

# Helping Org

*September 11 changed how many employees view their jobs and workplace. People may find it difficult to focus on learning. Building a sense of community in organizations can help refocus people on shared values and create an environment of support in which employees are fully engaged.*

I was introducing a group of managers to the concepts in James Autry's book *Love and Profit* when I heard about the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. The class had started at 8:30 a.m., just before the first plane hit. Managers who came to the session late shared fragmented updates of the situation they'd heard on television. People began talking and asking questions, none of which pertained to Autry's book. As our small, suburban Chicago office was evacuated, a senior manager canceled the session. I realized in that moment that everything would change—not just the onset of war or

tightened security but the way people view their workplace, their co-workers, and even the meaning of their work.

Training professionals have a difficult job right now. We're trying to impart knowledge to employees who are at best distracted or apathetic and at worst scared and disillusioned. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposes that people are motivated by unsatisfied needs and that "lower needs" such as safety and security have to be satisfied before attending to "higher needs" such as personal growth and development. How can learning professionals do their jobs and help organizations become successful when employees

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are wondering whether their mail is laced with anthrax? The answer may lie in helping to create an environment of support and belonging, in which employees have the opportunity to do their best. Economic downturn and massive layoffs make that a challenge, but not impossible. In fact, people might be especially receptive now to opportunities to shape and have more control over their surroundings. One way to encourage that is by building a sense of community.

Powering community in the workplace isn't new. The quality movement in the late 1970s touched on the idea of participative management as a way to bring

groups of employees together around common principles, such as quality. In the early 1990s, Peter Senge and James Autry talked about the necessary elements of a productive community to produce learning organizations and caring leaders. Autry writes: "Community is the new metaphor for organizations," saying that before the industrial age, all values entered society through the church and state.

People witness healthy and destructive values played out in the workplace. A community teaches values, and those values have the power to strengthen its members or divide them. Like it or not, the pillars of commerce have become a

A sense of community at work can make all the difference.

# community

By Tracy Mauro

# Community building is an unstoppp

central place where people learn values. Organizations that want to survive cultivate healthy values that bring success to staff and shareholders.

The need to belong and feel supported in the workplace becomes more important as our world becomes more uncertain. Many people spend at least half of their waking hours during the week at work, making the workplace a home away from home. Think for a moment about the home where you live and the reasons you chose to live there. The community and people were probably major factors in your decision. It's no different in the workplace. In community-building exercises I lead, I ask participants to remember a time when they experienced a positive community and to list the characteristics that made it special. Later in the exercise, they usually discover that the characteristics they listed are the same attributes they seek in their workplace now.

Clifton Taulbert, in his book *Eight Habits of the Heart: The Timeless Values That Build Community Within Our Homes and Our Lives*, writes: "From the classroom to the . . . office cubicle, there are people who wait to hear someone say, 'Welcome.' No one really enjoys eating alone or having no one to talk with."

The profound effect of the events of September 11 and since offer organizations a new opportunity to create places of support and acceptance. Organizational leaders can stabilize their workforces by recognizing what Autry calls "the sudden, compulsive search for connection and a sense of community," in which the workplace is the neighborhood and co-workers are extended family.

## A home by any other name

Training professionals must first have a clear definition of what community is before they can begin the process of helping an organization build one. Although there is no commonly accepted definition of community, most definitions include similar characteristics. Community seems to be categorized by either sharing a common space or common interests. The definitions in *Merriam-Webster's* combine both of those aspects: "an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location" or "a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society." Community researcher Carl Moore provides a simple definition appropriate for the workplace: "[where people] work together to bring the greatest good for the greatest number of people."

Many management experts think that shared values and goals are an important part of the definition of community within organizations. James Kouzes and Barry Posner, in their book *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, say that in order for people to perceive themselves as part of a community, they need to believe that their goals are cooperative and that they share a common purpose. Only then will people make their co-workers' problems their own and solve them together.

Regardless of how learning and workplace performance professionals define *community*, the word evokes unique images in the minds of participants. Many think of a physical place where they experienced a sense of community, such as the neighborhood where they grew up.

Taulbert recalls the small town in the Mississippi Delta where he grew up amidst segregation in the years before Martin Luther King Jr.: "But I realize now that the place was just a set . . . In other words, the real community I knew as a child was not held captive by geography, nor was it defined by the physical stuff that was part of our place." Rather, he says, community was defined by the actions and behavior of the members. Taulbert underscores that definition: "Community is an intangible that is so real that you miss it when it can't be found."

In May 1999, the National League of Cities held a conference to help representatives foster inclusion and belonging in their hometowns. When asked to finish the sentence "Community is . . .," participants mentioned working together and caring, having a sense of collective responsibility and ownership, and providing a safe environment for citizens to participate in. As any trainer knows, those are essential elements in fostering an environment for learning to take place.

The value of creating a sense of community in the workplace might be obvious to people in the learning and performance profession, but some powers-that-be will want an explanation of how that's useful to the company. Some executives may view community building as another soft-skills program that takes employees off the floor but doesn't produce immediate results. Taulbert, who teaches community building to executives, says he generates buy-in from his high-level audiences by showing that community makes a clear connection between employees' hearts and minds and improved job performance.

# able process once it gets started.

“You have to bring leaders back to the point of realizing that nothing can be built without people. People are still the key to building the business,” says Taulbert. Most of the time, people aren’t fully engaged and working at 100 percent capacity, especially when distracted by crises. Employees choose every day when and how much extra effort they will expend after meeting the minimum performance standards, which Kouzes and Posner refer to as discretionary effort. When companies create an environment in which employees want to be fully engaged, they “touch the soul,” as Taulbert describes it, and people are more likely to expend their discretionary effort.

Once employees are fully engaged in their work, extraordinary things start to happen. The presence of positive community leads to tangible results. The advisory council for the NLC has found several benefits of building a sense of community in cities, which are readily applicable in organizations. Employees can be involved in every step of a community-building process, which when combined with the values a supportive community espouses, creates a sense of responsibility people feel towards other community members and their organizations. People are more likely to fulfill obligations and perform at their best when they feel committed to the organization and its members. An environment of mutual support also empowers teams themselves to solve their problems and leads to shared ownership of work results. In addition, problems are identified early when employees anticipate that they’ll receive help from others and can openly discuss the issues.

Last, employees who perceive them-

selves as community members can be expected to interact more frequently than employees in other groups. The process of learning about each other can break down stereotypes. Though community can’t be measured quantitatively, that doesn’t take away from its real and powerful importance.

## Getting started

The good news about beginning the process of building community in the workplace is that most organizations don’t need to start from scratch. Elements of positive community are probably already apparent. Supportive and caring connections between people have been forming spontaneously in organizations as long as they’ve been around. Such relationships are often formed without the support—and, in some cases, the efforts—of management.

Says Autry, “In the new workplace, the bonds of family and neighborhood have emerged so strongly that managers, running to catch up, may arrive to find an environment the employees have already created.” In other words, employees will create some form of community on their own. Workplace communities are like gardens that may grow wild when unattended or flourish when guided. Organizations can build on the best qualities of the community employees have already formed to help it develop in a positive direction.

An NLC 1998 report, “Building a Nation of Communities,” recommends starting a conversation at all organizational levels about the need to create community. The focus should depend on the audience. Training professionals

working with a group of executives will want to drive home the potential effect on productivity and give examples of other organizations that have reaped rewards from community building. Managers will want to know how strengthening community will make their jobs easier regarding their teams. Individual contributors will be interested in hearing how community building will benefit them and what the organization will do to support them in that endeavor.

One question to anticipate from management is how to deal with employees who don’t buy into the community-building effort. Taulbert suggests asking managers to think of creating community in the same way as implementing any standard work process. “Suppose you had a process in place for how work was going to get done,” he says. “You would forge ahead.”

As with any major organizational initiative, leaders should champion the effort to foster a healthy community and work with people who want to take part. That will drive momentum around the community, have a positive effect on relationships and the organization, and win over stragglers. “Community building is an unstoppable process once it gets started,” says Taulbert.

Building and sustaining a community requires strong leadership. Taulbert cautions that “it isn’t for the faint of heart and requires tough leadership in the presence of community.” Leaders must be fully committed and must maintain commitment from others even in difficult times. Although employees form positive communities in spite of unsupportive leadership,

that's not the usual or best case.

### Positive values

Two important components of a discussion around community are allowing people to explore what community means to them and educating employees about elements that might be found in a positive community. Participants can uncover their personal meaning of community by finishing the statement "Community is . . ." Unfortunately, some people have never experienced a healthy community, either at home or in the workplace, and will lack a model. Organizations need to make sure employees have a clear idea of what positive community values are so that the community can grow in a productive direction.

One way to educate employees about what a positive community looks like is to provide examples of how other organizations have successfully built communities or values found in productive communities. In his book, Taulbert describes these important values of any healthy community:

**A nurturing attitude.** Members care about each other and believe that the organization cares about them. For example, a manager might call a sick employee at home to see how that person is feeling. Autry talks about a group of employees at a municipal water plant who donated part of their vacation time so that a co-worker with cancer could extend his medical leave.

**Dependability.** Employees need to be able to rely on their co-workers, especially in times when they can't depend on the organization for support. Members of strong communities don't want to let co-workers down and will often fulfill their commitments despite challenging circumstances.

**Responsibility.** Employees who are part of a community care about their workplace and feel individually responsible for maintaining a productive environ-

ment. They realize that every act, no matter how small, has the power to build or break community.

**Friendship.** "When friendship is absent, people often live in envy and fear." Taulbert's words highlight the importance of the often-overlooked element of friendship. People don't leap out of bed in the morning to be with co-workers they don't like and who don't care about them. Friendships at work help people get through the day and make them want to contribute to the team.

**Brotherhood and sisterhood.** A strong community is needed to bring together people with differing agendas so that they can work side-by-side as equals. Organizational boundaries can blur as technology enables global influences to permeate physical barriers. Taulbert alludes to the challenge of diversity by saying we've "entered a global community where we're challenged to reach beyond the comfort of our closest relationships to welcome others different from ourselves." Leaders can model diversity acceptance by holding themselves accountable to the same expectations they have for their staff and by pitching in to help when needed.

**High expectations.** Expectations have power because people will rise to the level of high expectations or live down to low ones. Leaders who make a daily practice of telling employees that they're valuable and competent build a community in which people are encouraged to maximize their talents.

**Courage.** Creating a positive community will test the character of everyone involved. Says Taulbert, "It takes courage to keep your gaze on what's right when all around you, people are padding their expense accounts . . . or cheating customers . . ." He adds, courage is "speaking out on behalf of others, and making a commitment to excellence in the face of adversity or the absence of support."

Employees need to see their leaders

model ethical behavior at all costs to know what the organization values and expects.

**Hope.** Hope sustains people during the worst of times, and communities that pull together for the common good create an abundance of hope.

Once commitment to the process is secured and employees understand the concept of community, the next step is to engage employees by creating and encouraging activities that promote community. If community is defined partly by the behavior of its members, then it makes sense to establish a set of shared values and goals; that's where many experts suggest starting. Unless people know what they have in common and realize that their individual goals can be met only by cooperating with others, there's little reason for them to commit to building a community. It's important that the values upon which a community is based be shared among its members and leaders, because people won't support values, individually or as a group, if they can't identify with them. Shared values also strengthen commitment to the organization when employees find that their personal values match the values that their work community practices.

Identifying shared community values as a group can flow naturally from the initial discussion about what community means to each person. Team members will often mention similar aspects of community that can translate into defined team values. The leader of the community is responsible for structuring processes that reinforce the shared values and that create shared goals. Managers can give team members projects that require them to make recommendations or solve problems as a group. Kouzes and Posner say that most people are genuinely interested in helping others, as long it doesn't mean they'll lose if the other team wins. Leaders who reward team success as

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opposed to individual efforts will avoid power struggles.

## If you build it, they will come

Employees who have identified a set of shared community values and are engaged in cooperative projects should be encouraged to take their new community and run with it. Taulbert challenges his clients to become general contractors responsible for building the community. It's crucial to encourage people to think of their community at work in the same way as their community at home. Sometimes, physical transformations can facilitate the community-building process.

Some employees choose to make their workplace resemble a small town by giving aisles street names and setting up a coffee shop in a shared space. Employees also form birthday committees and organize team potluck lunches. Such activities might seem frivolous to some people, but they can go a long way towards creating a friendly, nurturing environment that promotes trust and strengthens commitment to team members. It's why most organizations hold holiday parties and employee picnics in the summer.

Community-building efforts that affect work directly shouldn't be ignored. Community members, either as a team or through a designated committee, should be guided to identify business-related challenges held by members of their community, to develop the means to address those issues, and to set goals

and priorities for their community.

The final step in building a workplace community is to sustain the effort for the long term. Trainers can be especially helpful in this phase because if employees don't have the interpersonal skills that will help them build positive relationships, they'll need training. Ideally, training should start during the formation of the community-building initiative so that employees are prepared by that stage. Of course, people don't learn trust and respect in a classroom but by doing. In those instances, trainers can serve as coaches.

An organization's leaders play an important role in sustaining communities, which is similar to maintaining a house: The physical structure demands a continual process of upkeep. In the workplace, employees can't just grow community one time; they must cultivate it for as long as they're together. Leaders can nurture the community by establishing the strong expectations that employees will develop cooperative work relationships and deal openly with problems. Leaders should back up those expectations by rewarding employees who practice the community's values and by coaching those who don't. Managers can use hiring practices that find candidates who already share at least some of the key community values, and new-employee orientation can communicate the values.

Last, it's essential to review community

values periodically so that teams can renew themselves as the environment changes. For example, a critical event such as those on September 11 may cause a team to focus more on a value such as connectedness—not only within the community, but also with neighboring teams and external communities.

Ultimately, the community is responsible for its survival. Like all organization initiatives, communities will go through dormant and renewal phases. Fear not when you see the spirit of community wax and wane. Scott Peck, author of *A World Waiting to Be Born*, contends that a group doesn't have to be in a genuine state of community at all times to be healthy. "It's normal for groups to fall out of this genuine state and into temporary emptiness or even chaos. Truly healthy groups are determined by how quickly its members recognize that they have lost community and by their willingness to rapidly rebuild it."

The principles of positive community can reach far beyond the physical boundaries of a single office building. Organizations with employees who are located internationally, who telecommute, or who work in a virtual community can build strong communities that reach out to distant groups. Companies with offices in other parts of the world will find that, though the languages may differ, the yearning to belong is universal.

Creating community is especially



important in virtual organizations, where employees may never meet their co-workers or customers. Developing relationships with members of the community can combat feelings of isolation.

A strong sense of community tends to correlate with exceptional company performance. Two popular examples are eBay and Southwest Airlines. Chat rooms, bulletin boards, and newsletters have made eBay a 24/7 forum for people who like to trade and collect. Some eBay community members hold picnics and take trips together.

At first, eBay founder and chairman Pierre Omidyar was surprised by the response. "I thought people would simply buy and sell things, but what they really enjoyed was meeting other people," he says in the February 2001 issue of *Inc.* Executives at eBay educate new employees during orientation about shared val-

ues, and those values are reinforced. President and CEO Meg Whitman strives to foster connections between employees and customers by encouraging staff to start collections of their own.

One of the few airlines that didn't seek a federal loan after September 11 was Southwest. It's no coincidence Southwest has done well financially even in hard times. The airline reinvented air travel with low fares, exceptional service, and a strong sense of identity. It found success by being courageous enough to create an environment in which people can love and care at work.

Several months have passed since the events on September 11, and life at work has returned to a new form of normalcy. I repeatedly hear from company leaders that we should "get back to business as usual" and "move on." They may not see that many employees are still glued to

Internet news sites every time a plane crashes or when another person contracts anthrax. Executives may see training sessions packed with participants, but not their eyes staring through the instructor as they worry about not receiving raises this year because business is down. Letting employees remain disengaged is unhealthy for them and financially disastrous for an organization.

Leaders should be encouraged to take advantage of this present opportunity to unite people around common values that will create a place where people feel good about the work they do. Your company's survival may depend on it. TD

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