

RESIDENT-CENTERED COMMUNITY BUILDING

What Makes It Different?



Connecting Communities Learning Exchange

A Resident-to-Resident Learning Exchange

San Diego, California • June 2012



“This is the first report that I have ever read that really feels ‘community friendly’ and that communicates what we do as community builders.”

— Roque Barros, San Diego



PREFACE

In June 2012, forty-one leaders of community building efforts came together to share strategies and discuss lessons they have learned about how to improve conditions in disadvantaged communities. While gatherings like these happen regularly, this one was unusual: it was designed by and for community residents. Some of the participants were volunteer resident activists, while others were employed as locally embedded change agents, community organizers, or staff of local agencies and organizations. Most of them played multiple and overlapping roles in their communities, but they all had in common a deep connection and commitment to the communities in which they were active.

The meeting had three main objectives. The first was for the participants to share their experiences, learn from each other, and celebrate one another's efforts and accomplishments. The second was to build a sense of community and common purpose among the participants, and to remind them that they're not alone as they engage in the important work of community building. The third was to capture the collective wisdom of these community builders in order to share it with other actors in the field of community change. This report aims to fulfill that third goal.

This report summarizes community builders' lessons, conclusions, and suggestions for future work. It identifies a set of ingredients that are needed for effective resident-centered community building but does not offer

a recipe for putting them together because each community has its own unique history, conditions, capacities, and potential. Rather, the themes introduced here are the basic building blocks that experienced community builders have learned are essential for community work to succeed. It also provides guiding principles for those who support resident-centered community change efforts.

Hearing the resident voice firsthand is rare. The Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation and the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change were honored to co-convene a meeting that was designed to draw out and amplify the resident voice. We thank the participants in the meeting for sharing their time and wisdom so generously, and we hope that they feel that their voices are accurately represented here. A complete list of all the participants in the national learning exchange appears at the end of this report (*see page 24*).

THIS REPORT SUMMARIZES:

1. Community builders' lessons, conclusions, and suggestions for future work
2. The building blocks that are essential for effective, resident-centered community building work
3. Guiding principles for individuals and organizations who support community change efforts



“When in doubt, start something. You don’t know what will be valuable when you start. But if you don’t start, you’ll lose opportunities. It’s key that residents actually produce or DO something together.”

—Kathy Szenda Wilson, Battle Creek

“There has to be follow-through. Too many groups come through our neighborhoods and gain our trust, and then don’t do what they say they’re going to do. Promises are made and not delivered on. This creates distrust in the future. When everyone else—the funders, the private investors — has gone away, the community is still there.”

—Valerie Joiner, Austin

RESIDENT-CENTERED COMMUNITY BUILDING

What Makes It Different?

In low- and moderate-income communities across the United States, there are many public and nonprofit organizations working on various aspects of neighborhood improvement. Most of them operate as stand-alone entities that deliver social services, build houses, enforce regulations, and the like. They are staffed by professionals such as social workers, community organizers, foundation officers, or public servants. The best of them adopt a “community building” orientation, which is to say that they work hard to become part of the institutional and social fabric of the neighborhood.

A core principle of a community-building approach to neighborhood change is that residents should be engaged in the work of improving their own communities: their knowledge of the neighborhood should undergird the work; their opinions and judgment should inform decisions; and their energy and commitment should be harnessed. The ways in which residents are engaged can vary dramatically, however. Too often, their engagement is token: resident leaders are consulted to represent the “resident perspective” on the work that government officials, foundations, experts, and practitioners embark on for the residents’ benefit. It is not unusual for residents to be brought in well after the basic outlines of the work are already set.

“You may try to keep to yourselves as adults, but kids are already out there building a community within themselves.”

— Lisa Miller, Tacoma

The Cornerstone: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

When residents are genuinely at the center of community building, a different process unfolds. Relationships become the centerpiece of the work. This is because for residents community building is personal — it’s about their children, their families, their homes, their neighbors, and their streets. It is about making their day-to-day lives better in real time.

THE CORNERSTONE: RELATIONSHIPS

In resident-centered community building, three types of relationships must be built and maintained:

- 1. Relationships Between Residents**
These are one-on-one, personal relationships among neighbors.
- 2. Relationships Between Residents and Neighborhood Institutions**
These are residents’ relationships with people who work in institutions that affect their daily lives, such as schools and police departments.
- 3. Relationships Between Residents and Community Change Agents**
These are residents’ relationships with individuals and institutions that are leading community improvement efforts, sometimes from inside the neighborhood as locally embedded change agents and sometimes from the outside as funders, intermediaries, or public servants.



1. Relationships Between Residents

Resident-centered community change work is, first and foremost, about building personal relationships among people who live in the neighborhood. There are two reasons why relationships are the core of resident-centered community building: mutual support and collective action.

Mutual support: relationships are supportive, and they build a sense of community

Neighbors develop friendships, share information that is useful, and help each other out. Individuals and families can get social and emotional rewards as well as practical support out

of neighborly relationships. Neighborhoods with a lot of trusting social relationships are high in “social capital,” which has been correlated with a pleasant, safe, and nurturing community.

Relationships begin with person-to-person connections, when neighbors greet each other every day, share food together, or knock on each other’s doors. They can start spontaneously, as when neighbors meet at the playground, laundromat, or grocery store. Relationships are also forged through intentional activities designed to bring people together such as block clubs, community gardens, and cultural celebrations. Effective leaders of resident-centered community building make these connections themselves, encourage others to make them, and create opportunities for neighbors to meet each other and connect. The key is bridging differences and finding common ground, common interests, and a sense of mutual self-benefit. Getting to know people as individuals also helps to overcome stereotypes and stigmas and build trust.

“To build relationships, you must open your heart to others as human beings. Do that by engaging in conversations in which each of you tells stories about yourself. Those stories can bring out commonalities. Once you find you have a commonality with somebody else, you can broaden the conversation and start to discuss what you are interested in doing.”

— Eva Bowen, Tacoma

Collective action: relationships can spark community engagement and lead to collective action

Once relationships have been forged, people may join together to solve problems or take action on behalf of the community. Neighbors are more likely to help each other out or work together on behalf of the neighborhood if they feel a personal connection to each other. As a result of this affinity, they have deeper ties to the community and care more about improving it. They might realize that they are all facing the same problems and that if they join forces they have a greater ability to solve them.

As relationships build and trust grows among neighbors, so do the opportunities for people to take action together. As people work together, the bonds of friendship expand, deepen, and strengthen. Therefore, relationship building and collective community action are mutually reinforcing activities.

Relationships for their own sake, or as a means to an end?

It is tempting to see all relationship building as an activity that is done in the service of something else, such as community action and improvement. People who feel a sense of urgency about the conditions in distressed communities, including professionals whose lives are devoted to improving outcomes

for low-income children and families, are especially anxious for newly forged relationships to lead quickly to improved outcomes that can be seen and felt.

Resident-centered community building is more patient. It recognizes that people have multiple motives for most things that they do. People might engage in community-building activities because their friends do it and it's fun, or because there's a problem that needs solving, or because they have high aspirations for what their community could become.

“A number of men in my community were hanging out with nothing to do. I asked why they weren't helping in the community. They responded, 'No one asked us.'”

— **Phillis Tigues-Judkins, Detroit**

Community building leaders offer a caution: not all relationships have to lead to community action and tangible outcomes. Resident-centered community building considers new relationships a success in their own right. For sure, there is a hope that the social capital and trust created through these relationships might have a bigger payoff down the road — that they might be tapped for broader community-change work. But residents do not judge the work a failure if those relationships don't

“I don't go for the easy-to-reach residents. I'm not comfortable when the same people are always participating in activities. I go for new people, those whose doors have not been knocked on yet, and I want them to be engaged.”

— **Jezamil Vega-Skeels, Milwaukee**

lead immediately and directly to more strategic community improvement activities. Instead, they value social interaction, emotional support, informal information exchange, recreation and fun, and neighborliness. Those are legitimate and important outcomes. In resident-centered community building, relationships can be ends in themselves.

This is particularly true in low-income neighborhoods where people move frequently, there is a lot of crime, and many different cultural groups live side by side. In those neighborhoods, relationships don't necessarily happen spontaneously: busy working parents have little free time, distrust can weaken social

ties, and people can feel isolated from their neighbors. Therefore, any activity that introduces people to one another, links them up, and creates friendships and trust is good in and of itself. It does not need to lead to anything else.

2. Relationships Between Residents and Neighborhood Institutions

Residents benefit from having personal connections not only with each other but also with the staff of the organizations and institutions that work in their communities and affect their lives on a daily basis. Unfortunately, there is a history of poor relationships between community residents and local institutions: public agencies



have been bureaucratic and slow-moving; schools have been unresponsive to parents' wishes; police have instituted aggressive stop-and-frisk policies that have swept up many of the neighborhood youth; and so on. These relationships are often strained by differences between the racial composition of the staff of these institutions and the communities they serve.

Resident-centered development aims to create more of a win-win situation in the relationships between residents and the line staff in public and community institutions — with, for example, teachers in schools, police on foot patrol, building managers in public housing—because they are the people community members interact with every day. Institutional interests are also served if staff members make an effort to develop relationships with residents: school administrators will know what to suggest in after-school

“Establishing a connection with the police captain helped to get other officers involved in developing better relationships with residents. We had to learn the police ranks so we knew who to call when there was a problem, without undermining the relationships between the officers and their superiors. It's tricky to maintain all these relationships, but it's important to get everyone involved.”

— Danny Gutierrez, San Diego

supports for their students, police will know the youth in the neighborhood by name, and housing authorities will know the family circumstances of their tenants.

Residents are aware that aligning with the interests of an institution requires keen political skills. Doing research, gathering information, and

“The city listens when there is a shared self-interest. When the community isn't engaged, it makes it harder for the city to be engaged.”

— Kristy Clemons, Minneapolis

developing a power analysis are invaluable. When resident leaders understand the multiple ways that neighborhood organizations, local institutions, and city officials are connected and who is in a position to influence behavior or policy, they can develop and leverage relationships to the community's advantage. So, for example, when line staff are not addressing a problem— or indeed when they are the

problem—residents might need to go over their heads to middle or upper management. Sometimes this works and sometimes it backfires. Knowing when and how to engage public and community organizations, and knowing whom to reach out to and whom not to reach out to is a sophisticated relationship-building skill that savvy community builders bring to resident-centered development. Like all resident-led work, these efforts require finding connections and building relationships on a person-to-person level.

3. Relationships Between Residents and Community Change Agents

Every community has a history of local improvement efforts; there is no such thing as a clean slate in the community-building world. Unfortunately, from the neighborhood perspective, too much of that history is negative: it's about abandonment, disrespect, token efforts, and broken promises. Too often external entities with money but little accountability or connection





to the community came in with their own agendas and left when they didn't get the results they wanted in the time frame they set for themselves. They left behind a legacy of distrust that continues to poison relationships and must be overcome if new change agents are to work effectively with residents. This distrust may be exacerbated when there is a perception that a predominantly white organization is imposing its agenda on a community of color.

“When working with a big institution, enter by saying, ‘You need us, the residents.’”
— Niesha Bryant-Williams, San Francisco

Resident-centered community building aims to establish a new way of doing business by creating effective working relationships between the community and “agents of change” who want to assist the community. A prerequisite for outside change agents is to understand that the onus is on them to learn about the community and find meaningful

ways to connect to it rather than expecting that the community should learn about and adapt to the outsiders' agenda. This is true whether the change agent is a community organizer, a nonprofit working in the community, a public agency, a foundation, a police officer, a school principal, or even a community resident taking up a leadership challenge.

Communities and outside change agents have both learned that these relationships work best when they are organized around mutual self-interest. Finding areas of mutual benefit requires honesty and integrity on all sides. The external change agent must be up-front about what is motivating the work, what outcomes are expected, and the nature of the institutional, political, and financial relationship. Community residents are extremely savvy about

“As a nonprofit working in the community, we need to be invited in as well as to invite. We need to show that we are there for the long haul, and overcome the lack of trust. We need to be consistent and accountable.”

— Jacqueline Kennedy, Brooklyn

“The most basic point is being genuine in what you are doing. People can tell. It's not about being smart, connected, or funded. It is about being genuine.”

— Jeremy Andrews, Battle Creek

detecting tokenism, naïveté, and doubletalk in people's intentions when they embark on community efforts. For their part, community residents need to be clear about what their true interests are, what they are willing to sign on to, and how they want to invest their time and energy.

When there is a power imbalance — as there inevitably is between funders and communities — these honest conversations are hard to have. Community leaders want and need the resources that a funder can bring, but they understand that funders have their own agendas and that funds are likely to come with strings attached. At the same time, funders need genuine partnerships with communities if their work is to succeed. The most experienced community builders prefer to address the power dilemma head-on, and the most respected funders rise to this challenge.



“Community building is like making a Lego house. You have to have all the pieces, and you can’t just throw them together. You have to build it in such a way that it creates a structure that sustains. The way you do that is through creating networks, and the way you create networks is through building relationships with people one at a time. The architecture was planned from the very beginning: creating all those tiny little relationships created that building.”

— Brett Lipshutz, Milwaukee

“Having multiple generations involved together can be a very powerful thing. Youth become motivated through the stories of seniors. Our youth came up with a campaign called ‘Take a Child to the Polls’ based on what they learned from the seniors about the benefit of having watched their parents vote.”

— Susana Amanza, Austin

RESIDENT-CENTERED COMMUNITY BUILDING

The Four Building Blocks

Relationships are the cornerstone of resident-centered community building. Once that cornerstone is laid, four building blocks anchor community change efforts in the reality of residents' lives while also providing a platform that allows the work to grow and build vibrant, healthy communities over time.

THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS ARE:

1. Create multiple ways for people to engage and contribute
2. Build trust and capacity
3. Communicate often and in many ways
4. Build the foundations for long-term work

“I have more luck with young people. They are ready to go, to talk together, to dream, and to act. They are leaders at the group level. They have lots of cool ideas and energy. It's a matter of giving them space and letting them go.”

— Jeremy Andrews, Battle Creek

BUILDING BLOCK 1: **Create multiple ways for people to engage and contribute**

Resident-centered community building aims to engage as many people as possible in the community improvement process. But communities are made up of people with a wide range of interests, talents, and time. “Not everyone can be reached in the same

way” is a common refrain. Most people will become involved because they care about a particular issue, especially one that affects their family and friends directly. Community builders must create multiple entry points for people to participate and multiple ways for them to stay involved.

Find people's passion: Some people become active because they care passionately about particular issues like neighborhood safety, cleanliness, exercise opportunities, potholes, or gardens. Youth are often most easily engaged through sports activities and performance arts (swim and gym, boxing, baseball, theater, music, and dance). Parents often get involved because they are concerned about their children's well-being, so family-oriented activities can be a great way to reach adults. Seniors might become motivated by safety concerns, recreational activities, and community meal sharing.

Meet people where they are: Existing community gathering spots and events are the best place to reach out to community members. Change agents who want to embark on community building must first understand what is happening in the community and what people care about. To do this, they need to go to where people are naturally congregating, listen to what

“First find out what people are working on. Meet people where they are. Go to community or PTA meetings and find out what is going on.”

— Rosalind Magwood, Brooklyn

BUILDING BLOCK 1

Create multiple ways for people to engage and contribute

- ◆ Find people's passion
- ◆ Meet people where they are
- ◆ Create spaces, places, and reasons for people to come together
- ◆ Be flexible about how people participate
- ◆ Respect people's time
- ◆ Make it fun and easy to participate
- ◆ Make efforts to reach the hard-to-reach

“Not everyone has to be involved all of the time. Let people go at their own pace.”

—Macedonio Arteaga, San Diego

residents have to say, and build relationships. This can happen in informal meeting spots, such as a home or a playground or a church basement or a barbershop, or at more formal, regularly scheduled community events such as PTA or block association meetings.

Create spaces, places, and reasons for people to come together: Some communities do not have a rich tradition of spaces, places, or events where a broad array of residents can come together. Opportunities can be created to bring people out and create new relationships, such as community cleanups, block watches, and child-focused activities. Seasonal

and holiday events are venues for reaching out to diverse groups. Political campaign events in the neighborhood are also moments when local residents can be inspired to come out and express their priorities.

Be flexible about how people participate: Most residents get involved by participating in a community activity or project. Some are willing to attend planning or governance meetings; others find meetings a turnoff and would prefer to do a defined project. Some residents have a lot of time to give on a regular basis. Others may participate only once or very sporadically. People need to feel that they can adapt their participation as their life circumstances and interests change, and as their energy for community work ebbs and flows. Being able to choose among an array of activities or tasks helps to keep people energized and involved over the long term and accommodates different levels and styles of engagement. Skillful community builders will divide the work into multiple, discrete tasks to fit individual talents and capacities and allow for different leadership styles.

“Whatever the work or project or program is, if it doesn't come from what the residents want and desire and need, it's never going to stick. It will be just a Band-Aid that covers over a wound without any healing going on underneath.”

—Andala Duong, Tacoma

Respect people's time: Resident-centered community building relies on voluntary engagement and work. In any neighborhood, residents have hectic and full lives with little spare time for taking on community obligations. In low-income neighborhoods, where parents might be working more than one job and have few family supports, this is especially true. Not everyone has to be involved all the time: people should be invited to meetings or projects strategically. Meetings should only be called when they're necessary, and they must be well run. People are more likely to stay engaged if they feel respected in the process; wasting people's time is a sign of disrespect that can be easily corrected.

Make it fun and easy to participate: Community building may take work, but it is easy to add in some fun. This is especially important because so much of the effort relies on volunteers who are donating their time. Youth in particular need to feel an activity is “cool” if they are to participate. Providing food and child care makes it easier for people to come to events and meetings

“One important principle is to provide food and child care at events and meetings.”

—Roanae Kent, San Francisco

and is another way of honoring the effort they are making. One thing that everyone agrees on: food will bring people out to events, and really good food will bring out even more people.

Make efforts to reach the hard-to-reach: Multiple entry points and flexibility of roles can help to ensure that a community building effort goes beyond the usual suspects and includes those who are hardest to reach. For example, senior citizens and others who are less mobile can be asked to undertake activities that don't require them to leave their homes. Seniors also enjoy opportunities to cross generational boundaries and work with youths. Special efforts are needed to reach

new immigrants who have no natural connections to others in the community, marginalized youth who might otherwise feel unwelcome, and higher-income gentrifiers. In diverse communities, learning about other cultures and religions can help bridge differences, identify common interests and concerns, and draw people out.

BUILDING BLOCK 2: Build trust and capacity

Resident-centered community building is, first and foremost, about creating a foundation for ongoing voluntary engagement of many residents in neighborhood improvement. This requires developing trusting relationships and building community capacity.

Start wherever the energy lies: There is no “best” first activity. Instead, community builders take their cue from where there is energy in the neighborhood—which can be positive around

an opportunity, or negative in response to a problem or threat. They act entrepreneurially when an opportunity arises, when a leader takes initiative, or when a nascent group takes its first step, and build momentum from there.

BUILDING BLOCK 2

Build trust and capacity

- ◆ Start wherever the energy lies
- ◆ Don't be afraid to start small
- ◆ Build capacity not dependency
- ◆ Look for opportunities to broaden and deepen the work
- ◆ Be accountable to the community – it's key to building trust
- ◆ Take into account the historical factors that have undermined capacity and trust

Don't be afraid to start small: Starting small means launching and delivering on a project or an activity that provides immediate benefit to some group in the community. This gives visibility to a new undertaking. Starting small does not mean that the goals for change can't be ambitious but, rather, that the first steps should match the possibilities and constraints in the community and be quickly accomplished.





Build capacity not dependency: Starting small also makes it easier to establish a way of working that prioritizes building local capacity as the work proceeds, which is core to resident-centered community work. By not aiming too high too quickly, the work is less likely to depend on ideas, people, and

money from the outside, and more likely to build on resources that exist within the community. As the work succeeds, it builds capacity. As capacity is built, a larger change agenda can emerge out of the experience on the ground and be taken up by the community.

Look for opportunities to broaden and deepen the work: Although residents are encouraged to look for small wins as a starting point, ambitious goals for community building should always be on the table. Community builders need to take care not to become too distracted by or satisfied with small steps. Even when a neighborhood has been successful in turning a boarded-up house into a shelter or a crime-ridden vacant block into

a playground, community builders need to identify the root causes of those problems and develop strategies for working on them. As community-level work bumps up against problems in the way that city agencies or other institutions operate, for example, a systems reform strategy may be necessary. Larger ventures around physical revitalization, economic development, or political activism may be necessary also.

Be accountable to the community — it's the key to building trust: Credibility and legitimacy— both centerpieces of resident-centered community change work—are built one accomplishment at a time. In the end, accountability is key. Low-income communities have heard many promises that haven't been honored. They have been the momentary focus of attention during a political campaign or when a tragedy devastates a neighborhood. They have watched as selfish community leaders jumped into the spotlight and pushed for splashy but short-term projects. They have seen the fickleness of funders searching for the next new thing. Trust is key to effective working relationships. Nothing builds trust better than delivering on

WAYS TO START SMALL

- ◆ Community gardens
- ◆ Walking group
- ◆ Youth job fair
- ◆ School lunches with special community guests
- ◆ Arts event
- ◆ Zumba classes
- ◆ Block watch
- ◆ Youth survey of the neighborhood
- ◆ Neighborhood cleanup
- ◆ Painting boarded-up houses
- ◆ Building a pocket park

“Offer community groups small grants to do their own projects. Walk them through the application and be sure to take out all the jargon. When groups are working on similar things, bring them together to help them build coalitions.”

—Lefaua Leilua, San Diego

“We have many languages and cultures in our community and regularly do translations of all meetings. We employ different media and messages to communicate what we know and do, and more importantly what the residents want to know and do with us. We emphasize building on strengths and assets, and finding out what people can contribute rather than what they need.”

—Marquise Roberson-Bester, Seattle

a promise and being accountable to the community, especially over the long term.

Take into account the historical factors that have undermined capacity and trust: Most of the neighborhoods that are the focus of community building work have been weakened by years of underinvestment due to structural economic factors, racialized policies and practices, and disempowerment. Building trust between a community and outside change agents requires acknowledging the historical roots of today’s problems and the ways in which they continue to influence current community conditions. In places where there are longstanding racial and power imbalances, it is critical to deal directly and openly with the history,

understand the constraints it places on current work, and seek ways to compensate for it.

BUILDING BLOCK 3: Communicate often and in many ways

Real, open, and empowering communication is required for effective resident-centered community building. It’s critical to motivating, mobilizing, connecting, collaborating, accomplishing, informing, and celebrating. Communication is also key to accountability and

“Our community has Cambodian, Filipino, and Latino members. Even if our ability is limited, we try talking to them in their language to get them engaged.”

—Kelly Nhim, Long Beach

BUILDING BLOCK 3

Communicate often and in many ways

- ◆ Listen to the community
- ◆ Develop a deliberate communications plan
- ◆ Choose the most effective messengers
- ◆ Think creatively about informal and personal communication opportunities
- ◆ Translate everything
- ◆ Avoid jargon
- ◆ Communicate to audiences outside of the neighborhood

trust building: All decisions and actions must be transparent and reported back to the community.

There is no such thing as overcommunicating. People have so many demands on their attention that hearing about something just once doesn’t mean that they will remember it, internalize it, or think through the implications for themselves. This means that communications strategies must be intentional and built into every step along the way.

Listen to the community:

Listening well is the key to good communication. Too often, community change work has been led by people who enter a community with good ideas, energy, and commitment and then begin their work. Anxious to hear from the community, they might embark on listening



“When we started we didn’t know the power we had. It took us a few years to learn, but when we did, we began taking action.”

—Phillis Tigues-Judkins, Detroit

tours, conduct surveys, or hold a series of meetings. This is a start, but it’s not enough. Resident-centered community building requires more organic, ongoing, and genuine communication. Listening to the community is not a one-time activity that takes place at the beginning of a community building effort. It is an ongoing process.

Develop a deliberate communications plan: Having a communications plan that focuses on informing residents about the progress that is being made is as important as having a program plan that identifies concrete projects to carry out. Most community building efforts

hold open community meetings where issues can be surfaced, plans can be debated, results can be reported in “brief-backs,” and leaders can be asked to explain their actions. Most also keep residents informed by distributing newsletters or other printed materials. Increasingly, email, social media, and websites are being used as communication tools. Leaders caution, however, that those methods may not reach the elderly, new immigrants, and individuals without stable jobs or housing: Specialized communications strategies are required for those populations.

Choose the most effective messengers: Messengers must be trusted in order for the message to be heard and believed. This means that the community planner or project manager may not be the best messenger even if s/he has the most detailed information about the work. Resident leaders who

have a track record in working for the community are often the go-to people for reaching out to other residents, but some caution that they might have baggage and be suspected of having their own agenda. Peers are best positioned to talk to one another, so a good strategy is to have a range of communicators with messages that are tailored to their peer group: youth, elderly, religious groups, and ethnic groups.

Think creatively about informal and personal communication opportunities: Communication vehicles don’t have to be big and formal. Informal personal connections are sometimes the most powerful. One community leader actually goes to the door of her neighbors and physically helps them get to community events. Some neighborhoods work with barbers and beauticians to communicate important community messages.

Translate everything: Low-income neighborhoods are often the receiving communities for new immigrants who are not comfortable with or able to communicate in English. Language barriers can inhibit participation, whereas having all of the languages in the community represented at the table can build inclusivity. Meetings should have interpreters. Written materials should be translated into all of the community’s languages.



“The Tacoma School Board was going to close our alma mater. We passed the word about the potential closing through telephone chains, emails, and Facebook. Instead of a couple hundred people at the school board meeting, we had well over a thousand. Because of our collective networking and the passion of our alumni and the community, they were not able to close the school.”

— Jonathan Wagner, Tacoma

Translation does not have to be a costly venture if leaders utilize the language skills of community residents, including the youth.

Avoid jargon: Professionals who work in distressed communities often aren’t aware of how much specialized terminology has crept into their conversations. While technical jargon can serve as a convenient shorthand for funders and professionals in community work, it can alienate residents. The communicator must speak in the language of the listeners. Understanding the cultural nuances in language and embracing the ways people communicate can build trust.

Communicate to audiences outside of the neighborhood:

A communications strategy needs to relay what is going on in the neighborhood to outside audiences. Communities need to create relationships with the local media, government officials, leaders in other neighborhoods, and advocates. Press coverage is powerful. When residents have the skills and tools to communicate regularly with local press, they can build visibility, engagement,

and momentum across neighborhoods, organizations, and institutions.

**BUILDING BLOCK 4:
Build the foundations
for long-term work**

Creating healthy and vibrant communities is a long-term process. While short-term victories are possible and desirable, large-scale sustained change will take time. All the relationships, capacities, trust, and accountability mechanisms already discussed need to endure and grow. Other elements that are required in order for community building efforts to have long-term impact are described below.

Set goals, but be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances:

Neighborhoods are in a constant state of flux. People move in and out. Macroeconomic forces might eliminate a large number of jobs that sustain a community or spark a gentrification process that has both positive and negative consequences. Federal or philanthropic grants might offer new opportunities for action. A natural disaster, the

BUILDING BLOCK 4

Build the foundations for long-term work

- ◆ Set goals, but be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances
- ◆ Build in a process for learning and reflecting
- ◆ Create opportunities for leaders to rest and reenergize
- ◆ Integrate new leadership development into everything
- ◆ Aim for weightlessness
- ◆ Celebrate
- ◆ Think carefully about how large and formalized the management and financial structures should be

“If at first you don’t succeed, reflect, revisit, and rethink what you’re doing. Are you meeting the needs of your community?”

— Kate Frazier, Tacoma

outbreak of a virulent disease, or widespread use of a new illegal drug might wreak havoc on a community. Resident-centered community building keeps a clear eye on the goal of creating a vibrant neighborhood but appreciates that the work needs to be flexible and responsive to circumstances and opportunities as they emerge. The focus should always be on creating the most effective match between the conditions, capacities, and realities of the community and the existing vehicles for change.

“I’ve learned that you have to build short-term identifiable wins into the long-term process. You can’t try to attack all the problems at the same time. Instead, find a narrow issue and start there. If there is enough energy around a selected issue, residents can then build momentum from there.”

—Anne Griffith, San Francisco

Community building requires a constant balancing and rebalancing in pace, scale, and focus.

Build in a process for learning and reflecting: A deliberate learning process must be woven into community change efforts. Not everything will work. Things that work once won’t necessarily work a second time. Some projects will gain momentum while others will languish. Community building must accept this reality and build in a process for reflecting and learning. If things aren’t working, take the time to assess what is off-balance. It is tempting to let the press of everyday work take precedence over reviewing and assessing what has happened, but long-term success will require periodic course corrections.

Create opportunities for leaders to rest and reenergize: Resident-centered development depends on local leaders. The work they do is time-consuming and stressful, and it can sometimes seem overwhelming. Established leaders can become exhausted, suffer burnout, or feel they are

getting stale. From time to time, they may need to step out of the work to reenergize or restore balance in their personal lives. Efforts to recharge and reengage need to be accommodated and supported.

Integrate new leadership development into everything: Long-term community change requires nurturing and supporting new leaders, and doing so deliberately and constantly. Community builders benefit from both informal and formal leadership development efforts. Neighborhoods maintain energy, progress, and momentum by bringing

in new leadership. This often means going beyond the most outspoken or involved residents to engage harder-to-reach groups. Bringing new voices into the work can offset turnover at the top and help to ensure that the leadership remains representative of the community, especially if there is a lot of demographic change in the neighborhood. Cultivating youth leaders should be a top priority because the next generation will have to carry the work to completion.

Aim for weightlessness: Mobilizing local assets lays the groundwork for a broad base of participation going forward: residents are more likely to join in if they see that their friends and neighbors are involved. As more residents become engaged, the footprint of the work expands so that it can be distributed over a wider number of people. This leads to a state





“Having a community garden has helped with economic sustainability. The garden attracts businesses to come back to a block that was abandoned.”

— Jerry Hebron, Detroit

of “weightlessness” where no single person is overburdened. Then, in turn, community-wide commitment to the work strengthens, which is critical to long-term sustainability of the change effort. It creates the expectation, process, and track record of working collectively.

Celebrate: Community building is hard work, and the rewards are sometimes few and far between. Accomplishments, even small ones like a cleaned-up street or a block without crime, need to be celebrated. Community assets should also be celebrated: a class of eighth-grade graduates, a youth group’s musical production, or the beauty of a community garden. Fun events that are positive

and affirming contribute to community health and vibrancy and inspire people to invest in their community.

Think carefully about how large and formalized the management and financial structures should be: One question that communities face is how formalized the resident leadership structure should be. For some neighborhoods, informal structures, which allow people to volunteer on an as-needed basis and are only lightly organized by a local coordinating committee, work best. Others have developed more formal structures that typically include resident governance boards, block associations, or institutionalized

vehicles for neighborhood work to be led and managed. On the financial front, resident-centered community building has typically been underwritten by volunteer labor and foundation grants. This places the work in a precarious financial situation. A costly structure requires fundraising, and communities know from experience that foundations will not renew their support indefinitely. While no single structure works best for all neighborhoods or for all purposes, the goal is the same: to maintain a sustainable network of residents who can organize, lead, and represent the community on a range of issues over the long term.



“You can’t rest on the leaders that you have. People are transient so you always have to be looking for new people and cultivating new leaders.”

— Chaka Mkali, Minneapolis



“What makes a good partnership between a community and an institution? When the institutions follow through on their promises.”

—Dedria Smith, San Francisco

“Power is generally held by the foundations and nonprofits in the beginning because it’s their money. You need to make sure that funders are in the room with the community and the conversations are facilitated, so that the power differentials are not amplified. You need to construct forums where the community’s voice is valued.”

—Lisa Leverette, Detroit

RESIDENT-CENTERED COMMUNITY BUILDING

Guiding Principles for Supporters

The central role that relationships play in effective community building has profound implications for how outside organizations — foundations, intermediaries, technical assistance providers, nonprofit organizations, anchor institutions, and so on — operate in communities. It suggests that those organizations adopt a different mind-set as they approach their work and support different kinds of activities on the ground. Unfortunately, very few will be able to invest in embedded change agents, such as community organizers, in the communities in which they are working. Even when they do, and especially when they don't, they will need to adapt their practices to effectively support residents.

For many organizations, taking these principles to heart will mean moving out of their comfort zone, rethinking the way they do business, seeking different kinds of outcomes, and even changing staffing and hiring practices.

Develop direct relationships with residents of the community:

The staff of organizations that work in communities need to build their own one-on-one connections and relationships with community members. Outside organizations cannot assume that they are working effectively with residents if they simply convene a neighborhood planning process or invite residents to serve on advisory boards. To build relationships with residents, outside organizations should follow the strategies described in the four building blocks: take the time to find out what awakens the passions of community members, communicate well, build trust, and so on. They must find ways to support what the residents care about and want to do rather than trying to involve residents in preconceived plans.

Staff can only establish a presence in the community by getting out of their offices, going to the places where residents go, and engaging in what the residents are already doing. This might mean, for example, that their work hours need to be modified so they can be available on evenings and weekends, and not just from nine to five on weekdays. Some organizations have even hired community organizers into management positions, thereby incorporating a relationship building orientation into the operating culture of their organization.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ◆ Develop direct relationships with residents of the community
- ◆ Create and support opportunities for residents to build ties with each other
- ◆ Foster ways to combine external expertise and local knowledge
- ◆ Facilitate constructive relationships between the community and powerful institutions
- ◆ Encourage outside supporters of community building to cooperate and collaborate with one another
- ◆ Develop the evidence base about the value of community building



Create and support opportunities for residents to build ties with each other: Outside organizations can provide the supports that facilitate networking among residents and organizations in a community. Creating connections, holding meetings, sharing information, and working together are not cost-free activities: they take people’s time, they need a coordinator, they need meeting space and food, and they need a communications vehicle. External change agents can and should use their resources to support community building and community organizing activities directly as well as by creating opportunities and spaces for residents to get to know each other and come together in collective action.

Build community capacity to combine external expertise and local knowledge: Following the community’s lead does not mean ignoring or rejecting the knowledge and experience of external organizations. External change agents can bring important expertise about best practices and strategies that have worked in other locations. But they need to bring that expertise respectfully, recognizing that local knowledge is invaluable and that any field-level expertise must be married to the wisdom of residents about how their own community operates. Strategies for building a community’s capacity to utilize external resources effectively include providing leadership development opportunities for

resident activists; underwriting the costs of networking across neighborhoods; supporting resident participation in study tours and conferences; and creating local learning workshops.

Facilitate constructive relationships between residents and powerful institutions:

The relationships between residents and community-level institutions that affect their everyday life, like the police, public housing, and schools, need to be developed and nurtured. Community residents also need support to build relationships with people, organizations, and coalitions outside the neighborhood that can be allies and champions for the community. Outside organizations can support this by making sure that community members and leaders know the landscape of actors who have influence over policies and practices that affect the neighborhood, such as city commissioners, elected officials, corporate leaders, and so on. This requires developing a “power analysis” of key decision-makers. External support organizations can also use their own social capital, reputation, and convening authority to open doors and facilitate connections between the community and powerful actors outside the neighborhoods.

“There was one resident leader who worked tirelessly in our community who first let us in, and listened to our ideas for the community. She’s one of the reasons we do our work. She is a rock of the community.”

—Emmanuel Hepburn, San Francisco

“For relationship building, it’s important to do research so you know who to work with. When we were working on our local park, we focused on the Park Board and city officials. We went to City Council meetings and saw how the Park Board and City Council interacted. When we saw a lot of tension between them, we learned to maneuver in an intentional way between those two institutions.”

– Kristy Clemons, Minneapolis



Encourage outside supporters of community building to cooperate and collaborate with one another: One of the most commonly heard complaints is that funders, city agencies, and other outside institutions work at cross-purposes at the community level. At best, they are losing opportunities to build on one another’s investments, and at worst they are competing with and undermining each other. In either case, external agents are putting the burden on the community to sort out the conflicting demands on residents’ time, attention, and resources. Instead, the outside supporters of community building need to coordinate with each other in order to maximize the value of their resources to the community.

Develop the evidence base about the value of community building: Outside organizations can help to develop knowledge and evidence about the efficacy of resident-centered community building. They should fund and facilitate research that can

make a case for the importance of relationship building in providing mutual support, carrying out collective action, and producing improvements in health, income, employment, housing, education, and the like. The value of resident-centered community building needs to be documented.



“There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child. But what does it take to raise a village? We all have to come together and work together. Different organizations, different companies, different businesses have to come in together and collaborate.”

– Edward Davis, San Diego



“Take the time to listen. Residents feel empowered when their ideas are promoted and used. Give people the opportunity to express their opinions and have a voice, and create space for disagreement and reconciliation.”

—Eva Bowen, Tacoma

CONCLUSION

Community builders have a message to communicate to the individuals and institutions who work in their neighborhoods:

We welcome all who want to help our communities, but we don't want you to come in with your checkbooks, your professional credentials, your connections to power, and your jargon and impose your agenda on us. Respect us and our community. Don't do "to" us, but do "with" us. Get to know us, learn about our community, and figure out how to work with us as people: as concerned citizens, neighbors, parents, brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters. Don't patronize us. Tell us the truth about why you are in our neighborhoods, what you expect, and what you need. Work with us as partners, and together we'll figure out the best ways to marry our strengths and assets with your knowledge, resources, connections, and good will. We've seen too many of you come and go; meanwhile, we're still here. We really want to get it right this time, and we think you do, too. Let's figure it out in genuine partnership.

This message is not a new one. Residents of low-income neighborhoods have long asked for a different type of relationship with external change agents, technical experts, funders, politicians, and researchers. Some progress has been made in some locations, but for the most part old habits die hard and traditional methods of doing business in poor neighborhoods persist. In this document, we hear the message once again, but this time we hear it from residents in their own words. Hopefully, this will give the message more power.



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Institutional Conveners

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change is a national forum where leaders working on promising community revitalization efforts can share lessons and work together on common problems. The goal of the Roundtable is to strengthen the quality of policies, research, and practice in the community change field in a way that will lead to vibrant, racially equitable communities. The Roundtable also has a premier research and action program on race and racism in twenty-first century America, including a seminar series for government, nonprofit, media, and business leaders to improve their skills in working on racial equity and inclusion.

The Roundtable has become a core field-building institution serving individuals and institutions dedicated to improving conditions in poor communities by playing the role of convener, technical advisor, clearinghouse, analyst, and disseminator of lessons learned nationally and internationally. The Roundtable does this through two principal lines of work: training and leadership development; and knowledge development and dissemination.

The Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation (JCNI) is an operating nonprofit foundation that works in partnership with the Jacobs Family Foundation and residents of the Diamond Neighborhoods in San Diego, CA. The vision of the organization is to build a stronger community through entrepreneurial projects, hands-on learning relationships, and the creative investment of resources. JCNI helps attract and leverage investment while working with residents to build the capacity of individuals, families, and the community.

As a partner in community change, JCNI has the vision to be a part of a caring community where people are responsible to each other, where all cultures are embraced, where sustaining resources are in place for a vibrant economic and philanthropic life, and where residents create the future they envision.



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