

## A Recipe for Community

Posted: 04/08/2013 2:25 pm

Over the years I've watched people struggle to build community and community organizations in a culture that has become more and more hyper-individualistic. "What's in it for me?" trumps "What's happening with *us*?"

I've founded organizations from scratch (The International Documentary Association, a [professional organization](#) for documentary filmmakers) and served on the board of others. I've been a member of still more. Some have been more informal and/or countercultural (a Voluntary Simplicity Circle, a local permaculture guild, the early National Organization for Women) and some more traditional (our town's rose society). Some have survived and thrived; others have fallen away.

Most of us long for greater community feeling and action. And as we wake up to the enormity of the challenges we face in an era of degrading environmental, economic, political and social conditions, we instinctively know that unless we can come together to effectively create constructive change, we and our children may not survive.

So what does it take to build and sustain an effective community or organization? Humans have understood and used this social technology since we gathered around the campfire in the Paleolithic, but we in modern Western and westernized industrial cultures seem to have forgotten many of the basics.

For anyone planning on pulling something together effectively, I offer this simple checklist for community-building success.

1. **Build a campfire.** Sometimes we want to literally build a campfire to gather a crowd and sometimes we need to create another kind of clear, focused attraction that draws us into the circle.
2. **Connect with nature and the seasons.** Our community programs and activities can either connect us to the rest of nature or they can further separate us from the Earth and universe that make life possible. Tying whatever events we hold into what's happening seasonally to all beings (human and otherwise) is a traditionally effective way of creating community.
3. **Take the time to welcome each person.** Some groups have designated "greeters." Other groups take time to go around the circle welcoming and acknowledging each participant before proceeding with the event's main activity. This isn't a frill. It's basic to building community. People who feel seen and known are more likely to continue their involvement than people who remain unwelcomed and anonymous.
4. **Provide food and drink.** Again, so basic. Traditional societies always took hospitality seriously. Having people bring things to add to the collective feast is better than mere catering.
5. **Ceremony, ritual and even a sense of spirituality or the sacred.** If we've tied our event or meeting to the seasons we've already added a sacred dimension. And every culture throughout history has created its own form of ceremony and sense of occasion for various community purposes. We can get great ideas from them all. Deep in our collective human memory lie countless spring or harvest festivals, ceremonial or religious events, meals and celebrations that included a strong sense of passage, initiation and the sacredness of all life.
6. **Collective problem-solving.** I've found that we can't create community for community's sake. People bond into a community when they can come together to participate in solving a real-world community problem or heal a person, group or situation that demands a community solution. In our society we tend to deny our need for a community until our interdependency becomes painfully evident, and that's the teachable moment when people are fully motivated to participate! We also need some agreed-upon method of solving internal disagreements. For some groups, it's Robert's Rules of Order. For others, it's discussion and community consensus. And everyone in our society needs to learn the techniques of nonviolent communication, because we've been brought up knowing how to complete but not cooperate.
7. **Storytelling.** Humans are a storytelling species. This goes way back to those Paleolithic campfires. We learn best when see and hear stories told by storytellers or acted out in theater or other visual media. Literacy is a latecomer in human culture, important as it is. And rational science is later still. As our brain structure reveals, [facts don't arouse us](#) as much as stories and full-body experience do. We need all of these, of course, but too often would-be community builders make the mistake of thinking that bombarding people with facts will create change. It doesn't. Most of us now "know" the facts about global climate change -- but few are inspired to act on this knowledge.
8. **Elders.** In every functional tribe or culture, the elders have been valued for their storytelling. How else do we know where we've been and how things worked out in previous efforts at change? Who else can share the lived lessons of birth, life and death? Even people who can no longer participate in the hunt or the barn-raising or the harvest can provide valuable service to the community by sharing stories. Adults in high-stress industrialized culture tend to find elders' stories slow and boring, but they are a critical resource for our collective survival. We also need to beware of the "Star From Afar Syndrome" where we

bring in outside professional or celebrity storytellers from some other community rather than honoring and developing our own community's storytellers who don't abandon us at the end of the evening.

9. **Gifts and sharing.** As we focus on creating a sharing society (as opposed to our current "gimme gimme" culture), it's nice to give small gifts (plants or flowers from our garden, seeds, passalong gifts, etc.) to those who attend our events, as a way of helping everyone feel valued and appreciated. Also it's critical to de-monetize community organizations and activities. Like their corporate counterparts, too many modern non-profits have become obsessive money-charging and money-generating machines, losing sight of their higher purpose. Expensive events and fund-raisers destroy community, creating the sense that the moneyed few are the valued guests. True community welcomes everyone, wealthy or not. The key is keeping events local, simple and created by the community for the community. "Many hands make light work." Some of the best community-building events I've ever participated in cost nothing and involved everyone bringing their own chair, outdoor blanket and food utensils, plus food to share.

10. **Shopping.** Yes, we're trying to recover from being mindless consumerists, but we also need to remember that humans have been bonding through meeting others in the marketplace since ancient times. This is why the sales or silent auction tables are perennially popular at many events. And again, the money is a gift to the community.

11. **A little excitement.** At each meeting, our local rose society holds popular raffles of donated plants, rose-themed items or useful gardening objects. Archeological evidence shows that humans have been gambling since prehistoric times and many of us seem to enjoy a little flutter to add some fun to daily life. And of course whatever money is raised goes into the common coffers, so is a "gift" to all.

12. **Child care.** Traditional community events were always multi-generational. If all of us are not welcome, we're reinforcing the generational segregation that is destroying modern society. Besides, children provide a critical source of untamed energy and entertainment for every gathering. A society that no longer enjoys the sound of children playing is a sick society indeed. And banning children from adults-only events deprives them of the role modeling and true education they crave. Those of us who remember being at local community events as children now realize how these gatherings formed and shaped our adult lives, even if at the time we didn't understand what was going on or were bored or distracted.

13. **Transportation.** In tribal or village society, this wasn't such a big problem, as people lived close together. But now, even in smaller communities there is always the question of how to get everyone to the event. Helping people travel together and providing transportation for those without cars or unable to walk is a great way of building community even before the event starts.

14. **Music.** Our amazing ears are portals to the soul and spirit of the human psyche. Even a simple drum can bond individuals into a coherent group. And community singing can be extraordinarily powerful medicine, as our churches and temples have known for millenia.

15. **Dance and body movement.** Modern society makes us sit, sit and sit. Bringing the body into action connects us the way nothing else can!

16. **Beauty.** Those of us focused on changing the world can often forget to appeal to humans' inherent love of beauty. We want action, not aesthetics! And then we wonder why few come to our meetings. Our eyes, like our ears, are portals to the inner life. Too often we forget that our species has been painting on rock walls since we gathered in caves. A simple flower on the table or painting on the wall brings powerful archetypal energies to bear as we gather in community. And a meeting held outdoors brings all of nature's magnificence to our senses, adding extraordinary power to our community activities.

The bottom line? Any community gathering, organization or event that engages body, mind, soul and spirit has a far greater chance of surviving and thriving.

For more by Linda Buzzell, [click here](#).

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