



INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

Intentional Communities

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How this project got started

I first became interested in culture in terms of analyzing it and intentionally structuring it when I was in the Navy. During those days of the Cold War, the services didn't work together that much. There were a few exceptions, but for the most part each service had separate missions and tasks and we all knew where the lines were.

As the Cold War ended and funding started getting tight, the services began exploring ways to operate together. There were astounding differences in culture, language, and technology to be overcome.

The old story about asking a military service to secure a building had a lot of truth behind it. Here's how the services interpreted that request:

Navy: lock it up when you leave.

Marines: lay down suppressing fire and send in a small force to take possession of it from bad guys.

Army: set up a perimeter guard.

Air Force: sign a three year lease with an option to purchase.

As you can guess, the issues became far more complex dealing with targeting, aerial refueling, and even deployment.

The upshot of a tightening budget and increasing need to share resources and missions was the establishment of joint services qualified officers. Before long, many prize billets were designated as Joint Service Officer (JSO) billets, and only those who had completed the educational and experience requirements could fill them. Along the way, there were serious attempts to cross an even larger gulf: the gap between reserve components and active duty. Compared to dealing with reserves, working with the French was a piece of cake.

The birth of what today is **Intentional Communities** began during my tour of duty at the Naval War College. There, I was exposed to a book on the differences in military culture that changed the way I saw our interaction. It laid out in detailed terms what we all knew was true, that the services had very different cultures. What I found fascinating was how the book traced some of those cultural differences to our missions and technology, among other things. I was fascinated by the theories. To this day, I cannot find the title of that book.

Then the Soviet Union dissolved. The USSR, the ultimate evil in the world. For many of us, our entire careers had been focused on the Soviet Union and the threat of nuclear annihilation. I was at the War College after the break up and was intrigued by what would happen to those individual historic states as they broke away from the Soviet Union. What effect would the Soviet culture have on their futures? How was the Soviet culture different from their individual national culture? How much survived? How would they go to war in a post-Soviet era? Would their war-making culture continue in the Soviet vein, revert to their prior culture, or be some combination of the two? The War College allowed me a semester of independent study to look at Ukraine and explore some of my theories. I even made a very interesting visit to the Ukraine embassy in DC.

Well, the study I produced was pronounced less than stellar, but the research did expose me to a wide range of cultural anthropology theories. Additionally, I had one of the brightest minds at the War College, Dr. Holman, to talk over my theories with.

Fast forward many years, to a time when I'd been out of the military for a decade or so. Looking back, I had a clearer insight into how the military is different from civilian society. Additionally, I was working with a number of other groups in areas like dog rescue, martial arts, and church organizations, and it struck me that those groups had a number of things in common. They were about communities, and those problems related to them were questions of community formation, maintenance, and dissolution. I began to look at communities in a different way, especially the fascinating way that they were forming on the Internet. At the same time, the directions of the former Soviet states were becoming increasingly clear.

Another decade later, with more experience, this is what I've found about building community. Although it's not all-inclusive by any means, I hope it will be helpful to you in deciding how and when to deal with community issues.

Building a strong community is the key to fundraising.

Introduction

Humans live inside their own stories. We see it in the self-narration of Charlie Brown or the TV show *Dexter*, as the characters talk to themselves about the twists and turns that they're facing and what they're going to do. That's how stories evolve – they're idealized life where the self-narrative is a determining factor in how the character reacts and where there's a good chance that everything will work out right.

To create a community that people want to belong to, we need to intentionally create that story for them to live out, an overarching penumbra of community that is larger than life. We build that the same way we build a good story.

Step 1: Defining your community

Communities are groups of people who have something in common. It may be geography, as in the case of neighborhood associations. It may be special interested, like hobby clubs or professional associations.

Communities can be intentional or unintentional. They may be mandatory (as is the case with some professional associations or condominium associations) or voluntary.

The one thing you can be sure of is that where you find people, you'll find communities. Look at the explosion of community-building software and such platforms as Myspace.com and Facebook. There are also alternative lives, such as Second Life.

The first step is to define your community. What is it centered around? Is it just a loose collection of folk who've fallen in together? Or is there a reason for being a community?

Most often, you'll walk into a community that's already created. (Warning: make sure you understand the community before you start to make changes! More on that in another post.)

Say you're starting a new community. It can be a charity, a rescue group, a neighborhood association, or a support group. With a little planning and thought, we can make it much easier to grow it and stay on task.

Start by defining what your community is about.

- Purpose?
- Interests?
- Mutual benefit?
- Social justice?
- Animals?
- Rescue?

Be very specific about your purpose. For instance, take an animal rescue group. It's important that you distinguish between the love of a specific breed of dog (or mutts, for that matter) and actually rescuing that particular breed (or mutts). If you can keep that RESCUE purpose front and foremost, constantly focused on what's good for the dogs, your community members will be more willing to put aside their own egos, personalities and issues.

Initially, limit your organization to one purpose. It may pick up more or ancillary purposes later, but that's an issue that can be difficult to manage.

Groups evolve, too. What might have started as a community defined by a common purpose may have transitioned into a social club. Take a look at your group now and at what the stated purpose is and compare it to the group's activities.

It's a truism – look at where the time and money is spent and that's where the heart is. When the purpose aligns with the time/money expenditures, you've got a strong group identity.

The extreme examples of group identity take on a cultish flavor. You can find this in any type of organization. Sports clubs and activities such as karate schools can be just as cultish as religious organizations.

Once you've defined the center point, the purpose, of the community, then you have to create the story that's the center of the community. As a novelist and attorney, that's something I know a lot about.

Let's start at the beginning. There are three things you have to accomplish within the first few pages of a novel and you have to do the same things in organizing a community – AND within the first few minutes of meeting a new potential supporter. You have to hook the person, get them to suspend their disbelief, and create reader/personal identification. Here's how it works.

Hook

The first step to creating community is to make it interesting to people. We call this the hook.

The hook is what catches their attention. It is a problem, an opportunity, a common interest, a cause. It's closely related to the purpose and should reflect the main purpose of the organization. If it doesn't, you'll lose people once they figure out it's a bait and switch.

Your hook has to share the common interests or core of your community in a way that attracts attention of both those already interested in the community as well as those not necessarily interested. This is called the substance of the hook.

The hook needs an image. It can be a logo, a picture, or even just a set of initials. You want to engage your potential member visually. It could be a picture of a tragedy, but be careful with that. Unless you've got the photographic equivalent of the flag-raising on the Iwo Jima, you should probably stick with a logo.

The final thing you need for the hook is a way to get in front of your target audience. Who is your customer? Are they going to visit your web site? Do they read newspapers? Do they work out a lot? How are you going to reach your potential members?

Let me digress just a little bit again. True fanatics about your cause will find you. They're looking for you. What you want are the people who are not going to find you that easily. Yes, you need to maintain contact with your fanatics and bring them into your organization, but that's a different problem from reaching fresh converts initially.

So, the very first thing you need to work on is a solid hook, and that means defining the substance, creating a visual reference, and deciding how to reach your potential audience.

One way to approach the last challenge – look at your last ten volunteers or supporters. How did they find your organization?

Identification

The next thing you need to work on is identification, getting your potential member to identify with something in organization.

So what do people identify with?

Let's start by thinking of your community as a character in a novel. Now, this may come as a huge surprise, but most people are not completely good or bad. They're a mixture of both. The basic premise of reader identification is creating some quality in each character that the reader can identify with.

Something “human” in your community has to touch that same quality in your member.

How do you do that? Here are a couple of techniques that might work for you:

1. Focus on a common human quality or experience.

- Do you know what it is to be afraid?
- Betrayed by the one he trusted most.
- How can things go wrong so quickly?
- Don't you wish it was easier to...?"
- You can make a difference.

2. Set up one of those strange contradictions of being human. Pyrrhic victories are good here.

- How could you hate someone you loved?
- He wanted to go home but was afraid to.
- It was what she'd wanted for years—so why didn't it matter now?

3. Bring up that weird thing that you think is so odd no one will ever identify with. That's what people always identify with.

The weirdest one that ever got me was when an author wrote about the fascination with high places and standing on the edge and a compulsion to jump just to see what it would feel like. That's really the point at which I understood what strange critters people are.

People have lots of things like that embedded deep inside them. Universal secrets, if you will. Those always resonate – and quite powerfully, too, since they're secrets.

Even with those “human” elements, your community needs to be heroic: larger than life, capable of acts of bravery and heroism that the rest of us just dream about.

Suspension of disbelief

Finally, you must transition your potential member from identifying with your community to believing that they can be a part of it. This is suspension of disbelief. There three things that you must do in this phase.

1. Make it easy to join your group. This is especially true for volunteer and nonprofit organizations. Reach out to people where they are. These days, that means having websites and email contact info as well as snail mail for those who haven't made the transition yet.
2. Don't require a life-and-death commitment upfront. Make it in small increments, maybe a fifteen minute task. Example: "Can you meet me at the hospital and help me reorganize the supply cabinet? With two of us, it'll take about fifteen minutes and I'd sure appreciate the company. "

3. Make it easy for them to make that small commitment by getting them up to speed on what the regulars know. Make sure they know:

- How to get in. Which gate or entrance is the best?
- Where they can park. Is it comped or validated? **Will they need change?**
- What the procedure is. Are there security guards? What do you tell them when you arrive? Do you need to sign in somewhere?

DO NOT ALLOW THEM TO MAKE THEMSELVES UNCOMFORTABLE BY PUTTING THEM IN POSITIONS WHERE THEY WILL MAKE MISTAKES OR FEEL LIKE NEWCOMERS.

Have a name tag for them and (more on this later). Treat them like they belong.

Make them feel like an insider before they even show up. Your plan is to simply get them in the door, get them through the introductory awkwardness and make them feel a part of the team.

4. Manage the contradiction:

While you're making them experience what it will feel like to be a member, do not assume they are members of community. Don't start assigning them follow up tasks and goals. Let them make next commitment. You can coax it out of them, provide the opportunities, but let them take that step.

DO NOT IMMEDIATELY INNULATE THEM WITH ALL THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERSHIP.

I know this seems a little bit contradictory, making them feel like they're part of something while not hitting them up with everything that's involved in belonging. But that's how you introduce your prospective community member to the organization as it exists in reality.

What you want them to do next is to make a commitment to belong or help in some way. It can be a very small one. It can be something like, "I'm available to this again if you need it." It may be more extensive such as signing up to help one day a week.

Find out where your volunteers are in terms of commitment and meet them there.

Now that we've done some of the basic structural work on the community, it's time to begin creating it. It's not enough just to recruit people to your cause or group or forum or whatever community you're trying to create. As people respond to your hook, are identifying with your group, and are seeing themselves as members of it, you need to have a community for them to actually join. You need to intentionally and mindfully put in place those things that define a community, those things that make a group of people something more than just a group of people.

Those "things" are language, norms, structures, goals, communication, and higher purpose. We'll cover those next.

To Do

Write out the following:

What is your community about?

What is its purpose?

How are you going to hook, create identification, and suspension of belief?

List five fifteen minute tasks you could invite a potential member to help with.