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THEME: MEMBER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

**A Lesson that
Transcends Time**
The Consequences of
Forcing a Square Peg
into a Round Hole

**Creating
Community-
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Community is not a new concept ... so why all the buzz now?

The concept of “community” has been around since people first gathered in one place – whether as a tribe, a town or a group with a special interest such as a professional or trade association. Many organizations are now investing resources in purposely creating community within their membership. One non-profit organization that does this well is Habitat for Humanity International. Founded in 1976, it creates community by serving others. Habitat “seeks to eliminate poverty, housing, and homelessness from the world and to make decent shelter a matter of conscience and action” as stated on their Web site.

Building and Sharing Communities

By the very nature of Habitat’s mission, the organization creates

community through **volunteers** as well as the housing recipients. In 30 years, Habitat has built more than 200,000 houses around the world, providing more than 1,000,000 people in 3,000 plus communities with shelter. The relevance of the mission has enabled the organization to build a community internally and externally, as nurtured from a vision planted by Habitat founders, Millard and Linda Fuller.

How does it work? The organization creates relationships with affiliates in the local community. Habitat then works with independent, locally run, non-profit organizations like trade/professional associations or faith communities. Each affiliate coordinates all aspects of Habitat building in its local area; aspects such as fund raising, building site selection, partner family selection, house construction and mortgage servicing.

Within this framework, Habitat

models community through how they work and enable others.

“Modeling the way” is one of five practices of exemplary leadership that authors Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes outline in *The Leadership Challenge*. In addition to modeling the way, the authors’ other practices are: inspire a shared vision; enable others to act; challenge the process; and encourage the heart. In nearly every way, Habitat puts these practices to work in creating community.

For example, in 2001, the local community affiliates tithed over \$9 million additional funds to support Habitat’s work overseas. All Habitat affiliates are asked to tithe, or give 10 percent of, their contributions to fund house-building work in other nations. By doing this, Habitat is not only “modeling the way” in how communities can support other

communities but also “encouraging the heart” both of the givers, and of the recipients of much needed housing.

Learning Communities

Lions Clubs International, founded in 1917, has built community around the world by fulfilling a mission of “creating and fostering a spirit of understanding among all people for humanitarian needs by providing voluntary services through community involvement and international cooperation.” Their vision-related service has expanded through the years to include a wide variety of community service initiatives. Within this structure, there are local efforts, including leadership development, that have built community within the membership.

In the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, Lion Leaders worked with Leadership Outfitters to create a unique learning community experience for their Annual Regional Leadership Institute. Built around the metaphor of drumming and tribal communities, the conference was opened by handing out rhythm instruments to the over 80 Lions participants. Led by five drummers setting the “pulse of the community” the participants were quickly able to form a focused community of learning which extended through the three-day event (see sidebar). Drums were used to gather people from breaks and education breakouts. The images of drumming and tribal villages continued through group discussions, an idea wall and printed materials. The mission was constantly reinforced back to building community and creating connections with each other.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Institute of Organization Management (the Institute) has succeeded in building learning communities in a multi-year program held at various sites around the country. The Institute’s mission is “to advance the effectiveness of organizations by providing a quality environment of professional development and support for chamber and association professionals.”

That “environment of professional development” is a unique learning environment, created around collegial settings, that has resulted in a strong learning

Creating Community through Rhythm

In a village, community or team, the key is cooperation and communication. In order to be in sync, we must listen and take cues from one another. There is a musical conversation between lead drummers and a community of rhythm. Sometimes you want to stay on beat and sometimes you break out of the rhythm to create an interesting counter rhythm. But on the whole, all percussion instruments must be listening and working with each other.

In a jam session the hierarchical chart flattens out – all participants become the performers, each contributing in his or her unique way. Regardless of job description, area of expertise, geographic location, tenure or seniority, and despite age, gender or cultural background, the team is truly ‘in sync!’ That is what we aim for in our jam and that is ultimately what we aim for in our organizations.

Participants receive a variety of rhythm instruments: shakers, gongs, bells and sticks. For the Lions Leadership Institute we made customized shakers from empty water bottles and beans. Five lead drummers set the pulse and led the group through several “jams” where folks had to listen for the changing beat and play along. In keeping with the village theme, a ‘call and response’ song called “Fanga” enabled the lead drummers and participants to communicate by voice as well as drums. This traditional Nigerian call and response was taught by the renowned drummer Babatunde Ojatinji. It is a song of welcome, peace and blessing. We equated the symbolism of Fanga, used by traveling tribes upon entering a new village to communicate that they came in peace, with our organizations and how we communicate with one another.

In keeping with the village and drum themes, we posted an idea wall outside the classrooms. The idea was, if anthropologists were studying the Lions’ village, what observations would they make? They might be positive, negative or in the form of questions. The ideas generated were used to spark discussion at dinner and breaks.

The wall was divided into five areas: Worship, Elders, Legends, Communications and Celebrations. Within each section, the following questions were posted.

- **Worship:** What is worshipped in this village? What are the rituals of worship?”
- **Elders:** Who are the elders?, How are they treated? How does one become an elder? What is their role in the village?
- **Legends:** What stories or legends do people hear when they first join the village? Whom do they hear the stories from? What new stories have been heard lately?
- **Communications:** What are the formal channels of communication? What informal communication channels exist and who uses them? How is reality communicated? Who is included and who is left out of the communication patterns?
- **Celebrations:** How does this village celebrate? What is celebrated? Who participates in the celebrations? What is honored and rewarded?

community. Those participating as students, faculty, trustees and regents bond together during the four-year, week-long Institute. “Classes” proudly identify themselves by designing tee shirts and slogans resulting from something meaningful within the community. Students stay in touch between the annual Institutes through peer coaching, sharing their successes and challenges, and preparing for the next year. Graduates of the four-year program return as class advisors; much of the faculty returns year after year; and both faculty and graduates have moved up to serve as trustees or regents. Those that have graduated as “IOMs” share a unique learning experience and often continue the community relationship beyond graduating from the program.

Communities Have a Clear Mission and Purpose

How can we apply the success of these organizations’ abilities to create and nurture community? The most obvious step in fostering a healthy community is to have a clear mission or purpose. The key is to have a purpose that people recognize as worth their valuable time and limited resources. Communities whose members not only understand the mission, but are passionate about it, thrive and attract more members with the same interest and passion.

These organizations are just three examples of how an organization can stay authentic to its mission. Maybe your organization can be included in the list. Are decisions within the community made with the mission in mind? Each time the community acts, does it examine organizational mission to ensure that it is remaining consistent? Along with mission must come a clear understanding of vision. According to *The Leadership Challenge*, an organization can “inspire a shared vision” if it can not only envision the future, but clearly communicate the vision and engage

others in seeing the exciting possibilities for the future. A future that is set by the community, not just one particular leader, is more powerful and more likely to be achieved.

What is your organization doing right now to inspire a shared vision? Do you know who you want to be and where you want to go?

Communities Constantly Change and Evolve

Each year Habitat involves a variety of people in projects, the Lions work with new leaders, and the Institute of Organization Management adds a new “freshman” class. These caring and learning communities see an influx of new members and flex to adjust to the changing individual needs and organizational challenges. Just like a tribal village, some traditions or rituals are continually practiced, there are elders within the community, and there are shared stories among the members. Identifying these components and learning where they help or hinder the community is important to the process of growth and development. This may require communities to “challenge the process,” looking at what is working and what is not.

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, calls this process “facing the brutal facts.” What brutal facts must your community face in order to create a better experience? Using the framework of tribal village is one way to explore this area (see sidebar).

Creating Community within Meetings and Events

There are a variety of strategies to initiate the community-building process. Start small by adding community aspects to meetings and events within your organization such as greeting people at the door and mentoring guests. Sounds simple enough, but how many organizations actually practice this basic strategy?

Organizations can create areas in which participants gather informally

and share ideas with soft seating clusters, idea walls and community bulletin boards. Members can build community through shared stories, creating cheers or songs, designing group pennants or wearing coordinated tees. Groups can rally around a community-service project as simple as bringing food, books, eyeglasses or cell phones to donate, or as complicated as building, painting, cleaning or restoring homes, schools or playgrounds.

A brainstorming idea tool that can help this process is ASAE and the Center for Association Leadership “Community Building Card Deck” created by both association executives and business partners. The thought-provoking deck is the result of association leaders who met together and shared over 50 ways that they have built community within meetings and events.

Consider how your meetings and events are structured, how people are encouraged or not encouraged to gather, what folks talk about and compare, and how members relate to one another. Through this data, an organization can begin to identify ways to create and build community by starting small or building on an existing healthy community-centered organization.

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