

What can community do for us?

An exploration of what we mean by community,
and how it might revitalise our organisations

When a community is working well, it manages to generate some special magic that's hard to define. I know this from my personal experience of different group events. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts; members of the community feel that they are in a state of flow.

At its best, a community is a space which can transform its members. There's something about simply being in this unique environment which leads inevitably to individual and shared growth.

At its worst, a community can be oppressive and destructive. What is the role of 'community' in our lives, and in our organisations? How can we capture the best of community, while avoiding its worst?

What do we mean by 'community'?

Humans evolved living in communities; we are meant to be that way. In the past, these communities would have been contained in relatively narrow geographical bounds – the village, the valley, the tribal hunting grounds, the mill town. The 'containers' for these communities may have been relatively static, slow to change and possibly chafing some of those within them.

The contemporary world means that narrowly-defined communities, with their clear boundaries and cultures, are no longer sustainable. The modern world on the one hand faces us with the challenge of creating communities in ways which people have never had to before, which is difficult and unsettling. On the other hand, through technology and increased mobility, it offers us whole new possibilities for building community. We have to learn to create communities for the modern world, which means paying attention to what we mean and want by 'community'.

The idea of 'community' is certainly attractive. But its very attraction means that the word is often used sloppily as a blanket term. One hears it used to describe people who happen to be living in a particular area – even if they may feel that their town or estate is far from being a unified community. It's used to designate a particular group of people by those who are themselves outside that

group. One hears of 'the black community' or 'the Asian community', when people supposed to be in that community may be far from experiencing themselves as part of a unified whole. It may be adopted by people living intentionally in a specific grouping or place (for example, a religious or spiritual community), when the reality of that 'community' may feel oppressive or conflictual to some of its members.

If we are consciously to build community, we need a clearer definition of what it is we are after. For me, 'community' means a web of relationships which enables us to be fully and freely ourselves in relation with others who are fully and freely themselves. In order to support this network of relationships, healthy communities will have a certain number of characteristics in common.

Here are twelve key characteristics which I suggest will be needed by any successful community.

1. **Self-reference, or self-awareness** – the community understands itself as a community, and its members are aware that they're part of it. So if you don't think you're part of a community, then you're not – you can't be labelled as part of a community by someone else. Thus, membership of a community is voluntary and can't be imposed. The community will maintain its self-awareness through feedback loops, which allow issues to be heard and communicated to the wider community.
2. **Autonomy and diversity** – all members of the community are free and equal. The community cannot be controlled, designed or led by an individual or a group (although members might agree to delegate leadership, or other functions, to an individual or a group). The community recognises and respects the differences between individuals.
3. **Participation** - all members of the community are enabled to participate, but are free to choose their level and manner of participation. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder¹ suggest that there may be three broad levels of participation in communities. The first is a small core who take on much of the organising and participate extensively. Around that core may be 15% to 20% of community members who are active and participate often. The majority of the community, however, may be 'peripheral' and watch what happens from the sidelines. In a traditional team or group, this level of participation would be seen as half-hearted. However, these people may be having private conversations and thoughts about the

activity in the wider community, which in itself can be of value. A community needs to value and accommodate these different levels of involvement by creating opportunities (what the authors call 'building benches') to encourage these spontaneous reflective sub-groupings.

4. **Relationships** – the community pays attention to developing relationships, valuing both the individual and the collective. Members of the community do not need to be in direct relationship with every other member. (This is in distinction to a group or team, where all members would normally be in direct relationship with all other members.) Relationships within communities can be thought of as 'integrative fields' in which individuals come together and create something greater than the sum of the parts, while retaining their distinctiveness.
5. **Intention** – the community has a clear and shared intention. In traditional work teams or groups, the mission or task is often about doing something, about effecting change external to the group. The task is generally envisaged in rational, practical terms. In healthy communities, the intention may have a 'doing' element (encompassing the cognitive and practical) but this will be balanced with a 'being' intention, which pays attention to the emotional and imaginal realms of human beings. Healthy communities will pay attention to how they are, as well as to what they are doing.
6. **Energy** – the community has enough internal energy, or enthusiasm, to sustain itself. Energy is likely to come from the generation and flow of information which is given a shared value by community members (that is, meaning, not mere data). Energy is also likely to be generated and flow from strong emotions present in the community.
7. **Culture** – the community has the basic minimum necessary ground rules or culture (even if implicit) to form a gentle container for the relationships between community members. However, in order to maximise energy-flow throughout the community, the culture must be one which allows as much diversity, creativity and spontaneity as possible.
8. **Processes** – the community pays attention to the processes needed to create and transmit meaning, including the community's culture, to its members. Community members will share a 'community hygiene' role, making sure the community is functioning to the optimum, by looking out for, and dealing with, individuals who are struggling or processes which are not working.

9. **Wave and Particle** – the community exists, like matter, in wave packets and may manifest itself at different times in 'wave-form' (eg: virtual communities, loose networks, very disparate or low-energy communities, everyday neighbourhood activity) or in 'particle-form' (eg: close groups, teams, during specific events, in response to particular occurrences in the external environment, street parties, and so on). Low-energy ('wave') communities (and community members) have the potential to shift to a high-energy state ('particle') and vice-versa.
10. **Context** – the community, and what happens within it, emerge from, and are inseparable from, its context. The community can't be designed, controlled or predicted from outside itself. What works in one context can't be precisely translated or copied into another context.
11. **Boundaries** – the community pays careful attention to managing its boundaries. The community is aware of both inside and outside perspectives. Members of the community 'scan the horizon' to see what is happening in the outside world, and bring relevant information back into the community. The community pays attention to welcoming and inducting suitable newcomers, and to celebrating the departure of individuals leaving. The boundaries of the community are thus permeable and fluid. They are seen as the place at which it interacts with, and learns from, its environment.
12. **Emergence and evolution** – the community evolves and changes in response to its own energy levels and to other internal and external stimuli. It will need to have feedback loops and review mechanisms to help this happen. The community will need to pay particular attention to what is happening outside itself, in its wider environment. Flexibility will be built in to how the community functions, to allow the unplanned to emerge.

Of course it would be foolish to be too starry-eyed about community. We can all think of communities which have been oppressive, restrictive and moribund.

The very concept of 'learning communities' in an academic context, for example, has been challenged by a number of writers². Communities can be seen as idealistic, harking back to a non-existent pastoral golden age, enforcing conformity while punishing difference, valuing the collective over the individual, and so on.

Nor is it always easy to participate in a community. It can be hard for some people to join together with others – to step into the 'integrative field' of a relationship³. Some people may be left on the

sidelines feeling isolated. And while we may strive to respect others, it can be hard to know how our personal behaviour is affecting them until it is too late. The creativity of a community comes from the energy generated by the various relationships and interactions within it. But these interactions can trigger negative, as well as positive, reactions within us. Parker Palmer highlights the irritating side of community, saying *'we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!'*⁴.

However, I would argue that the reason for communities feeling uncomfortable, or even damaging, may be because some of the characteristics of a healthy community listed above are absent. For example, in a small village community where conformity is enforced, one could say that participation is not voluntary – the village just happens to be the place where one was born.

Alternatively, in a community which is not evolving, the boundaries may not be permeable enough to allow in new members or ideas, or the community processes may be too cumbersome or irrelevant. Where individual members are feeling bruised in a community, it may be that the 'community hygiene' role is not being carried out effectively, or that not enough attention is being paid to generating healthy relationships which value the individual. A healthy community will have processes to bring awareness of these facts to its attention and to allow it to evolve in response to them.

Without being unrealistic about what 'community' can achieve, and understanding that the uniqueness of each context means that nothing can transfer exactly from one setting to another, can we at least take something from the experience of community into other parts of our lives?

Can community rescue our organisations?

Recent research by Roffey Park⁵ revealed that 70% of managers were searching for something more meaningful at work; 80% said it was personally meaningful to them that their company was environmentally and socially responsible – although 52% were sceptical about their company's value statements; 39% said they experienced tension relating the spiritual aspects of their personal values to their daily work.

This research points to a crisis in our workplaces, to a dislocation between people, their work, their sense of purpose and their personal values. What can be done to bring a greater sense of meaning to people's work lives and to allow them to better connect

their work and non-work selves? Could fostering a greater sense of community in our organisations provide an answer?

I certainly believe many of our organisations and workplaces have lost that sense, which can be found in a healthy community, of what it means to be properly human - an individual fully and freely in relationship with others who are fully and freely themselves. All too often, our organisations focus exclusively on task, output, the bottom line, while failing to pay enough attention to the interpersonal relationships which deliver them.

As we have seen, 'community' (as I have defined it in this article) can provide organisations with a space in which the individual is encouraged to be more autonomous and self-responsible while in relationship to others. This in turn can allow people to develop a greater sense of togetherness, common purpose and shared meaning, clear intentions and a defined but flexible culture. By paying proper attention to the full context in which the community finds itself - which may entail listening to the voices which are not being heard, understanding the meaning of conflicts, gossip and rumours - individuals can feel freer to bring more of themselves to work, because they feel that who they are will be valued.

'Stuckness' and rigidity can be minimised by paying attention to developing and supporting a wide variety of relationships across the organisation and by consciously bringing in new stimuli and learning from outside, thus allowing the organisation to change and evolve in relationship to its environment. In this way, the organisation can make most effective use of the available energy within it - and can understand how to revive flagging energy.

But, sad to say, 'community' will feel very far from where most of our present organisations are. Trying to create a fully-functioning community will be an unrealistic task for many. Creating a community demands investment and good leadership. While a community can encompass far more people than a group or a team, the larger the community, the more energy will be needed to manifest it in a high-energy 'particle' state.

Change may be hard to imagine. Within our organisations, people are so entrenched in their tasks and roles that it may be hard for them to imagine how they could move outside the perceived safety of their present way of doing things. Realistically, people in our workplaces may simply be reluctant to see themselves as part of a community - they might not want the challenge, they may not even like their colleagues enough.

But our organisations need to capture some of that shared meaning-generation and creativity of which communities are capable. Fortunately, I believe there are some practical steps, some of which most organisations could take immediately.

Be more creative about stimulating the flow of information, and thus energy. Set up events in which people come together freely to exchange and generate ideas. Activities such as Open Space, Market Place, Learning Exchange or The Street allow individuals to mix in small and large groupings and to share information and ideas which are important to them in a spontaneous way.

Concentrate on generating shared meaning, not more information. Don't just collect more data: use the data to develop a collective understanding of what's happening between as many colleagues as possible. Notice how information – and meaning – flow (or don't flow) around your organisation, perhaps even in the form of gossip or rumour, which always contain huge amounts of energy.

Pay attention to how the organisation *is*, as well as to what it *does*. Reward time spent developing interpersonal relationships, and the processes which support them, as well as time spent achieving 'bottom line' tasks. Schedule time during working hours to allow people to talk and interact with each other away from their desks, perhaps even in a more social setting.

Reward individuals who act as 'community hygiene monitors' by identifying where your organisation is not functioning well – and who do something to clear up the mess, even if only by bringing it to wider notice.

Invest in exploring the non-rational side of the organisation. Generate debate around your organisation's rituals and myths. Be brave enough to spend time collectively dreaming your organisation's plans as well as thinking about them. Tell each other stories about the history of your organisation, plus about what you're doing now. Make sure that the stories aren't controlled by a small elite but that dissident voices and alternative stories are heard too.

Identify how the 'boundaries' of your organisation could become more permeable. Encourage people within your organisation to regularly 'scan the horizon' for new developments outside your organisation which may affect it, and to share that information.

Make it easy for new members to join your organisation, in whatever capacity, for whatever length of time (for example,

through proper 'hand-holding' induction procedures, guest speakers, consultants, secondments, job placements and shadowing). Make it easy for members of your organisation to leave it, in whatever capacity, for whatever length of time (for example, through exit interviews, study trips, sabbaticals, job-sharing). Really value diversity rather than paying lip-service to it, or trying to enforce sameness.

In short, fostering a greater sense of community can provide a way of revitalising our organisations. By paying attention to developing our relationships with others, we can maximise the energy within our organisations and help it flow to where it is most needed. In turn, our organisations will reward us by evolving more effectively than in response to mere 'rational' planning.

Above all, fostering community will reconnect us with what it means to be fully and freely human, together with others who are also fully and freely human. Being part of a healthy community will allow us to create organisations in which all aspects of us can be honoured – not only our ability to do and achieve, but our emotions, our values, even our capacity to love one another.

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Dedication

To FN, with thanks for the community we built between us.

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References

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2. Summarised by Michael Reynolds of Lancaster University in 'Bright Lights and Pastoral Idyll: Ideas of community underlying management education methodologies' in *Management Learning*, vol. 31(1), pp67–81, London, 2000, Sage Publications

3. For more on the individuating and participative modes of the psyche, see John Heron's *Feeling and Personhood: Psychology in another key*, London, 1992, Sage Publications. A tour of *Feeling and Personhood* has been written by Framework member John Gray; see <http://www.framework.org.uk/view.aspx?id=27>
4. Parker Palmer, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 10.19, 2nd edition, London, 1999, Religious Society of Friends
5. Summarised by Rebecca Hoar in her article 'Work with Meaning', in *Management Today*, May 2004.