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The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging

by Charles Vogl

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23 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 142

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.

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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.

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having weak social ties was as harmful to health as alcoholism!

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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

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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.

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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."¹

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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for members, while there may be early interest, behavior often comes first, and adopting values can come later with experience.

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differing rings, one for outsiders to visit and one for insiders to share a protected space.

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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.

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Boundary: The line between members and outsiders. 2. Initiation: The activities that mark a new member. 3. Rituals: The things we do that have meaning. 4. Temple: A place set aside to find our community. 5. Stories: What we share that allows others and ourselves to know our values. 6. Symbols: The things that represent ideas that are important to us. 7. Inner Rings: A path to growth as we participate.

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Where there's a boundary, insiders feel more confident that they share values and that they understand one another better than outsiders.

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The initiation helps members understand clearly who's part of the community. It

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An initiation is a kind of ritual, and the best rituals come with symbols and tokens. Developing a ritual that's right for your formal or informal community can make a profound difference in how welcomed a new member feels.

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Community display rituals reveal the community to itself. There must be collective displays of participation and community membership. This means that there should be some activities where members can see other members participating as well. The scale and the strength of the community will at least partially be revealed here. These

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Foundational Form Elements: Opening 1. Welcome 2. Intention 3. Reference a tradition 4. Explain events and instructions Body 1. Share wisdom 2. Invite participation Closing 1. Acknowledgment 2. Sending

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There are at least three ways people seek success: Relative, Personal Maximization, and Community Maximization.

Features of a sustainable community: First, there's a clear group identity with understood boundaries and purpose. Members know who is in or out and why they're together. Second, benefits and costs are proportional. Members have a system that rewards contribution. Getting more benefits than others must be earned, or the group will collapse. Third, decisions are made together. Members make decisions in a way they recognize is fair. This doesn't necessarily mean by consensus or simply by voting. It does mean that there's group participation. Fourth, there's effective monitoring of violators or free riders. If members don't trust others to obey the rules, then they'll lose faith in the community. Fifth, there are graduated sanctions for those who disrespect community rules. Small violations get small sanctions. Large violations get serious punishment. Sixth, conflict-resolution mechanisms are inexpensive and easy to access. Conflicts can be handled quickly and in ways that members think is fair. Seventh, there's recognition of some sort of rights to organize (for example, by the government). People must be allowed to organize for their own reasons. If they're forbidden to do so, that limits the third principle (making decisions together). Eighth, for groups that are parts of bigger groups and networks, there must be coordination for relevant groups. Some activities are best handled in small groups, and some may require the involvement of many people. It's important that the right-size group—neither too big nor too small—handle whatever is at hand.
