

Article 35

Building Community in 8 Hours or Less: One Participant's Journal

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The importance of community is “the interdependence built into the small town and rural social structure of earlier years,” believing that “support groups, religious groups, and work groups should all nurture a feeling of connectedness and a belief that everyone’s destiny is intertwined, yet as individuals, retaining a healthy degree of independence” (Sweeney, 1998, p. 83). Activated in an 8-hour workshop, community brings strangers together who end the day committed to a year of community-building activities.

This article provides a detailed narrative of an ACA First Timer’s experience attending an 8-hour ACA Learning Institute on “Building Community.” The author describes each activity, and then reactions, thoughts, and feelings about the activity, and the insights gained as a result of participation.

7:35 a.m. I am curious as I enter the convention center, because I see posters similar to “Uncle Sam Wants You” except the words are different: “ACA Wants You To Belong To Our Community—Community Building In 8 Hours Or Less.” Green arrows point toward the room—I don’t feel so “lost.”

7:45 a.m. Three people greet me. “Hello, I’m Linda. Sign in, please.” “Hi, I’m Brandy. I’m glad you chose our Learning Institute. Which color name tag would you like?” and “Hi, I’m Joan. Coffee, tea, or hot chocolate?” What a reception! Smiles, choices, and a warm drink!

8:30 a.m. The presenter starts with a caveat: “When others come in, who would be willing to say, ‘Come on in, you’re right on time! Would you like to join our group?’” We are given papers to participate in a research study on increasing ethical reasoning—cool! (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999). Until now, I thought there were two kinds of people—ethical and unethical. After we sign the informed consent and complete the

instrument, we are asked to journal our thoughts and rate our “feeling of community” on the Community Rating Scale (CRS) of 1 to 10 every time the bell rings. (CRS=3 This is definitely the “Fast Start” to Community Building!)

8:45 We find a partner and follow the instructions on the paper in our seats. We ask each other questions, such as, “What did you have for breakfast?” “What’s your favorite color?” and “How do you feel about being here?” On our handout are five pictures of a person with eyes looking in different directions. We notice where our partner looks (up for visual, to the side for auditory, and down for either kinesthetic or internal dialogue) (Helm, 1994) to help us know what verbs to use when we talk, such as, “I *see* what you mean” or “It *sounds* like you mean.” (CRS=4 It is easy to feel comfortable here.)

9:00 The leader directs pairs to “choose” other pairs, without talking, just by “knowing,” telling us about “tele”—the psychodrama technique. We walk around looking at others until we “find” them. And then we laugh out loud, because they are mirror images of the two of us, one short, one tall, one White, one Black, and we all “know.” (CRS=5 I don’t normally make friends this fast, tending to be guarded, taking things slow, and expecting people to disappoint me. I can hardly believe that I just admitted that.)

9:15 Our group of four must now find another group and become a group of eight for Back Scratching—writing an encouraging phrase on paper on each person’s back. We exchange names and note AVK (Auditory, Visual, or Kinesthetic) styles. I notice my face has a new, seemingly permanent grin. (CRS=5.5 It’s actually higher than that, but maybe I’m just getting caught up in the general excitement of the moment, so I’m being conservative.)

- 9:30 In pairs we choose a “car” and a “driver” (Kottman, Ashby & Degraaf, 2001). The car has closed eyes, and the driver, with hands on the shoulder of the car gives commands for moving forward, left, right, or backward. The idea, of course, is to move without touching anyone—the opposite of bumper cars. After a few minutes, we change positions. (CRS=8 My community feeling jumped a major hurdle during this exercise!)
- 9:45 We take a break. No one really wants to. We are all so revved in the experience, asking each other, “Wonder what’s next?”
- 10:00 Each group of eight follows directions in a paper bag. We use a sock ball to do a get-acquainted activity (Kottman et al., 2001). The thrower says, “Linda, here comes the ball,” and then tosses it. The receiver says, “Thank you, Brandy.” This continues until everyone has a turn, establishing a pattern. The group leader asks, “How is this like life?” and allows time for discussion. More balls are added. Some balls are dropped and retrieved. Again the leader asks, “How is this like life?” Lastly, a rubber chicken is introduced, passed either left or right, without comment while the balls are tossed. Finally, the same question is asked and discussed. (CRS=10 The workshop title was accurate—8 hours or *less*. If we don’t do anything else today, I got what I came for!)
- 10:15 While seated in a circle, a proscriptive dialogue includes saying a person’s name, waiting for a “Yes, Linda” response, then saying, “I appreciate you for . . .” and waiting for a “thank you” before rolling a ball of yarn while retaining end. The receiver wraps the yarn around a finger, and the process is repeated until a spider web develops with everyone connected. During the second round, the dialogue centers around good wishes: “I wish for you. . .” The third and fourth rounds are rewinding—going in the opposite direction and rewinding the yarn, with “I feel connected when (or because). . .” and “I plan to stay connected by . . .” (CRS=11 What do you do when your feelings go off the scale?)
- 10:30 We sit at tables with colored clay. With the option of individual projects, pairs or groups, we use the clay to make representations of our Vision for ourselves and of our Passion; then we discuss our previous experiences with people of color and diversity. (CRS=12 Can it get any better, really?)
- 10:45 Each group walks outdoors in one direction for 5 minutes, then we walk back. Although no other directions are given, our group talks as we walk. Some mention thankfulness for the activity, as they are people who exercise daily and wondered how they would squeeze in some physical exercise, while others admit they hardly ever walk anywhere. Conversation drifts to health topics in general. Laughter is frequent. (CRS=13 I know, I’m way over 10, but it keeps getting better.)
- 11:00 Water bottles are handed to us with a list of phrases to say to each other from Beyond Encouragement (Milliren & Maier, 2004). Some examples: “I’ve noticed how you show a real concern for others. It must make you feel good when others seek you out.” “You have a nice manner that draws people to you. That must really make you feel good about yourself.” “It feels good to know you are a good friend.” (CRS=14 The number is really much higher. I joined the community an hour ago, and my heart keeps expanding.)
- 11:15 We examine items representing the world religions and writings of philosophers. No other instructions were given. (CRS=15 How could the number stay stagnant when the good feelings keep getting better?)
- 11:30 A box of art supplies and paper are on the table with instructions to draw “community.” (CRS=15 The feeling was mitigated because I feel allergic to artsy things.)
- 11:45 Each group is instructed to discuss and choose a group name. We choose “Horizon Seekers.” (CRS=15 It feels like a solid 15. Perhaps this is the upper limit.)
- 12:00 Papers are laid out on a table with the names, descriptions, and directions to various restaurants. Our group chooses a Mexican restaurant. Upon arrival, we are taken to a private dining room, with a Mexican buffet—no waiting. During lunch we formulate a plan to help develop community within ACA, creating a trifold display board to illustrate our plan, practicing a 5-minute presentation that we will give when we return. (CRS=10 I still think this is a wonderful

- experience, but thoughts of reality are beginning to set in. Can we really pull off our proposal?)
- 2:00 Each group presents its plan for building community at ACA. (CRS=12 What a difference group support makes!)
- 2:30 Each group of eight joins with another group of eight to merge their small group plan into a larger plan. Our group gravitates toward the Advanced Registration and Communication group, whose name is Prevention Philosophers! Our group plans to rise at “Dawn Thirty” to greet early morning arrivals at the ACA 2006 Annual Convention. (CRS=16 What a connected, capable contributing community! (Albert, 1996)
- 2:45 Each group of 16 presents its plan for building community at ACA and writes its plan on a scroll for the Time Capsule. (CRS=17 This is my first ACA Annual Convention, and I am involved with a capital “I!”)
- 3:00 We go to a room set up with wireless laptops with hot spot connections and log on to ACA Online Community. Within the community are our named groups with links to our group Web page, complete with our names and digital photographs that were taken that morning. Each group of 16 works together to plan weekly online chats, get comfortable with e-mail and instant messaging to each other, and set benchmarks and timelines for our plan to build community at the ACA 2006 Annual Convention. We are asked to commit or decline from participation in a year-long study of an online community. I choose to participate. (CRS=20 Twice the scale of 10 seems the right number.)
- 3:15 My group chooses me to be our spokesperson for a committee to take in the big picture of all the group presentations and fit the pieces together. I feel honored and humbled at the same time. (CRS=25 I’m on top of the world.)
- 3:30 The committee meets together to formulate a presentation to the ACA leadership while the rest of the participants plan appropriate audience support. (CRS=50 This is so huge!)
- 3:45 We present the ACA officers with our plans for developing community in ACA. (CRS=100 So how come we just didn’t start with a scale of 1 to 100?)

4:00 The leaders join us in a large circle and we sing “Happy Trails to You.” Then we do the Texas Hug. (CRS=Infinity and beyond!)

The purpose of this workshop is to connect people, encourage them to feel capable, and provide them opportunities to contribute to the greater need of the organization (Albert, 1996). As Pascarella and Frohman (1989) advocated,

Becoming more purpose driven is within the realm and reach of many organizations. Some are taking deliberate steps in this direction...Being purpose driven involves carefully choosing the areas in which to spur change while reinforcing areas where goals, plans, and activities are already consistent with the purpose. (p. 156)

In conclusion, there is no limit to the power of a 1-day workshop. As aptly expressed by Sonstegard and Bitter (2004),

The traits that emanate from a feeling of belonging are cooperation, friendship, empathy, caring, interest in others, courage, and confidence. Our capacity for this community feeling is the measure of our mental health. People with social interest meet these tasks with a willingness to solve them usefully. They treat others as they would want to be treated. They contribute. They participate. They seek to make a difference. (p. 80)

Epilogue

This manuscript is dedicated to Thomas J. Sweeney who inspires his students to live “Adler even more than Adler” (Sweeney, 1998, p. v).

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