands” on us?

Psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists tell us that

- We all need to be part of a community, such as a family, service group, hobby group, business organization, or sports team.

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- Some of us acknowledge and understand this need while others aren't conscious of it; however, we are all relational animals and need relationships.
- Regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion, all of our ancestors from at least four generations ago came from strong communities and knew the importance and skills needed to build and maintain them.
- As mankind was evolving, we needed community just to survive.
- Remember the "use it or lose it" rule? We have been on a continual decline since the 1960s in using our community-building skills, and we have lost them slowly, as we would a muscle that atrophies in a cast.
- The need and skills to be in a community are lodged in the "reptilian" part of our brain and are accessible to us all.

It is our job as local government managers to resurrect that knowledge and skill base in our residents. We need to slowly retrain our public to use those lost skills rather than continually

- Calling the city about a barking dog or a loud neighbor
- Calling the city to remove leaves clogging a storm drain during a storm
- Demanding that the local government make them feel safer
- Demanding that the local government fix all their problems
- Blaming the city or county or school board for almost everything that "isn't right."

Often when I talk of community building, some of my colleagues say, "Ed, so what. . . . Get over it. . . . Times are changing. . . . Don't live in the past. . . . Move on. . . . It is all about being plugged in and technologically savvy. Forget what used to be. . . ." Well, for all of you who are willing to get over it, forget about it, and move on, you should know the hard facts of such a policy decision.

### The Importance of Community Building

Putman ranked all fifty states by their level of social capital/community and then compared them in four important policy areas: education performance, crime, physical health, and social health. He found that as social capital/community increases,

- Educational performance increases
- Crime (measured per 100,000 population) decreases

- Physical health increases
- Mental health increases.

Today's complex and difficult problems cannot be solved by government alone. So if you want your city or county to have a higher quality of life as measured by higher educational performance, lower crime, and better physical and mental health, it is essential to focus not just on building your physical city but also on building a stronger community.

Community building does much more than improve education, crime, and health. Getting the community involved and committed has other far-reaching effects as well:

- It develops trust between residents and government and generates a partnership without alienating the public from government.
- It creates an environment in which there is almost no issue that cannot be resolved.
- It leads to better ideas and solutions as well as to faster implementation of those ideas and solutions.
- It encourages people to be responsible for and committed to improving the quality of life in their communities.
- It makes your job easier, and it is why most of you got into this profession.

*Community building* and *civic engagement* are terms that are often used interchangeably, but there are some differences. As I see it, community building is like building a foundation upon which you construct events or processes that call for civic engagement. Once a civic engagement around a particular issue is over, community building is the social capital, or glue, that holds the community together until the next reason for civic engagement occurs.

### Coming Together as a Community

It is unfortunate, but studies show that we most often come together as a community after a crisis or natural disaster. After September 11, for example, we behaved differently from how we behave during "normal times." For one thing, the National Football League canceled all its football games the first weekend after 9/11. When the games resumed a week later, we acted differently, starting with the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." We quit talking, and even the drunks shut up. When asked, people said they felt connected to others and part of something bigger. Some described it as feeling "patriotic" for the first time.

What else did we do that was different? We talked to strangers in the grocery line instead of reading the weird headlines in the tabloids. We spoke with neighbors whom we didn't know very well. We immediately connected with our family members even though we knew they were not in danger. We became more civil while waiting in line. We reached out to each other.

We did something else that was huge. We gave billions of dollars. Not millions or hundreds of millions but billions! We gave our blood—many of us for the first time—and overwhelmed the blood banks. We gave our dollars and our blood, such precious commodities to us, and we gave them to people we didn't know.

**“Hands that give also receive.”**  
**—Ecuadorian Proverb**

Remember the fourth feeling of a community: “a feeling of not being alone, of knowing that others in our community will help us even if they don't know us.” Most of us did just that around September 11 and enjoyed the good feelings of being in a community. We loved how we felt. We experienced

- Being connected in an invisible way to others
- Helping others
- Being part of something bigger than ourselves.

We were feeling the power of being in a community. And then we lost it. Some lost the feeling in a few weeks or months, and soon almost all of us went back to “normal,” which I believe is “abnormal,” or a lack of community.

I hope that this part of my report has given you a sense of what community is and why building community is important. Now let's turn our attention to the issue of how to build community.

### Getting to Community Building

To understand where we are, we need to look at where we have been and where we are going. In

Table 1 below, I summarize the evolution of local government and public involvement. We are currently stuck in the “vending machine” form of government, with the public viewing themselves as customers. Vending machine government depicts the local government as a machine in which citizens put in their tax dollars and pull a lever to get the exact service they want. If they don't get exactly what they want, they do what we do with vending machines: they give it a hit. They pull the lever again to get their service, and if they don't get what they want, they kick the machine. After the third time, they the hit the machine, swear at it, and kick it. We have all experienced the equivalent of hitting, swearing, and kicking from our “customers.” The hope is that we are headed into a future where government's orientation is “community as partner,” and the public actually see themselves as “citizens” rather than “customers.”

When I use the word *citizen*, I mean anyone who works and lives in our community—corporate/businesspeople as well as residents. I am *not* referring to any legal status, as all people who live within our communities are citizens of our communities. Immigration is a separate issue. Peter Block's new book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, does a marvelous job of describing the difference between citizens and customers.<sup>2</sup>

How did our public come to see themselves as customers? The private sector was the first to realize that providing high-quality customer service and saying that the customer is “always right” is very good for business. Nordstrom perfected this approach and thrived. Many of us in the public sector believed this orientation toward our residents made sense, and we emulated the private sector. We then trained our staff to treat our residents like customers.

When people are treated like customers, whether by business or by local government, they become customers. When they are told that they are always right, they come to expect to be served exactly they way they want to be served. This mindset has caused

**Table 1 Historical Evolution of Local Government and the Public**

Time period	Governmental form	Public involvement
Early history	Town hall	Active as citizens
1800s to 1930s	Political bosses	Passive: controlled by bosses
1940s, 1950s, 1960s	City fathers	Passive: power and responsibility abdicated
1970s to 2009	Vending machine	Reactionary: customer oriented
2010 to future	Community as partner	Active as citizens

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them to lose their sense of being responsible citizens and accountable for their community.

How might we characterize “customers”? Customers are people who

- Give away their power to others
- Allow others to define their needs through marketing and believe that their needs can best be satisfied by the action of others (e.g., Wal-Mart, Costco, and Nordstrom) or, in the case of government, by council, staff, teachers, cops, etc.
- Consume but do not create, and so are always complaining about something not working in their city or county
- Think in terms of “I and me,” not in terms of the welfare of the whole community
- Feel “entitled,” which allows them to escape their accountability, responsibility, and commitment to their communities.

Citizens are much different from customers and hence act differently. Citizens can best be characterized as people who

- Are willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole community
- Determine the future rather than waiting or begging for it, demanding it, or just dreaming about it
- Choose to own and exercise their power rather than delegating it or deferring to others
- Understand that sustainable change in a community can happen only when citizens are involved, committed, and accountable for that change.

The art is in knowing when your residents are customers and when they are citizens. When residents sign up for a recreation class, they are customers who are buying a product. The process should be efficient and the class of high quality. When residents turn on their water, they are customers and should expect clean, uninterrupted water at a fair price. However, residents are not customers when it comes to our educational system, crime, homelessness, youth violence, sustainability, affordable housing, and many other important issues facing cities and counties. Managers need to start talking to their staff, councils, and residents about the differences between customers and citizens. There will need to be some consciousness raising around this issue.

A major inhibitor to building community is that our residents act like customers, and we treat them as if they are. However, there are other inhibitors to community building that need to be understood in order to move forward:

### Engaged, but Not Involved

I am told that to be reelected mayor of Denver, one must have the most efficient, effective, and responsive snow removal program possible. So one mayor set up a very elaborate phone bank operation that city employees staffed during blizzards. In the middle of one blizzard, a nineteen-year-old man called and somehow got put on hold. After ten minutes, someone realized that this person had gotten lost in the system, picked up his line, and apologized profusely. The young man was irate and yelled at the employee, who continued to say how sorry she was that he had been put on hold. After the young man calmed down, the employee asked what the problem was. He responded that the city had plowed his street. The employee said, “Good, so what is the problem?” The young man said that the city left a large snow berm in front of the old lady’s house across the street and that she was unable get out to her doctor’s appointment.

Now at first blush, one might say that—contrary to how some people perceive today’s youth—this young man was fulfilling his duty as a concerned and caring neighbor and an active citizen: he took the time to call, and he stayed on the line for over ten minutes. He was engaged.

However, in the time that he took to call and complain, he *could* have gone across the street and shoveled the snow berm himself. Certainly our fathers or grandfathers would have taken the responsibility upon themselves to go out and shovel the snow so that their neighbor could make her appointment. But instead, he did what he had learned to do: call, complain, and demand action of the city. In other words, he was a *concerned resident*, but he hadn’t learned how to be an *involved citizen*. We need to help remind our residents what being an involved citizen really means.

- *We are fear driven:* The media is quick to play upon fear in its marketing strategies. We are quick to label people. We talk about “those kids” instead of “our youth.” We talk about “welfare mothers” instead of “mothers.” We define people as “gang bangers,” dropouts, immigrants, the poor, and the uneducated; we refer to the “ghetto” or the “barrio.” We label people and neighborhoods and allow our fears to divide us. We cannot achieve community if we are driven by fear.
- *We assign fault:* We blame someone for everything that is wrong. We blame Congress, Republicans and Democrats, unions and businesses, school districts, city councils, city managers, and school

superintendents. We are always blaming the anonymous “those people” who are never in the room.

- *We worship self-interest:* We are always hearing directly or indirectly: “me, my neighborhood, my idea/belief, what’s in it for me, what do I get out of it.”

## Breaking Free

We have to change the way we view ourselves and our community, which in turn will change our relationship with our community. Specifically, we have to move from customers to citizens in the way that we treat our residents and that they see themselves. We need to encourage people to let go of fear and labeling in order to be open to the ideas and perspectives of others, to move from fault finding to accepting responsibility and accountability for their community. We need to move from self-interest and silos to connectedness and caring for the whole community.

To achieve these changes, we have to change the way we interact with our residents and how they interact with each other. We have to learn better ways to come together. We have to change the discussions that we currently have with our citizens and, most importantly, the discussions that citizens have with each other. We cannot build community if we stay stuck in the same old ways. We cannot continue an approach that doesn’t work for the local government or our citizens.

The traditional meeting with the community looks something like this:

- The problem gets defined prematurely: people are brought together without having built any relationships or having attempted to find common ground.
- People begin to blame someone or some group for the problem.
- People put forth their ideas, or the government puts forth its idea.
- We all advocate for, debate, and defend our ideas endlessly without listening to or learning from others.
- The meeting usually ends up with people shouting at each other; positions harden with no resolution.

When we bring people together, we have to begin by building relationships instead of leaping into problem solving. We first must encourage people to discuss their hopes and dreams so they can begin to find common ground. Then we have to get them to start

talking about the “possibilities” instead of solutions. If, for example, we want to talk with the community about gangs, it might be best to set a broader context, such as youth violence, and then ask our citizens—always in small groups of no more than eight—to share their hopes and dreams for our youth. This is a much different discussion than talking about “those kids” or “gang bangers.”

Do we want our citizens to look backwards and define the gang problem, thus limiting the discussion? Or do we want them to look forward and develop a plan for new possibilities regarding our youth? Most importantly, are our youth highly represented in this discussion? Framing the issue and the language used is very important if the community is to become engaged in a positive way. We must be willing to trade our problems for our community’s possibilities.

***“You must be the change you want to see in the world.”***

***—Mahatma Gandhi***

It is also important to make sure we understand the difference between a problem and a symptom. Too often we try to solve symptoms and never get at the underlying problem. We usually talk about the problem being crime, drugs, teenage pregnancies, or low-performing schools. Not that these aren’t problems, but the most important underlying problem is a breakdown in community. As noted above, the data show that the higher the social capital/community, the lower the crime rate, the higher the physical and mental health, and the higher the educational performance in the community. Honestly talking about the breakdown in community and working on building a stronger community will have a greater long-term impact on these problems than developing specific programs, which usually don’t last.

The reason to frame the discussion in these terms is that your citizens are more likely see the role they play in the breakdown of the community than to see the role they play in the rising crime rate. Correctly naming the issue as a “breakdown in community” allows citizens to focus on restoring their community.

A very interesting question to ask people in small groups is, How have you contributed to the issue you are complaining about? At first you will probably get blank stares or resistance, but with some gentle nudging people will begin to realize that their contribution to an issue is most likely that they have done nothing about it.

**Table 2 Creating Community: A Matter of Focus**

The wrong focus	The right focus
On solving problems	On envisioning the possibilities
On making statements	On asking questions
On advocating for preconceived notions	On being open to new ideas
On separation, isolation, silos	On wholeness
On people's deficiencies	On people's gifts
On blaming, fault finding, or making demands on government	On accountability/responsibility of citizens
On relying on leaders	On empowering citizens
On government/business organizations	On associational life
On large organizations	On small groups
On residents as customers	On residents as citizens

The most important question we must ask small groups of citizens is, What are we going to create together with regard to this issue? This frames the issue by acknowledging that only citizen involvement will allow the community to reach its vision.

Another way to make our citizens come together differently is to have them start having conversations with each other. Encouraging a good conversation is more important than pushing for a quick fix. A conversation is different from a debate, a problem-solving session, or the typical meeting that is only about sharing information or trying to sell a program. Real conversations are a bit messy at the beginning, and we have to suppress our need for control over them. If we try to rush past the uncomfortable and messy part, we most likely will have to deal with disruption later on in the group. Meg Wheatley's book *Turning to One Another* provides a wonderful discussion about the power of conversations.<sup>3</sup> We need to remember that any important change always starts with a few people having conversations about an issue they really care about.

A major part of having a conversation is listening. Most of us, including our citizens, have forgotten how to listen. Listening is actually a very healing act, and it has nothing to do with advising, coaching, critiquing, or persuading. We all have our own stories that we want to tell, but only to people who are willing to listen without judgment.

Community comes about because of relationships. Relationships develop by listening to each others' stories. Community building, conversations, and listening are all tied together and take time to develop. Our fast-paced society is not conducive to thinking, reflecting, and understanding. So it is important to

get your citizens together differently, help them build relationships, share stories, and have conversations about issues that matter to them.

### Three Important Truths about Community Building, and a Conceptual Model

John McKnight of Northwestern University has been studying community building across the United States and has discovered three crucial factors that must be present in order to truly build community.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Focus on the Gifts*: Unfortunately, we focus on groups in terms of their deficiencies—for example, “special education kids” instead of students, or “welfare mothers” instead of mothers, or “chronically unemployed” instead of unemployed. It would be similar to having a meeting with a group of friends to plan an event and saying, “Bill, what skills don't you have that can't help us?” or “Sally, what aren't you able to do to contribute to this event?” Citizens in true communities want to know what you *can* do, not what you *can't* do. We must focus on the gifts that all people in our community have. Look for people's gifts, not their deficiencies.
2. *Associational Life*: Systems and organizations—for example, cities, counties, or welfare agencies—can provide quality services but not care. Associations are groups of people who come together voluntarily to do something good—to help people they care about because those people are part of the whole community and not because they are deficient or needy. McKnight describes a community as “an association of associations.”



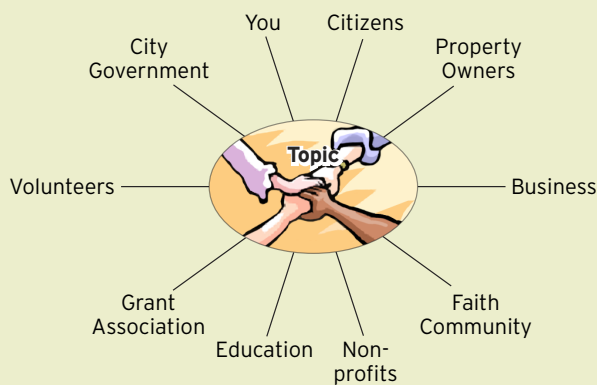
3. **Power in Citizen Hands:** Citizens have the ability to identify and solve issues themselves or in partnership with their local government. In fact, sustainable improvement in a community occurs only when citizens discover their own power to act. Citizens must choose to be accountable for what their community will become. Citizens will be accountable for and committed to what they help create. They will not be committed to a plan that they were not a part of creating, even if they think it is worthwhile.

Ray Patchett, a good friend and retired city manager of Carlsbad, California, has developed interesting models that visualize the role of the local government in building a community. The first model (Figure 1) shows the city or county recognizing that there are a lot of other stakeholders; however, the local government is at the hub. By implication, local government is responsible for solving all the community's problems. Unfortunately, this model is outdated.

**Figure 1 Old Partnership Wheel**



**Figure 2 New Partnership Wheel**



In a newer iteration of this model (Figure 2), the city or county is just one of many stakeholders, and the topic or issue is at the center or hub. This clearly means that the local government is a partner with others in addressing an issue and that any combination of stakeholders can get together and deal with an issue without involving the government. This model removes the city or county as the sole responsible party to resolve all thorny issues.

### Leadership and the Roles of the Local Government in Community Building

Community building means leadership! This is not something that has been written about in ICMA's Green Books, taught in MPA programs, endorsed by your city council, understood by your staff, or demanded by your citizens. Community building requires initiative, risk taking, creativity, and strong leadership. As the local government manager, it will be up to *you* to provide the leadership to start building community in your city or county. It is the most lasting legacy you can leave your community.

The roles that a local government can play in community building fall into four categories.

#### Consciousness Raiser

Being a product of the 1960s, I learned that if you want to move people in a certain direction, you have to spend time raising their consciousness about an issue before they are ready to take a journey with you.

#### Example: Community Building Speaker Series

Redwood City citizens, like most citizens, were not thinking about community building, nor was it a priority for them. It was not on anyone's radar screen. I put together a speaker series in which I cajoled some of the top writers, speakers, and thinkers on community building to help my citizens think about and understand the importance of building community. One hundred citizens signed up for a series of five presentations. We met from 6 to 9 on a weekday evening, and as you must always do, we served dinner so that everyone got to know their tablemates. The feedback was "over the top" positive. We repeated this speaker series on three separate occasions, all to rave reviews, and the attendance never dropped off. People were delighted and profoundly moved that the city would put on such a series.

#### Convener

A powerful role for the city is to convene meetings of citizens so that they can talk to each other and discuss

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issues of interest to them. Sometimes you may just convene events for people to get to know each other and have fun. Ultimately, citizens will begin to convene themselves, but the city will play a part in this important development.

**Example: Redwood City Plaza** Redwood City built a plaza where there was none, and we began to aggressively manage the plaza to get citizens to begin to use it as their gathering place. Every Wednesday we have free outdoors movies, every Thursday free dance lessons, and every Friday a free concert. The downtown plaza developed a buzz as the place to go and meet your friends.

**Example: Citizens Academy** Redwood City is in its tenth year of running a citizens academy, but it is not like most citizens academies. Our purpose was for citizens to meet other citizens and for our employees and citizens to get to know each other. City council members, the city manager, and department heads were restricted to a three-minute welcome. For nine weeks the citizens met on weekend evenings from 6 to 9 and were served a nice dinner at round tables holding about eight people. Each table was given a topic—for example, tell us something about your name or family history that is interesting to you—as a way for attendees to get to know each other better.

City employees had to show citizens what to do without lecturing them. It had to be hands-on, interactive, and fun, with no talking heads or PowerPoints allowed. We have continued to get rave reviews, and the attendance has stayed steady. Citizens get to know each other personally and they get to know their city employees. Both sides drop the negative labels they have for each other. The citizens feel pride in their city and their employees. (Remember feeling #2, “the feeling of pride in something.”)

### Catalyst

Sometimes it is important for the city to make something happen in order to kick-start other actions. The city can become the catalyst that prompts people to get together and do something for themselves.

**Example: Redwood City Plaza** Redwood City, like many cities, was trying to revitalize its downtown. And for that we decided that we needed a center to galvanize the citizens. We decided to build a plaza, which would serve both as the community’s “living room” and as a catalyst for further economic development. The synergism of the plaza, with its entertainment, restaurants, and retail outlets, has created a focal point for the community. The citizens are using

their living room, and there is a sense of excitement downtown.

**Example: Disaster Planning** The city was the catalyst for neighbors coming together to plan for the next disaster. We had two objectives in creating this initiative. First, all community building starts at the neighborhood level (again, most of our residents don’t know half of their neighbors). Although they were tasked with preparing for a disaster, neighbors were also getting to know each other and forming a community. Second, we knew that when the big earthquake hits, we won’t be able to return to our neighborhoods for at least seven days, and citizens need to know how to make it on their own for that period of time.

**Example: Fundraising** Most noteworthy was a community-building effort by our fire department. A fire crew went out on a medical call and learned that a little girl had brain cancer and needed surgery; however, her parents didn’t have insurance and couldn’t afford the surgery. Without asking permission, the crew decided to put on a small fundraiser within the department for the girl. The event grew as community members learned of these efforts and began to help the fire crew. The result was that over 500 community members attended a fundraising dinner and auction and raised around \$80,000 for the girl and her parents. Over 95 percent of the citizens who attended did not know the girl or her parents. Remember feeling #4, “A feeling of not being alone, of knowing that others in our community will help us even if they don’t know us.” This is a great example of that.

### Facilitator

The role of the city is to provide high-quality, professional facilitation so that a meeting of citizens is well run and doesn’t get into the same old unproductive behavior of debating, advocating, ignoring others, and each person pushing his or her own idea.

**Example: Recycled Water** Redwood City was using more than its allotted share of water. After much research, city staff developed a program of water conservation and recycled water for irrigation and commercial use. During the development of the program, a growing segment of our community began to worry about the health factors of putting recycled water on parks and playing fields. This issue began to divide the community. The council knew it had to cut back on potable water, but it didn’t want to divide the community.

The mayor asked me as city manager to come up with a better process. We positioned the council to

move from controlling the outcome to establishing a process with policy guidelines. We put ten citizens in favor of using recycled water and ten folks opposed to it on a task force, gave them \$60,000 to hire consultants to help them, and provided a highly qualified professional facilitator. We told the task force that they had to save 2,000 acre-feet of water per year and that they could not spend over \$72 million, which was the cost of the plan that a segment of the community opposed. We gave them four months and said they must reach a consensus recommendation. The last condition was that if they failed to meet the above policy guidelines, the council would move forward with Plan B, which the opponents didn't want. This last condition prevented the opposed group from bringing the task force to a standstill. The council also stated publicly that if the task force met all the conditions, it would accept their recommendation.

In the end, the task force came back with a recommendation that was a better idea than staff or consultants had devised. The council accepted the recommendation, and Redwood City solved its water supply problem and, at the same time, built a stronger community. The task force members who used to dislike each other ended up having celebratory anniversary dinners for several years after they completed their work. People in Redwood City still refer to that task force as a model. The council learned that often there is more power in setting up a legitimate process with policy guidelines than in being the "decider."

## Lessons Learned

Through the experiences in Redwood City, I have learned the following lessons about community building:

- Understand that the roles of the local government are consciousness raiser, convener, catalyst, and facilitator.
- Ask the right questions: it is more important than rushing to solutions.
- Engage your public in a well-designed community-building strategy, and they will accept their responsibility and act like citizens, not customers.
- Change old assumptions, roles, and behaviors of staff, council, and citizens.
- Trust what your community is telling you. Go to great lengths to be truthful in soliciting and *accepting* community involvement and input, even if it is critical of your programs or actions. Provide clear and thorough information, and always maintain

candor with community members to gain a high level of mutual trust.

- Believe in and embrace the concepts and the value of helping people connect with the local government and with each other. The commitment to working on community building must initially exist in the city manager's office and eventually be endorsed and embraced throughout the organization.
- Let go! The city doesn't always have an "end-product," "desired outcome," or "right answer" identified. Often, the dialogue itself *is* the outcome. It's a *process*, not just a project, and it can be a long, slow process that doesn't take place in the fast lane. It stops and starts and changes direction. Allow for and accept a high degree of ambiguity.
- Make community building a way of doing the city's business. Make it an everyday part of your organizational culture and your philosophy with a need for flexibility, determination, and long-term commitment.
- Bring people together and help them make community connections. This is more important than measuring results.
- Make sure that the nuts-and-bolts logistics are handled well in order to place a high level of attention on the dialogue and substance of the community-building process.
- Follow up early on with community members who participated in a particular event, and develop a means of maintaining contact with them and renewing the community connection that you're trying to nurture.
- Bring all points of view to the table. Don't dismiss differing viewpoints as bad or wrong; just view them as new ideas that you haven't yet considered. Know that the more diversity you have in the room, the more creativity you will have in community problem solving.
- Keep a sense of humor and use it to share the excitement and enthusiasm of working to build a great community together.
- Be a leader in this venture.

## Community Building: Why We Love This Profession!

Let's step back from the data, concepts, examples, and specifics of community building and talk about it from a very personal level. Community building

## 12 Community Building: How to Do It, Why It Matters

is all about building relationships, helping others, empowering people, connecting people, helping them to dream and believe in themselves, and helping them to not feel alone. This is why most of us got into this profession in the first place, but over time many of us seem to have lost our focus. We haven't lost our love for the profession, but we have forgotten what it is we love about it: the community-building aspect. So as a reminder, this job is about

- Feeling good because you are helping little kids who have it really tough and seeing them laugh and have fun
- Helping a family realize their first home and watching the tears of joy as they get the keys to it
- Taking a dead downtown, turning it around, and hearing residents speak about the change with pride and ownership
- Helping citizens begin to understand and feel the power and pride in building their community
- Playing Santa Claus for the police and fire departments' holiday toy drive, giving presents to families in need, and watching the kids' eyes light up with joy and the tears of gratitude from their parents
- Pulling together a divided community and getting folks talking instead of arguing
- Turning people on to possibilities before them and getting them excited about achieving their vision.
- Giving senior citizens a place to meet and not be alone, and helping them to feel worthwhile and useful rather than useless
- Providing safe programs for young kids so that they don't just hang out and get into trouble
- Watching a neighborhood come together and feel pride in planning its new park
- Making this world just a tiny, tiny bit better because of what you have done.

All the above are about *community building*. It simply doesn't get any better than this. Of course, it is a job that will kick your butt at times, but it will also provide you with passion, pride, joy, happiness, excitement, and challenge.

Community building is the part of your job that fills your *soul*.

Community building is the part of your job that feeds your *spirit*.

Community building is the part of your job that makes you feel *alive*.

## Conclusion

Let me close with a story from my experience in Redwood City:

We had just finished a program to connect people and build community, and we wanted to know if the program had any impact on the citizens who attended. We simply asked what, if anything, had changed for them. Most people spoke and were very positive of the program. The last person to speak was Maria, who had lived in Redwood City for twelve years. Each morning, she said, she woke up and drove to South San Francisco, where she worked. Each evening she got in her car and drove back to Redwood City, where she lived. She then got quiet. I waited for a while and finally asked, "But Maria, what changed for you?" "Oh, everything has changed. I still drive to South San Francisco in the morning but after work when I get in my car, I now drive home. Driving home is very different from driving back to where I live."

Community building is about making all our residents feel like they are driving home.

## Notes

1. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
2. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers, 2008).
3. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers, 2002).
4. John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Skokie, Ill.: ACTA Publications, 1997).

## Notes

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