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guide to create the community you  
have envisioned for yourself and others."  
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*The Power of Purpose* and *Life Reimagined*

# The Art of Community

SEVEN PRINCIPLES  
FOR BELONGING

Charles H. Vogl

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—**Jonathan Knowles, Explorer in Residence, Autodesk, and host of the Autodesk IDEAS series**

“If you are tasked with bringing families, neighborhoods, or organizations together, read this book first. In *The Art of Community*, author Charles Vogl reinvigorates a vision of community and the importance of social bonds to our well-being. In place of our convenient and transient associations, Vogl tells us how to establish relationships that are more meaningful and enduring.”

—**Michael O’Malley, author or coauthor of *Every Leader Is an Artist*, *The Wisdom of Bees*, and *Leading with Kindness***

# The Art of Community

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*Seven Principles  
for Belonging*

CHARLES H. VOGL



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# The Art of Community

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1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

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First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-62656-841-9

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-842-6

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-843-3

2016-1

Project management, design, and composition by Steven Hiatt, Hiatt & Dragon, San Francisco.

Copyeditor: Paula Dragosh. Proofreader: Tom Hassett. Indexer: Theresa Duran. Cover designer: DogEared Design.

To Mr. and Mrs. Mwango, Mr. Puta, Mr. Davies,  
and Luposhi village in Luapula Province, Zambia

Even before I knew it  
you welcomed me when I was a stranger in a strange land  
far from home and crying in the night.  
May I offer to others what you gave to me  
when you changed my life.



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Draw the circle wide.  
Draw it wider still.  
Let this be our song,  
No one stands alone.

*Mark Miller and Gordon Light*  
*“Draw the Circle Wide”*

# Preface

In my professional life, I work with leaders in tech, finance, government, and social change organizations to create meaningful change. Drawing partly from spiritual traditions, I help these leaders understand how they can build loyalty, strengthen identity, and live out shared values. When leaders create a robust and committed community, they build relationships that are effective and resilient. These relationships in turn can lead to profound change. This book is an extension of that work. It's primarily (but not exclusively) intended for those brave people who seek to bring others together to create something enriching, satisfying, and meaningful. Sometimes that something is a community that can shift the future of our planet. But let's put that aside for the moment.

It's only because I felt like an outsider for so long that I was able to write this book about community building and belonging. When I say, "outsider," I mean someone who wonders "will I ever have the friends I want" and "is there anywhere I'll ever fit in." I've felt so lonely that I've cried alone at night. In my early twenties, I accompanied my cousin Erin to her large, young, and hip church in Los Angeles because I was searching for a spiritual community. The service began with a downbeat from the contemporary praise

band. In that moment, seemingly everyone, well over a thousand people in the auditorium, stood and raised their hands in the air and began swaying with the music. Halfway through that service, I no longer wanted to pretend that I was comfortable. I preferred something far more contemplative. Quietly, I sat down.

I still remember the looks and frowns directed at me sitting alone. It was clear that I didn't belong. Over the years, I have sought out many groups, looking for the right one, the one to which I would belong.

When I was twenty-five, I served in the US Peace Corps in northern Zambia, near the Congo-Zaire border. When I left home, I looked forward to meeting people as brave and adventurous as I wanted to be. The villagers welcomed me generously, but I felt lonely many nights, in a strange place with a different language and different food. Not fitting in, in that environment, was not a surprise. But I also remember the nights I sat around fire pits with other volunteers. Often there were tall stacks of beer crates nearby. In the background, a never-ending series of drinking games went on. One night, a Peace Corps volunteer I'll call Ralph turned to me and said, "I don't trust people who don't get drunk." Because I didn't drink alcohol, well, he didn't trust me.

From that conversation and several similar evenings, I understood that I didn't really fit in among those volunteers either.

After the Peace Corps I moved to New York City, still hoping to find the group to which I would belong. A pastor on Manhattan's East Side introduced me to wisdom from C. S. Lewis's lecture "The Inner Ring."<sup>1</sup> Lewis wrote that we all want to enter inner rings of exclusivity. These are groups that are more exclusive and cooler than the groups to which we already belong. The problem lies not in the rings themselves but in our desire and longing to get inside them. This desire drives good people to do very bad things. It's the unrecognized cause of a lot of unhappiness. Lewis further explains

that, unfortunately, when we do get inside these exclusive rings, we always discover that there's an even more attractive and exclusive ring beyond. This pattern will continue forever unless we break it. This is the trap of the inner ring.

Lewis's solution was to find something we like to do and do it often. Then invite others to join us if they like doing that thing too. The people who join us will create a special type of relationship that allows us to escape the trap of the inner ring. That relationship is called friendship. I was inspired by the notion that if I could not find the right community, perhaps I could create it. At the time, I was producing, without sufficient skill or resources, what became an independent PBS documentary. I also organized other restaurant workers abused by a company that ignored labor laws. I came to understand that building community was important for success in both endeavors.

In my thirties, I went to graduate school at Yale to study religion, ethics, and philosophy. There I learned many ideas that had brought together people across the globe over millennia. I learned how Jews coalesced within a hostile empire, how Anabaptists stood up to the Roman Church at horrific cost, how Zen monastics still dissuade outsiders from joining their long-kept private rituals, how Jains maintain their radical compassion in a violent world, and how Green Nuns band together to celebrate a new theology for our relationship to earth. So many people over so many years have held together in brutal and murderous times. Often they were so successful that you can still meet their descendants today. It was inspiring to see how strong even small bands could remain, even while facing existential threat. There was so much to learn from them, lessons that applied just as easily to secular communities as to spiritual ones.

One thing that surprised me, when I arrived at Yale, was the discovery that its history and brand loomed so large that many

other students, just like me, thought that they could never be good enough to truly belong there. We feared that, at any moment, someone would ask us to leave after revealing us to be the frauds we felt certain we were. There was a lot of loneliness and fear at Yale. With Lewis's wisdom in mind, my now wife Socheata and I chose to host dinners in our home every Friday night. We would cook a large multicourse dinner and serve it to anyone who would come.

That first semester there were many times when I was sure that we had made a silly commitment. Guests would cancel at the last minute. I would cook a feast and only three people would show up. I had to turn down invitations to all the other fun stuff on Fridays on campus and in New York. Over time, things changed. With perseverance and a lot of work, the dinners became popular. But after hosting well over five hundred people in our home, we were exhausted. Rather than give up the dinners, we built a team of volunteers to plan the menus, cook the meals, and set the space. Arjan volunteered to manage the appointed dinner leaders, and Sam would go on to manage the sponsors and guest lists.

While cooking dinners, sharing those meals, and cleaning our kitchen, I formed many of my dearest friendships. Those friends have traveled with me across countries and stood with me at my wedding. On my worst days, I call them so I don't cry alone. Sometimes, they cry in my living room. We are now to one another what my friend Nick calls "3 a.m. friends." We know that when we call each other at 3 a.m., we'll ask how we can help and then take action. We make one another so much stronger.

In my sixth year in New Haven, my friend Melo took me to lunch at the Yale Commons. Just the two of us sat at a long table on the north side, and he shared a special story with me. He told me that his first year at Yale had been the hardest of his life. He had come from the Philippines, and the American culture, the New

England weather, and the workload were hard enough. He discovered that his medical doctor wife, Jazz, couldn't work in Connecticut, so she had to live and work hundreds of miles away so they could make ends meet. During that first semester, his mother's cancer worsened. He couldn't afford a surprise trip to Manila, so when she died, he couldn't see her, or say good-bye or "I love you" one last time. As I have done many times, he cried by himself at night. During the summer break, at home in Manila, he decided that he never wanted to return to New Haven. It didn't matter that he had a full scholarship and was one of a few Filipinos to study at Yale. It was just too hard. He couldn't do it.

"Then," Melo said, "I remembered your invitations to the dinners at your house. And I knew that I belonged. I knew that I wasn't alone, and that gave me the strength to come back." I didn't know that when he invited me to lunch that day, he had done so because he was graduating the next month, and he wanted me to know that I had changed his whole life. The act of creating community can look simple, even mundane. But it can also be life changing. We weren't just making dinners. We were creating deep relationships that serve, support, and heal.

## Changes Are Afoot

One thing I learned in my religious studies is that our experience of community has changed in a single generation. The number of people who say that they have no one to talk to about difficult subjects has tripled in the last few decades. Moreover, the size of the average person's social network decreased by one-third in the same time.<sup>2</sup> In fact, more people say that they don't have a confidante than those who say that they do.<sup>3</sup> Americans, particularly those under thirty, are not participating in formal religious organizations as much as people did even a generation ago. These religious organizations were often the basis for communities of val-



ues. According to a 2012 Pew Research report, “one-fifth of the US public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, about three-quarters (74 percent) of these unaffiliated adults were raised with some affiliation, but have chosen to lapse. The statistics do not indicate that Americans think any differently about God or spirituality. On the contrary, overwhelming majorities continue to say that God and spirituality are important.<sup>5</sup>

Churches aren’t the only social institutions to erode. In the 1970s almost two-thirds of Americans attended some kind of club meeting.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1990s nearly two-thirds had never attended a club meeting. The average American invested about a third less time in organizational life (excluding religious groups) in the thirty years from 1965 to 1995.<sup>7</sup> Even the number of picnics per capita went down 60 percent from 1975 to 1999!<sup>8</sup>

## Hunger for Connection and Community

The millennial generation may be more interested in connection and values-based activism than prior generations. They may be desperate for deeper connection, without the stale organizational baggage abandoned from a generation ago. Millennials prefer to live in dense, diverse urban villages where social interaction is closer than in isolated suburbs.<sup>9</sup> They’re more likely to join a cause (environmental, social, economic, etc.) than a social club.<sup>10</sup> Millennials also want to make a difference in their communities: “High school seniors today are more likely than previous generations to state that making a contribution to society is very important to them and that they want to be leaders in their communities.”<sup>11</sup> Consistent with this, 84 percent made a donation to charity in 2014.<sup>12</sup>

We know that social relationships have profound positive effects on our physical and mental health, longevity, and happiness. Loneliness kills, and the quality of our relationships matter. The

seventy-five-year Study of Adult Development indicates that good relationships keep us happier and healthier. People who are socially disconnected are less happy, experience health declines earlier, and live shorter lives than people who are not lonely. One in five Americans report that they are lonely.<sup>13</sup> A 2010 review involving over 300,000 participants concluded that having weak social ties was as harmful to health as alcoholism! In fact, “a lack of social relationships was equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.”<sup>14</sup>

The research indicates that Americans today are seeking connection with others who share their values. But they’re not involved in communities that typically provide deep ongoing connection, membership, and life-honoring rituals. Best-selling author and marketing guru Seth Godin writes that people today want connection more than material things. He believes that we’re in a connection economy in which those who connect others will succeed.<sup>15</sup>

When we do find people who share at least some of our values, there’s a real opportunity for friendship. It doesn’t matter if this is at work or on our block, or while volunteering in a distant country. Building community creates a venue for friendship, and friendship defeats loneliness. In deep community we can be vulnerable and still know that we belong. Those of us who are able to connect what may be a new lonely generation will have a profound effect on the health and well-being of those we serve no matter why we bring people together. I unwittingly started this journey because I was desperate to find a community for me. I promise you that I continue because I’ve learned how important it is for us all to know that we belong. The leaders who create this, well, we will change the world. I hope this inspires you.

Godspeed.  
Charles H. Vogl  
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## Introduction

# The Inspiration for This Book

One sunny day in June, I sat in a bustling downtown San Francisco taqueria with Kevin Lin, a cofounder and chief operating officer of Twitch. Kevin oversees a billion-dollar online gaming brand that each month attracts tens of millions of visitors. Over a tostada and iced tea, he told me how his user numbers continue to explode. In just three years, his brand had almost accidentally created a meeting place for people who love video games.

To Kevin, it had become clear that users desperately wanted to be part of a community that represented their identity, values, and shared interests. The company had recently invited one thousand of these users to “partner” with the brand. They were extended privileges to work with the company in a special way that gave them a higher profile. Kevin shared that some people were so moved by the invitation that they cried. He knew that it had little to do with the financial opportunity—these users had already shown that they would provide content for free. What moved them was the sense that they were being welcomed somewhere and appreciated for who they were.

Many Twitch users felt misunderstood, unappreciated, and disconnected from the offline world, Kevin said, referring to the

stigma of being a video game enthusiast. Just by the hours spent online at Twitch, they had already demonstrated how much they appreciated finding one another. But Kevin didn't know how to transform the group into a strong community: all he really knew to do was to invite them to visit and use the website. In fact, no one in his company knew time-tested principles for building a robust community endowed with a rich feeling of connection. Moreover, Twitch's leadership was reluctant to take risky steps to organize the users, lest such decisions ruin whatever was currently working. There were so many ideas I wanted to share with Kevin right away so that he and his team could better serve millions worldwide and make them feel more connected. He shared his vision for bigger live events around the world and a more harmonious global community.

This book is my offering to Kevin\* and all the other community builders who are creating spaces where we can learn to be connected, defeat loneliness, and enrich lives by understanding where and how we belong. In short, this book is a tool for bringing friendship and support where there has been loneliness, fear, and separation. May your communities serve members in all the ways they are hungry to experience.

You probably already understand that it's important to belong to strong communities. They make us more effective in reaching goals and overcoming challenges large and small. Communities are created when at least two people begin to feel concern for each other's welfare. If others join this tiny caring flame, the community fire grows. This is as true for neighbors as for global activists and coworkers (or even competitors) taking on a big challenge. I designed this book to help current and future leaders working either in person or online to understand how to make their communi-

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\* To protect identities, I've changed the names and identifying details about other people in this book. They are all real people.

ties feel more connected, durable, and fulfilling. If it's successful, then your communities will do at least four things better. First, it'll help members grow in the ways they hope to. This growth can be technical, social, or internal. Second, it'll cause members to feel more connected, welcome, proud, and excited to be a part of the group. Third, it'll help members work together toward making the difference that you envision. Fourth, it'll make membership more fun.

## Shared Values

For the purposes of this book, tribes are people who share certain values even if they're in different places or aren't connected yet. These values may show up in shared interests, activities, or life choices. Tribes want to be connected. They want to be around people who understand them. For example, there are many people in the world who value building confidence and courage in girls and are willing to take action. They create a tribe even if they haven't come together in a formal community like the Girl Scouts organization. The people who bring a tribe together to create a community are tribal leaders. Since you're reading this book, you're likely a tribal leader. Or maybe you're a tribal leader but haven't realized it yet. If so, you may be far more important to other people than you know.

## Building Mature Communities

Your community may be very small; in fact, it might not even have begun yet. You may notice that your community uses almost none of the principles discussed in this book. *There's nothing wrong with this.* Small, informal communities can offer a lot of value with very little structure or consideration of what makes the community work. It's also possible that the principles are there, but you haven't been looking for them. Chances are, you're taking on one of two

challenges. The first possibility is that you want to build or grow a community. This could consist of a group of students, tech workers, teachers, healers, advisers, or any other tribe with an interest in connecting with and caring about those around them. Communities can be formal, with official membership and administration (like Doctors Without Borders), or informal, tied by shared values and commitments (such as jungle bush pilots).

The second possibility is that you believe an existing community has the potential to become more connected or effective. The current community might look successful on the outside. You might even have lots of members, events, and funding. But communities that look strong and healthy are sometimes poorly organized. Many do not have a clear vision about what they do or where they're headed. They don't know how to make their activities more sophisticated, effective, or rewarding. They may not know how to connect newer members in a meaningful way with current members. And they may have trouble finding the right prospective members and helping them get involved. Right now, I'm working with a famous legacy church in San Francisco. More than two thousand people attend services there on Sundays. It looks strong, but I know that it's a real challenge to get younger members involved and to give visitors a clear way to connect with active members. While there's a lot happening at this church, its long-term sustainability is far from certain.

If you're not facing either of these challenges, don't worry: there's plenty for you to get from reading this book now. It can help you understand your current communities and the leadership style within them. You may be outside a community trying to understand it, either because you think you want to join it or because you're sure that you don't. Or maybe you're a leader who hasn't known that you've been waiting for these insights, and it may make your efforts far more powerful.

## Crafting Community

I titled this book *The Art of Community* because the best community building is an art. There's no single formula. What works for you and your members will not work for everyone. Success will reflect your values, priorities, and growth. Just as in art, there are forms and skills you can build on, but copying someone else won't create something truly inspiring. You have to bring your own creativity and experience to the work. And while you must craft your own community, once you finish this book you'll see that there are seven core principles to community building that have served people for millennia. Even when an organization considers itself informal and unstructured, as it matures, these principles will appear—whether the members notice or not.

## Serving Members

To create something that others want to join and support, we have to remember a core tenet: communities function best and are most durable when they're helping members to be more successful in some way in a connected and dynamic world. If you forget this, or even worse, if you never understand this, then your efforts will be misplaced. The communities I'm encouraging you to build should make people (including you) stronger, happier, and full of well-being. Simply gathering people on your block together can do this. So can connecting millions of people around the world. If we fail to get members excited about committing their time and effort, they'll leave.

## Ego versus Good Community Leadership

One word of caution before we begin. You've probably been part of an exclusive group in which someone (or several someones) believed that, since they belonged to this particular group, they had permission to bask in their own achievements and mistreat more

junior members. I hope that you saw how quickly that attitude erodes respect and influence. We will discuss “inner rings” in great detail in chapter 8. Leaders must set an example for senior members to respect and serve new members. Without this, some will certainly build up their own egos by disrespecting new members. They’ll forget that the community is strongest when it attracts and supports like-valued people. Abusing new members will show that the community is a self-serving, self-aggrandizing, and potentially dangerous organization. It’ll be dangerous because it’ll be far more committed to serving its own needs than to serving as a supportive part of a healthy world.

Lastly, you may have visited or joined a community (formal or informal) that seemed great in the beginning, and then your interest waned. Maybe you got upset by the way it was run. Was it because it stopped helping you be who you wanted to be? Did it become just another chore or responsibility? Perhaps the community did a bad job of explaining what its true purpose was. You joined thinking that you would find help to achieve *X*, only to discover that the community was really focused on helping members achieve *Y*. If you had understood that at the outset, you would never have joined. Sometimes, as leaders bringing people together, we find it easy to become convinced of our own greatness. We can help avoid this by remembering that we can lead for the long term only when we’re serving others.

Let’s begin the cool stuff.



## Part One

# Recognizing Community

## One

# Understanding Community

In this book, I define a community as *a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare*. It's distinct from a group whose members may share ideas, interests, proximity, or any number of things but lack concern for one another. Such groups can have huge memberships, like the Museum of Modern Art, the American Medical Association, or Greenpeace, but their members do not share any strong social connectedness. Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard, says it best: "They root for the same team and they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other's existence. Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another."<sup>1</sup>

When we see that others are concerned about our own welfare, we'll invest more in building community with them, and we'll feel more connected. We have communities in our lives that don't have formal membership but to which we feel connected because of this perceived mutual concern: the neighbors on your street or in your apartment building, your pickup sports friends, or even the people you know from your commute. Though informal, these are real and important communities.

## Recognizing a Community

There are certain features that are almost universal in healthy communities. While communities have different levels of maturation and sophistication, these features will quickly emerge as communities mature and gain importance. Your success in growing a community will depend on how well you can understand and articulate the following features:

- Shared values
- Membership identity
- Moral proscriptions
- Insider understanding

## Values Bind a Community

We all want to be part of a group of people who share our values. It doesn't matter if we dress, behave, work, or consume similarly, or even whether we live in the same area. We want to believe that others value what we value (and disdain what we disdain). Shared values are what attract us to a group in the first place. By understanding how a group develops and expresses values, a leader can help a community mature and grow.

We may seek out a community because of a shared activity or interest (people sharing interests often share behaviors). Shared activity indicates sharing *some* value for the activity. But we'll feel disconnected from such a community if we discover that there aren't enough shared values. For example, consider CrossFit Oakland (CFO). It's a fitness training facility and an affiliate of the global CrossFit fitness network known for a particular style of high-intensity workouts. The CrossFit company that created the network was founded in Northern California in 2000 by Greg Glassman and Lauren Jenai.<sup>2</sup> There are now over thirteen thousand affiliate gyms and more than two million exercisers in the network around

the world.<sup>3</sup> The gyms are famous for their strong cultural identity, which includes creating supportive communities that help women get strong alongside men.<sup>4</sup>

CFO is a local gym founded by Mike Minium. He knows that members may *join* because the gym offers high-intensity and varied training, but they *stay* because they feel connected and welcome. The community values health, safety, and respect for personal growth far more than strength, speed, and competitiveness. Members show it in their words and instruction and in their acceptance of people at all levels of physical ability. If you look at CFO's website, you'll find this language (edited):

We believe in working hard so you can play outside, play inside, play with your kids, play with your friends, play on vacation, and play your way through life.

We do what we do because we believe it works to get you fitter, stronger, and healthier.

We believe it empowers you to perform better in the gym, in sport, and in life.

We do what we do so that more of you can live longer, healthier, happier, more amazing lives.

We serve you if you want to get in shape and don't know where to begin.

We serve you if you are looking to get better (faster, stronger, fitter) at your sport.

We serve you if you are looking for real, tangible, and lasting changes in your overall health and appearance.

We serve you if you are seeking quality coaching and a supportive community.

It may surprise you that there's belief and service language on a website for a fitness center. I discuss this later. For now, you can see how their public language clearly shares that they value faster,

stronger, and healthier members. They also value community, health, and those who “don’t know where to begin” (novices). I know from conversations with Mike and from personal visits to CFO gyms that there are also unstated values in the community around honoring the effort of those with the most physical challenges. These include safety, patience, and long-term health rather than near-term performance. Anyone who can afford the fees at CFO can join. But only those who embrace the stated and unstated values will connect and feel genuinely welcome. CFO is a community because the members don’t just train together, they care for one another. And members will stay only as long as they continue to feel CFO’s commitment to those values.

Virtually all communities express their values either consciously or unconsciously, and often in both ways. They do it with actions and with words. Visitors can learn about these values in explicit ways on a website, in marketing materials, and from formal inquiry. But implicit ways are *at least* as powerful. They include what members say to one another, whom they welcome, what they share, and with whom and where they spend their money. No matter what the explicit values are, the implicit values will reveal the real deal.

My favorite way is to see where they put their “warm body.” I look for what community members value so much that they actually put their bodies near it. With CFO, for example, leaders and members spend significant time in the gym, greet new visitors in person, and help new or low-performing athletes with their exercises rather than spending their time only with high performers. Where members put their warm bodies tells a visitor whether they mean what they say. You may know groups that say they value generosity, contribution, and cooperation, but you have seen that they’re actually selfish. Most people quickly figure out the truth.

When I was a documentary filmmaker in New York City, I felt closely connected to an informal community of social justice filmmakers. There was no official membership card or secret handshake. Most of us belonged to several film organizations, but membership in them was not required to be part of our community. Even though there was no formal membership, I felt connected because I knew that other filmmakers cared about my success and well-being, just as I cared about theirs. We shared equipment, crew, legal knowledge, our own labor, and many hard-won lessons. When the film-making partner of one of our members was kidnapped in Nigeria, we raised money to pay for his safe return and provided much-needed emotional support.

I was attracted to that community because we valued telling important stories that would bring a measure of justice and healing to the world. We valued spending our time and money to tell stories that might never provide a positive return on the financial investments we made. We all valued making a difference in the world far more than our own comfort. To this day, I am proud to be a social change documentary filmmaker. Understanding the shared values that attract and keep members in a community is important for leaders. For continued success, leaders must both clearly share and personally represent the values so others can recognize what they want to join.

A community's values evolve as times and people change. Your community almost certainly values something more than outsiders do. It's not important that on the first day you can recognize and name the ultimate values for your community. In fact, it may take some time to understand what things you value more than others. Moreover, as time passes and culture changes, it's imperative that the community values also change. This is how you stay relevant in a dynamic world. For example, it was not long ago that many American communities (like churches) valued racial segre-

gation. While this is still a value in some places, a lot has changed since the 1950s.

Formalization can destroy a community if values are ignored. When efforts arise to formalize or corporatize a community, there's often understandable concern that the effort could destroy the very community it seeks to grow. This is why it's so important to recognize *both* the explicit and the implicit values that attract and keep members connected. Remember how CFO explicitly values higher performance and a supportive community, and how it implicitly values patience and the efforts of low-performing athletes. Any effort to grow will fail if members sense that the community leadership is neglecting important values or introducing unwelcome ones. For-profit corporations are particularly at risk for this if they value members for their revenue potential rather than for their contribution and commitment. Leaving any meaningful portion of core members feeling disconnected or abandoned is a real danger when formalizing or corporatizing a community and can lead to its destruction.

My friend Margaret has been working for years at a well-known ski resort I'll call Ski Valley. She told me what happened when a major corporate resort operator took over. The new owners celebrated the "soul" of the resort in their marketing, but their actions eroded the connections, camaraderie, and commitment the employees felt at work. She described how she and her co-workers used to look out for one another. She valued the connection between work lives and social lives, the freedom to improve the operations, and the friendliness of a workplace built for happiness.

That all changed when the corporate leadership came. The Welcome sign at the lodge entrance was replaced with three new signs: No Dogs, No Alcohol, and No Drones. Instead of each department celebrating its holiday parties as it chose, all were invited

to a combined fifteen-hundred-person event with no intimacy. Now, instead of being able to knock on a manager's door or chat in the locker room to discuss operational improvements, staff receive instructions come from someone miles away. Not only does Margaret miss the opportunity to discuss improvements, she doesn't even know the name of the decision maker. The values that she appreciated about the community aren't there anymore. Margaret said that employees who were fundamentally "do gooders" have left. Instead of coming to work excited to improve guest experiences, many others just "show up." I suspect that whatever standards the executives wanted to bring in, they didn't plan to destroy a culture of vigilant improvement and mutual support.

Communities can have unhealthy implicit values (without knowing it). Unhealthy values are those that aren't serving members and may even restrict connection and enrichment. You've probably seen this in a community somewhere. I briefly worked at an elite educational institution where there was an implicit value of demonstrating "effortless brilliance." Some seemed to love this and showed off their mastery by dazzling others. But many students felt oppressed, fearful, and trapped by this value. They weren't confident that they had brilliance to share. Often, they wouldn't say *anything* aloud for fear that someone else would cut them down and thus demonstrate a greater effortless brilliance.

You can imagine how little social connection and enrichment was fostered when students feared speaking. The problem was so severe that several students I knew created their own secret communities to be safe from the inevitable criticism and judgment of their peers. In particular, spiritual and religious communities often run into this challenge of unwelcoming implicit values. They may advocate an explicit value of welcoming strangers, but their language (and whom they stand next to) shows that they value their own homogeneity, familiarity, and conformity. It's largely the



disagreement over values and apparent hypocrisy that angers outsiders and prevents visitors from joining for connection.

## Values and Membership Identity

Because members share values, the community helps answer three important questions for members in some way:

Who am I?

How should I act?

What do I believe?

I call this *membership identity*. The identity may not apply to all areas of a person's life. In fact, to an outsider it may appear that the values and identities are inconsistent with other areas in the person's life. For example, someone can be generous and kind in one community (church, poker group, or alumni association) and a selfish bully everywhere else. You've probably seen this kind of compartmentalized identity.

What's important to understand is that when a member is in the community, the community's values and identity feel comfortable and right. Further, when members are around other members, those values and their identity are reinforced. Obviously, the particular values and identities that are reinforced will have profoundly different influences in different people's lives. Some values and identities are deeply helpful and others equally hurtful. As a shorthand here, I'll define healthy values as those that encourage members to care for and enrich themselves and others. The more broadly that care is defined, the better.

Stop here for a moment, and think: how would you describe your community's membership identity? If your response is that your community doesn't tell members who they are, what they should do, or what they should believe about anything at any level,

then there are two possibilities. First, you're not really creating a community, but only a group. A group may share interests and values, but a community has connections so that members care for the welfare of one another. Second, you're simply not recognizing the membership identity. Consider why someone would seek you out and what that person hopes to gain as a member. Consider what that person expects of members and leadership, both formal and informal.

For example, if you have a weekend bicycling community, are there ideals that your members hold about bicycling? Perhaps they enjoy biking because it's good for their health, or because it's for the brave and adventurous, or because it's an environmentally friendly outdoor activity. These provide an outline for your community's identity. Does your community have ideas about how good bicyclists act? (This is usually identified by contrasting with how bad bicyclists act.) Do you have ideas about your identity as bicyclists? Do you welcome anyone with a bicycle? At any age or skill level? Will someone preparing for the Tour de France fit in with this community? How about a ten-year-old with a mountain bike? You might answer that anyone who enjoys bicycling is welcome, that you have special events for beginners, others for racers, and others for off-roaders. But would a bicycling police officer recording your group for terrorist surveillance fit in equally well?

The point of these questions is to help you recognize that there may be identities present in your community that are unrecognized and unstated. It's important for you to consider them carefully, because there's a twofold danger to not recognizing them. Below are examples shared with me from people I know within supportive communities they cherish.

Melissa recently retired as the first female firefighter captain in the history of New Haven, Connecticut. In her career she ran the busiest firehouse in the city and oversaw two teams. Over the years

she has pulled people out of wrecked cars, responded to shootings, and of course put out fires. She told me that she absolutely has a community of firefighters that she knows will respond to her no matter the hour, weather, or emergency. They know that she'll do the same for them. Here's how she describes the identity of her personal community of firefighters:

### *Melissa's Firefighter Community*

#### **Values**

Being hypervigilant about saving lives, including a willingness to take high risks.

Embracing life in the present.

Training for years for the single worst day of someone's life.

Deep understanding about a place and circumstances to be ready for emergencies ("pre-fire planning").

#### **Identity**

*Who I am:* I'm the fixer on the worst days. I'm the assurance in terrible circumstances.

*How I should act:* I show up no matter how bad or uncontrollable the situation. I exude confidence and control no matter what surprises show up.

*What I believe:* I believe life is fragile. I believe our lives can change in a moment, and I believe risking my life is worth saving someone else.

Adam is an executive chef in the San Francisco Bay Area who runs professional kitchens and consults for restaurant owners. He's also building a national food company. He has a community of executive chefs who support one another with big events and logistical challenges, and celebrate together with lots of food. Here's how he describes the identity of his community of chefs:

### *Adam's Executive Chef Community*

#### **Values**

Working long hours to create excellent food.

Creating new food experiences.

Respecting people who make extraordinary food.

#### **Identity**

*Who I am:* I am an authority on culinary methods and responsible for making thousands of meals excellent every time.

*How I should act:* I learn about new food research, flavors, and ingredients. I find better ways to solve cooking problems, improve food, and support other chefs when they need help.

*What I believe:* Feeding people is important and worth long hours to do well. Food is exciting and makes the lives of others better.

Sara is a film director and producer. For over ten years she's worked in both New York and San Francisco on projects that air on network television and national PBS, and tour the world in film festivals. She's a part of a documentary film community that shares equipment, shares labor on projects, and helps one another navigate the changing media funding and legal landscape. Here's how she describes the identity of her filmmaking community:

### *Sara's Filmmaker Community*

#### **Values**

Understanding someone else's viewpoint.

Dispelling stereotypes and prejudices.

Sharing the truth no matter how uncomfortable.

Creating empathy for people and ideas that are unknown or misunderstood.

### Identity

*Who I am:* I'm a storyteller who hopes to share true nuance about people and create empathy.

*How I should act:* I seek out people whose stories are unknown or misrepresented and share them to contribute to understanding the world.

*What I believe:* I believe everyone has a voice and not everyone has the tools to project their voice. I believe it is my responsibility to get more voices heard. I believe that sharing the truth in powerful, visual ways can make a difference in people's lives.

To grow a tight community, it's essential to articulate the community's core values clearly, at least for yourself. Not every value needs to be articulated, just the most important ones: those that tie the community's members together. There are values that someone must share to be a functioning community member. Can you be a functioning part of a supportive chef community if you don't value cooking? What if you don't value quality?

When we can speak of the core values, then we have principles that can be used to evaluate options for the community. We can ask: "Will this decision help us build on our core values?" It's possible that something grows without the values named, but then it becomes difficult to know if new ideas and options will grow in a way that serves and strengthens.

For example, Kevin's online gaming community has grown far larger than he ever expected. He had thought that there might be hundreds who would want to join, but its membership is now in the tens of millions. He wonders how leadership can invest in

strengthening the community without destroying what makes it great in its current form. I don't know what's best; I'm not part of this community. But I do know that the community will appreciate investments that support its core values.

There are many things the community can or does value, including these:

### **Performance**

- Improving gaming skills
- Learning about new technology
- Influencing game development
- Proving who's the best

### **Connection**

- Connecting with other gamers
- Creating local and online friendships

### **Entertainment**

- Finding inexpensive entertainment

### **Dignity**

- Improving perceptions of online gamers
- Gaining legitimacy in the worldwide sports community

The first thing Kevin needs to do is to *talk with the community*. By doing so, he'll learn more about what values matter to the members. This particular community is old enough and large enough that there are now subcommunities, and they may have slightly different values.

I hope you can see why Kevin should start by fully understanding and articulating the core values he intends to strengthen. If he simply dives in, for example, by starting a program to help gamers improve their skills, this could be a wasted investment, or even a

disaster, if the community's real core value is connecting gamers with one another. Conversely, if he invests in social features to improve connection, but members are there to acquire better skills from experts, the new features could feel silly, distracting, and foreign.

*If you don't know the values, you may not know who's seeking you.* You may even seek out people with the wrong values and beliefs. This is no good if you intend to strengthen your existing community with more members who share the current values. I remember speaking to a martial arts school entrepreneur who explained to me that martial arts schools often fail because instructors assume members value fighting, self-defense, and discipline. But the reality is that many martial arts students simply value a fun way to stay fit. They're casual athletes, not fighters.

*You may expect and ask members to do things that disregard their values.* This is one way that efforts to formalize a community can destroy it. If members understand that these efforts fit with their values and identities, they'll be enthusiastic about incorporating the new structures. But if not, you risk alienating your core members. I know a training director who rushed volunteer leadership trainers to compress hours of material into minutes. He valued lots of material presented quickly. The trainers and students valued interactive learning far more. Within days, all the trainers and participants abandoned the curriculum.

Behavior often precedes adopting common values. The importance of understanding that core values are different from common values becomes clear when we understand their relationship to behavior. Visitors should be aware of core values before they explore membership, but they don't have to embrace all the common values of the group.

For a rapidly expanding community, it's critical that prospective members are welcome to participate in community behavior before adopting common values. Visitors can have general interest or prefer to experience something before commitment. This is an idea that many religious and spiritual communities misunderstand. Few want to join a community where they must adopt an overwhelming number of life-changing values before they can participate at any level. Can you imagine visiting a bicycling club if the first thing you had to do was profess five required lifestyle-changing values about bicycling? (Bicycling can change values about eating, stretching, getting outdoors, etc.) Another way to say the same thing is that for members, while there may be early interest, behavior often comes first, and adopting values can come later with experience.

While some values are core and required, other values are simply common among members. After participation, if prospective members reject core values, they'll leave the community on their own. (In fact, if the core values are made clear enough at the outset, the prospective member may decline to participate.) It's important that new members be given time and flexibility in adopting values. When I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, I started a contemplative prayer group. When I founded the group, I thought that it wouldn't matter whether members had specific ideas about God's nature, kept a particular relationship with God, or even were confident about the existence of God. I wanted to include anyone with an interest in our discussions and contemplative prayer.

We had one participant who really enjoyed being part of the prayer group, but it soon became clear that he was more interested in philosophy than in theology. His own dismissal of God's existence left no room to develop conversations about understanding God at any level. I had to determine what our group's core values were: What would allow us to create a safe space for the members



we sought out? It was important that members valued contemplative prayer, broadly defined, and thought it could enrich their lives. It was also important that members valued sharing and listening to each other's thoughts about their experience of God.

It was difficult for me to contemplate restricting membership. But when I considered what kind of community I wanted to create, I had to acknowledge that a core value was respecting and honoring others as they shared their thoughts about God. It wasn't important that someone share my particular beliefs about God. If I had communicated that core value up front, my friend would have realized early on that this was not a community for him. Or he could have participated, learned how our core value led to theological conversations (behavior), and then chosen whether to join, based perhaps on his value changing. Maybe seeing us seek out contemplative prayer would grow new interest in him. Maybe.

I was missing two things. The first was clarity on what were critical core values for the group, and the second was differing rings, one for outsiders to visit and one for insiders to share a protected space. For example, after firefighter recruits live and work in a firehouse for a year, they learn to appreciate (value) with deep respect both the trust and commitment of their crewmates. They also learn to support crewmates outside work with life's challenges. These values make people better firefighters. Fine dining cooks usually spend a year in a high-performing kitchen before they value taking time to make food right and maximizing ingredient use. Orchestra musicians value the role of music in their lives. Once members play in an orchestra, they learn to value breathing together in preparation. They learn to value creating a magnificent sound texture rather than standing out as an exceptional musician.

The critical lesson here is that prospective members must have a way to behave like the current community members (par-

ticipate) before we require them to believe in and value the same things we do (no matter how trivial or significant). When we understand this, we can find a way to both respect our community values and acknowledge that newcomers may need time to grow into full membership.

## Communities and Moral Proscriptions

A community provides moral proscriptions on how members should behave and treat others. The community may not provide proscriptions for *all* areas of morality, but it will for those areas that relate to the community's core values. The morals may be unidentified, seldom discussed, or unacknowledged, but you'll see them clearly if you ask these questions:

What and whom do we protect?

What is intolerable?

What do we share?

With whom do we share?

Whom do we respect?

How do we show respect?

When you think of communities that have fallen apart or eroded, you may think of activities that betrayed the community's values and moral prescriptions, whether or not the values or moral prescriptions were clearly articulated. For example, the revelations of child abuse in the Catholic Church eroded respect for the church not only because children were abused but also because perpetrators were apparently protected and justice for the victims denied. This is opposed to the church's stated values of serving all church members and honoring justice.

If your group does anything together or supports members in participating in any activity, it's almost certain that the community

advocates certain moral proscriptions. For example, even in a bicycling group there are proscriptions on how morally responsible bicyclists (us!) behave in contrast to others (them!). How restrictive the proscriptions are depends on the community. Many leaders do not recognize that their communities offer moral proscriptions. It sounds too restrictive. But even violent criminal gangs have moral proscriptions about behavior. These influence how members honor one another, their leaders, and others important to the community. A member who violates those proscriptions risks being expelled from the gang, and perhaps much worse. As a leader, you may never need to write out standards for community behavior (moral proscriptions). But a time may come when they need to be articulated. Don't be afraid. Such standards are what define strong communities. As long as the proscriptions truly reflect the shared values of your community, members will be enthusiastic about them. Communities provide moral proscriptions consistent with their values.

## **Communities and Insider Understandings**

One of the great pleasures of being part of a community is that we don't have to explain ourselves. We want to feel seen and understood without explaining the parts that outsiders don't get. We feel more comfortable and safer within the community because of this baseline understanding. In the outside world, it may be less clear that we and our values are understood and accepted. Part of our comfort comes with technical or "external" understanding. This is how insiders understand the external world. We don't want to explain terms or recap history and the fundamentals of our field. We want to come together and share our values and skills.

Recently my friend Kari returned home to Oregon and gathered with friends who have a long history of playing jazz together. One musician came with a friend who was a musician but not a jazz

musician, and who hadn't brought an instrument. She didn't share the jazz tradition, so she politely sat to the side as the group of six played. Kari told me that instead of playing for two to three hours, as they had in the past, they played for only thirty minutes, largely because they were uncomfortable playing with an outsider sitting idly by who didn't appreciate jazz very much. While everyone had good intentions, inviting an outsider who had neither the technical knowledge nor the musical interest for this special time changed the space and eroded the intimacy of the community time.

Perhaps the more important part of insider understanding is the emotional or "internal" understanding. This is understanding about how it feels for insiders and the values that drive choices no matter how hard, easy, fun, painful, scary, or noble it looks to outsiders. For example, in Weight Watchers communities, there's confidence that members understand and value the struggle required to maintain a healthy body weight. Firefighters understand both what experiences are dangerous and why they are so, and they share the emotional reality of living through them. They also understand the love of the job that comes from saving people in life-threatening situations. In communities where patients with similar diagnoses and challenges connect, they feel enormous relief that everyone in the room or conversation understands the fears, challenges, discomfort, and elation that comes with their own journey.

My favorite example comes from my retired firefighter friend, Melissa, who explained to me that her colleagues have a dark sense of humor that may come from regular exposure to mortal challenges. The humor is a kind of release for them. Even when the firefighters' spouses are present, the conversation is not as comfortable and the language is not as free. She knows that with firefighters she can say things that would be jarring to outsiders yet respectful to crewmates who share her experience.

I'm hopeful that these past few pages have opened some insight into how and why the communities you already cherish stick together. You may have seen something new that means you can articulate something that has previously remained unsaid. This may be something your community already values or an understanding you share. In naming it, you may gain clarity on why you are together and understand who is looking for you so they can grow what you've started. Whatever you grow, it will stand on this originating core of identity.

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