Most of us go to work and assume that our work relationships should fall under the realm of “professionalism.” However, recent thinking focuses on the importance of connecting with others at work on a more personal basis. This report reviews the most recent thinking on this topic as well as insight into how interpersonal relationships can be strengthened by building effective communities at work.

OVERVIEW

This report is divided into the following sections:

- What is community?
- Organizational Learning
- Innovation and Creativity
- Morale
- Loyalty
- Organizational Citizenship Behavior
- Leadership
- Organizational Change
- The Current Value of Building Communities in a Recession
- Peter Block’s Approach to Developing Effective Communities
- Community Building Example
- Possibilities for Continuing Organizational Development
- Conclusion
ne of the most important developments an organization can strive for in order to promote growth is establishing a sense of community. Mintzberg (2009) illustrates the significance of community building by stating “We are social animals who cannot function effectively without a social system that is larger than ourselves (141).” He proposes that the idea of community insinuates being dedicated when it comes to work, caring about other people and being thoughtful about the environment. This paper will define community building. It will share methods to building community based on Peter Block's book Building Community.

In general terms, the fact that community building has numerous advantages is not a novel idea. However, community building is also advantageous in terms of organizational development. In fact, when it comes to organizational effectiveness, community building is particularly important. A successfully developed community enhances organizational learning, elevates innovation and creativity, strengthens employee morale, increases a sense of employee loyalty, increases organizational citizenship behavior, develops leadership, and helps implement organizational change.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?
Let us consider further what is entailed in the idea of a ‘community.’ According to Bray (2006), the definition of ‘community’ evolved a great deal over the past several decades. In fact, it originally described the common people, or non-nobility. Afterward, it was used to depict a group of individuals that share common interests or similar experiences, such as ‘Hispanic community,’ or ‘professional community.’ Since about the middle of the twentieth century, the term ‘community’ came to describe a manner of uniting, or individuals coming together in order to work toward a noteworthy goal. In the present context, community means relationships that are
based on trust and respect, a sense of belonging, and individuals working together toward a common vision and understanding how their individual goals align with that vision.

**ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

Much focus has been recently dedicated to the idea of organizational learning. Now more than ever before, organizations have to promote learning in order to create a competitive advantage (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Learning helps to attain higher quality products and services, as well as drive productivity. Learning is critical in order for an organization to keep up with the rapidly changing technology (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, & Smith, 1994). In order to develop the necessary competencies, individuals have to engage in continuous learning.

A strong organizational community facilitates learning. A community serves as a means for individuals to share cognitive, emotional, and material resources (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Individuals are more comfortable asking questions when the environment is supportive and collaborative as opposed to frigid, stiff, or uncooperative. This promotes the sharing of information. Likewise, individuals know each other and know who to go to for specific information. This saves time and increases efficiency. Orell (2006) describes feedback as “the cornerstone of all learning” (441). Providing specific, timely, and honest feedback is an essential part of learning. People are more likely to give honest feedback when the organization establishes a sense of community. The individual providing feedback is less compelled to be polite and more willing to provide constructive comments that help improve performance. The individual receiving feedback is more likely to be open-minded and receptive. The bottom line is that individuals with a strong sense of community are likely to work and communicate in a collaborative manner, which helps to create a learning organization.

**Top 7 Reasons to Build Community**

1) Enhance organizational learning
2) Elevate innovation and creativity
3) Strengthen employee morale
4) Increase a sense of employee loyalty
5) Increase organizational citizenship behavior
6) Develop leadership
7) Help with organizational change efforts

**INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY**

In addition to increasing organizational learning, a sense of community increases creativity and innovation. This means that the members of the organization are more
likely to come up with new and useful ideas. They are more likely to find innovative solutions to problems. As Harvey Firestone, founder of Firestone Tire Company, stated, “Capital and experience aren’t so important in business. You can always get these. What are important are ideas. If you have ideas, you have the main asset needed, and there isn’t any limit to what you can do with your business and your life.” An organization that is focused on building community facilitates learning and sharing of ideas, which in turn increases creativity and innovation. Members of the organization are more likely to form high performance teams. When compared to working individually, employees in a well functioning, cohesive team make better decisions and work more efficiently (Osland 2007).

High performance teams allow innovation and creativity to skyrocket. Individuals are able to brainstorm together and build on each other’s ideas.

**MORALE**

Boosting employee morale is beneficial for both employees and employers. If employees are satisfied and happy with their jobs, the organization is more likely to profit then if employees are discontent (Schoeff, 2006). Schoeff writes that a study conducted in 2005 by Sirota Survey Intelligence reported that during one-year period stock prices of high-morale companies increased significantly more than those of medium or low morale. David Sirota, the founder and chairman of Sirota Survey Intelligence, says, “The success of an organization is dependent upon the competence of senior management and the morale of the workforce.”

How is high morale a factor in the profitability of the organization? According to Griffith (2001), satisfied employees are likely to satisfy customers. Young and Gutner (2005) state that morale is negatively related to turnover, with high morale resulting in lower turnover. Additionally, employees with high morale are likely to be more committed and less likely to engage in social loafing (putting in less effort during a team project), which results in increased efficiency. Morale increases trust, which means that employees are also less likely to engage in adverse behaviors, such as
absenteeism, tardiness, or theft. There is no doubt that having high employee morale creates a pleasant place to work. Most importantly, however, having high employee morale creates a successful organization.

Building community strengthens employee morale by creating camaraderie among members of the organization. Individuals bring in a set of expectations about what they want out of the job as well as the organization. Mischkind, and Meltzer (2006) say that majority of employees seek equity, achievement, and camaraderie. Camaraderie means that members of the organization feel a sense of friendship and trust toward one another. Likewise, building community strengthens morale by building trust. Community also strengthens morale by promoting teamwork. One can look at building community as being parallel to building morale. Building morale means, among other things, instilling a sense of community.

LOYALTY
On a similar note, an organization with a strong sense of community helps foster loyalty. Each year, companies spend millions of dollars on the recruitment and training of new employees. The cost of turnover for one employee can easily surpass 150% of the employee’s annual compensation (Bliss n.d.). This includes direct costs (such as cost of advertisement, training a new employee) and indirect costs (loss of productivity, loss of skills and knowledge). Organizations with a strong sense of community are more successful at retaining employees, which can drastically reduce costs. Employees are more motivated and more committed to the organization’s success. They understand the organization’s vision and are able to see how their individual goals align with the organization’s goals. It is a known fact that the most effective form of advertisement is word of mouth. Loyal employees that are dedicated to the organization will have positive opinions about the organization, which is a powerful (and free) form of advertisement. Likewise, one of the best methods of recruitment (if not the best
form) is through personal referrals. Employees that were recommended for the position by a friend who already works for the company are on average more successful than employees recruited using other methods. Employees are likely to refer individuals who are competent and qualified for the position. However, the first step in encouraging employees to refer their friends is to give them something to brag about. If they love their job, they will be more likely to tell their friends about it.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOR**

Furthermore, building community increases organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). This is positive employee behavior that is not formally required by the organization. Organ (1988) defined OCB as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization (4). A positive, cohesive organizational culture supported by community building efforts results in its members going above and beyond to get the job done. Employees are more willing to put in extra effort to get a task accomplished even without additional compensation. A relevant example is an employee who takes the time to help familiarize a new hire and serve as a mentor. Mentoring has numerous benefits for an organization. It increases the mentee’s performance and supports development. It also increases job satisfaction, which helps with retention. Mentoring allows new employees to gain the necessary knowledge and skills in a shorter amount of time. The employee who puts in time and effort to help a new colleague will also benefit by developing stronger leadership abilities and enhancing communication skills.

**LEADERSHIP**

Building community helps with leadership development. As already mentioned, employees in a strong community environment are likely to
engage in organizational citizenship behaviors such as mentoring, which helps develop leadership skills. In addition, employees are more likely to demonstrate certain behaviors that are essential for individuals in leadership positions. Such behaviors include communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and team building ability. Communication is easier in a cohesive, positive environment. People are also more willing to discuss problems, give constructive feedback, and work together in order to overcome obstacles, all of which help with resolving conflict. People learn how to effectively work together which enhances team building. In addition, supervisors that engage in community building efforts with their teams become better leaders.

They have the opportunity to develop many leadership abilities, such as people skills, ability to effectively coach/mentor, and team building. Gary Hoover says, “Nothing is a more powerful agent for attracting and keeping talented people than a clear vision, especially if the organization is living that vision and achieving its goals.” A strong community advances the organization’s vision and helps individuals become committed to the vision. A team becomes easier to manage and lead when everyone is striving towards the same goal. Individuals are willing to take ownership of projects. They are more motivated and determined.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Finally, one of the biggest reasons to engage in community building is the fact that it helps implement organizational change. Change is inevitable. In order to hold a competitive advantage, an organization has to be willing and able to change (Osland 2007). Both economic and strategic circumstances compel organizations to seek new approaches and new solutions. However, the disheartening fact is that most organizational change efforts fail.

According to American Productivity and Quality Center 1999’s Organizational Change white paper, there are five conditions necessary for successful organizational change: committed and active participation of leadership, culture change, and energetic involvement of an educated and empowered workforce, effective communication, and aligning human resources systems with goals and

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objectives of change. A strong organizational community helps fulfill these conditions in the following ways. Individuals are more committed and willing to actively participate in new endeavors. A culture that values growth is established which helps promote change. High morale creates empowered workforce. Communication is easier and more effective. And lastly, individuals have goals that align with objectives of change. Successful change is what will differentiate an organization that is thriving from one that is merely surviving.

As an employee, the sense of belonging to a community in your organization is crucial. Plenty of times companies will have what they call a “false start.” A member from the organization will get this idea for a change effort and then the momentum slips away quickly. Seventy percent of change efforts fail. These efforts can fail for obvious reasons such as lack of motivation, no support, other priorities, etc. Those who have created a successful change effort can tell you that the benefits are worth the challenge.

THE CURRENT VALUE OF BUILDING COMMUNITIES IN A RECESSION

During these economical times, employees are stressed out. They are stressed with the workload they gained from layoffs, the fear of being laid off, etc. This time more than ever is a time to build a community. When companies foster engaging environments where workers feel connected to their work and co-workers, employees will put in more effort to produce outstanding work. As such, creating a feeling of community among workers is key to increasing employee engagement and productivity (Nolan, M. 2009).

People need a sense of belonging; otherwise, they can be chickens running around with their heads cut off. We are social animals who cannot function effectively without a social system that is larger than ourselves, hence community, the
social glue that binds us together for the greater good. Community means caring about our work, our colleagues, and our place in the world, geographic and otherwise, and in turn being inspired by this caring (Mintzberg, H. 2009).

Building community in your company will not be easy, but the good news is that you don’t need to reinvent it, just recreate it. Humans’ social nature virtually guarantees that they will create community on their own, with or without encouragement from management. (Nolan, M. 2009) When a community has already been built what is the next step, to recreate it so the culture of your organization is for the good of the employees, customers and the organization as a whole.

Peter Block represents one of the most important voices in understanding the value of building community within an organization.

**PETER BLOCK’S APPROACH TO DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES**

In his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block (2008) proposes that there are six key elements to building effective communities. The author lists six conversations that need to take place in an organization in order for positive transformation to occur. The conversations are as follows: Invitation, Possibility, Ownership, Dissent, Commitment, and Gifts. Instead of focusing on what went wrong in the past, Block’s approach is to look at future possibilities and the organization’s potential. The conversations serve as a foundation for building an organization that will not only survive through tough economic times, but thrive.

**The 6 Conversations**

**Invitation**
The invitation is the call to create an alternative future. Start by creating conversations around the organization. An invitation should be by choice and should not be mandate. This way the ones that will be accepting the invitation will be those who want to be there not those who have to be. After a group of people, doesn’t matter the number, has been established, it is time to start rebuilding community.

**Possibility**
The group that has been established in the invitation stage will start looking at the possibilities for your organization. More in depth conversations should be taking place
by collecting thoughts and ideas around the possibilities that can occur in the organization. To create a common goal and vision is important in this stage. After creating a vision, the team will be able to brainstorm ideas and figure out how make that vision successful. These conversations aren’t always the most pleasant. Open and honest opinions are essential to make any change happen. Stating what crossroads you find yourself at and what your group members are at is imperative. By finding out the crossroads you and your group members are at, you as a group will be able to move through them.

Ownership
Ownership is a common word you will hear when starting a change effort. The importance of owner is crucial. Those who take responsibility and ownership are more likely to succeed then those who don’t. To create ownership within your group, ask the group what they have done to contribute to the very most thing that they complain about. That being said, by having everyone admit to what their current state is and what they have done, the group is thinking outside the box individually yet as a group. After that has been identified, the individuals can start making positive changes within themselves.

Dissent
The dissent conversation is about allowing people to say no. Block says, “If we cannot say ‘no’, then our ‘yes’ has no meaning.” According to Block, people need space to express their doubts and reservations. Leaders need to gain an understanding of what people do not want in order to be able to create a shared vision and to assure that people are committed that vision. This process begins with doubt. One cannot acquire genuine commitment from individuals if they do not posses the ability to say no.

Commitment
The two questions that Peter Block poses are as follows: “What promise am I willing to make? And, what is the price I am willing to pay for the success of the whole effort?” Block says that in order for successful transformation to occur, a promise is needed from fewer individuals than most people believe. However, the important factor is to demand authentic commitment from those individuals that do decide to make a promise. If an individual does not want to commit, he or she should be able to say no and pass. In order to create accountability, promises need to be made public.

“If we cannot say ‘no’, then our ‘yes’ has no meaning.”
-Peter Block
Gifts
In most situations, people tend to focus on deficiencies. Block says that it is more valuable to focus on our “gifts” and capitalize on our strengths. This is probably the least common occurring conversation among organizations. We should focus more on our potential and all the positive aspects each person brings into the organization.

The following case example represents the use of Peter Block’s model in action.

COMMUNITY BUILDING EXAMPLE
In June 2009, Susan Cain, CEO and Founder of the Corporate Learning Institute ran a Community Building session around Peter Block’s Six Conversations that Matter with C/D/H. Mark Becker, from C/D/H explained that “As we worked through the conversations the group began to open up and share from the heart. Many conversations were enlightening but the one that really seemed to open up the floodgates was on dissent. Initially no one dissented and we almost moved on. But Susan Cain wisely helped out for the last dissent and soon one consultant dissented and then another. Soon we were having a real conversation about people’s reservations about commitment and trust.” Mark continued to say that the group learned how to solve issues that were expressed through the conversation that was started in the session. The conversation was begun and is still going on. C/D/H team members’ conversational performance has improved since that conversation. Mark said that the context of the community building session, the six conversations and the commitment of the members of staff to be willing to expose their dissent and concerns was a breakthrough for C/D/H. Mark also said “We have had two additional...
conversations at our Friday All Day meetings and the results were good, and the atmosphere and sense of community was restored. I think we are moving forward again with regards to firm culture and team atmosphere.”

POSSIBILITIES FOR CONTINUING ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

After attending a community building session, the facilitator will help the team develop an implementation and evaluation strategy. Through follow up workshops and group proposals agree on a roll out plan that will communicate the implementation of the change effort throughout the entire organization. By developing an evaluation strategy it is important to think about how success will be measured.

CONCLUSION

This paper has defined community as relationships that are based on trust and respect, a sense of belonging, and individuals working together toward a common vision and understanding how their individual goals align with that vision. This paper has also reviewed the seven reasons to build community which include:

1. Enhance organizational learning
2. Elevate innovation and creativity
3. Strengthen employee morale
4. Increase a sense of employee loyalty
5. Increase organizational citizenship behavior
6. Develop leadership
7. Help with organizational change efforts

We also examined the importance of building community in this recession. We concluded with Peter Block’s approach to developing effective communities and an example. With all the information, one can see why building a community is extremely important during these times.
REFERENCES


