

10 Principles for a Vital Community



By Mike Stolte

Working in community is a little like working with *Sybil*, the character with 16 very different personalities. It's tough to work with this diversity and diversity of agendas, especially in an era where the cult of the individual seems to be winning out over doing things on a community or collective level.

Here's a collection of 10 sound principles to consider in your efforts to inject some vitality into your community.

1. The solutions are yours.

Don't look to senior levels of government to solve the problems of the community. While they can often offer resources, it's the members of the community who are more in touch with the community needs and have the long-term interest in making it a better place to live and work.

2. Small successes.

Too many communities go for the home run without ever having picked up a bat. In order to do large projects or those of a strategic nature, small successes/projects (I would recommend those with low political risk) should be used to build relationships, trust and a track record of success, essential elements for the bigger tasks. Eventually communities should be able to take on strategic projects and evolve to strategic community planning. The metaphor of crawling - walking - running is an effective way of illustrating the concept. Without some successes at the earlier levels, this evolution is impossible.

3. Find the passion in the community.

There's no sense taking on projects or making plans if leaders or community members aren't chomping at the bit to get the actions done. Too many community projects get started because there's funding available. It's better to find the passion. Other resources, especially money, tends to be easier to come by if the community's passions have been identified.

4. Bring leaders and influential people in the community together for a common purpose.

Too often, different sectors of the community do their own thing without ever considering what other community groups may be doing. This 'silo' mentality must be overcome in order to effectively build bridges and build a strong sense of community.

5. Build consensus.

Easier said than done. As mentioned earlier, projects with low risk but visible outcomes are best to

try in communities without a track record of success. An inclusive, well-facilitated process helps in building consensus.

6. Take stock.

Find out where the community stands or what shape it is in. When one feels badly and goes to the Dr. the doctor doesn't give the patient a pill. He/she runs a battery of tests (cardiovascular health, blood tests, etc.) & objectively assesses what is out of kilter in the patient. Taking stock involves objectively assessing opportunities, assets (Human, physical, etc.), threats and weaknesses. (This is what we try to do with the BVI in a very targeted & graphical way in order to build a common understanding of where the community stands).

7. Focus.

Like almost any other endeavour in life, focus is crucial. Too many communities spread out energy and resources on diverse outcomes.

8. Don't look for silver bullets.

Too many communities believe there is an easy answer. Community building is a long-term process. It's far easier to destroy community than to build it. However, once a strong foundation of community-building success has been developed, a community is much stronger, self-sufficient, and resilient.

9. Look for the catalytic leaders and organizations to assist in leading.

An African study showed that every community champion recruited brought 10 new leaders to the community. Good leaders or influential people, & their ability to work together for the needs of the larger community, are what separates strong communities from weak.

10. Perform a reality check.

Many community-building exercises do not accurately take into account community energy, resources, passion, leadership and timing.

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