Building Communities

The Sequoia Journal

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In order to understand what it takes to build sustainable communities, in the sense of communities with lasting cohesiveness, we will first have to understand what makes a community. We recently asked a workshop of membership-centric participants from the National Trades Union Congress what they thought, and these were the attributes that emerged: Shared Values, Sense of Pride, A Common Sense of Purpose, Attachment or "Stickiness", Emotional Connection, Common Interests, Relationships, and Ownership.

Root Word for Community. The word community is derived from the Latin communitas (meaning the same), which is in turn derived from communis, which means "common, public, shared by all or many". Communis comes from a combination of the Latin prefix com-which means "together", and the word munis – which has to do with performing services. Hence in combination, it implies people coming together to engage and share in valued services.

Different Uses of the Term Community. Generally there are two major uses of the term community . The first is the territorial or geographical notion of a neighbourhood, town or city.

The second is "relational" in nature, concerned with "[nature] of human relationship, without reference to location." Scholars noted that the two usages are not mutually exclusive, as modern society develops community around interests and skills more than around locality. Hence, the definition of the world "community" has evolved and been enlarged to mean individuals who share characteristics, regardless of their location or type of interaction. In this sense, "community" can mean a group with common interest or an ethnic group. Finally, the widest meaning of the word refers to the global community. What these different meanings have in common is that they refer to the strength of the ties between the members of the group, of whatever nature – cultural, ethnic or moral - they may be.

Community is About Ownership. Community in one sense is about an experience of belonging (Block, 2008). Each time we find a place we belong, we are in community. As Block pointed out in his latest publication , the word "belong" has two meanings. The first meaning is "to be part of something" - it is about

> *"The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest without our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. The key is to identify how this transformation occurs.*
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> *We begin by shifting our attention from the problems of the community to the possibility of community."*
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> *~ Peter Block, Community: The Structure of Belonging, May 2008*

– it is about membership, "being at home" and "being amongst friends", a feeling of being welcomed, and knowing that "I will be safe".

Another meaning of the world "belonging" is about being an owner. To belong to a community is therefore to act as a creator and co-owner of the community. What I consider to be mine, I will build and nurture and contribute to. The notion of 'stewardship' comes from this – to steward is to carefully attend to something so that it stays functional and healthy. Building communities is therefore about fostering a sense of ownership, citizenry and accountability.

Members as Co-Creators. We believe that Block's perspective offers us a way to reframe the way we look at membership – from one where members are merely consumer of services, to one where members are much more like co-owners or co-creators of the community. In a previous work of Block, he alluded to the fact that most institutions have gone down the path of "consumerism" in the way we engage our communities.

Consumerism has the side effect of leading politicians to treat citizens as customers to be pleased, rather than as citizens to be engaged; and leads schools to treat students or parents as customers who will give them a satisfaction rating at the end of the year, rather than as learners who have a responsibility for their own or their children's learning in the shared enterprise of education.

Rather than to look at customers or members as merely consumers, the most successful institutions of all sector and creed (even consumer brands) have successfully co-opted the constituents they are serving as co-creators of the product-, service- or membership-experience. From our research, we find that the most lasting communities are sustained by members who exist in relationship with one another forming an interrelated, interdependent and interactive social network. The effect for some has been game changing for some industries, such as the dawn of relationship banking in financial services to look at consumers as people with a holistic system of needs rather than as purchasers of disparate products. A different example in the same industry is the advent of Islamic banking - targeting specific customer communities who are likely to transact frequently within the community and share common values.

The benefits they derive exceed that provided by the brand, the association or institution, because being part of the community itself has its own perceived value. For some, it is being recognized as an expert in a particular product, technology, or being associated with a social identity (such as being a Harley bike owner or a Mac user), for others it is about being part of a social network that stands for an important cause and allows one to express a social value man (Children's Cancer Society, Breast Cancer Foundation,

Entrepreneurs For Sustainability etc.) There are many perceived benefits for being a member of such communities and these are further highlighted in an earlier research by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

According to McMillan & Chavis, there are four elements to the experience of communities:

I. Membership - the feeling of belonging or of a shared sense of personal relatedness. It is a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong. It is a feeling of belonging, of being a part of something. Membership includes five attributes: 1) boundaries; 2) emotional safety; 3) identification; 4) personal investment; and 5) a common symbol system.

II. Influence - a sense of being able to make a difference to a group and of a group mattering to its members. Influence is about a two-way relationship – members need to feel that they have some influence in the group, and influence in the group by members is needed for group cohesion. Members are more attracted to a community which they feel they are influential.

III. Integration & Fulfillment of Needs - the feeling that members' needs will be met by resources received thorugh their membership in the group. Members feel rewarded in some way for their participation. It is the concept of positive (or negative) reinforcement in behavioural psychology. Generally, in order for any group to maintain a positive

sense of togetherness, the relationship must be rewarding for its members. This can come from reinforcement between community-to-members, or between members-to-members. A strong community is able to fit people together so that people meet others' needs while they meet their own.

IV. Shared Emotional Connection. The authors refer to this as the "definitive element for true community" – it includes shared history and shared participation, or at least identification with the history. The participation of members and their interactions in shared experiences may facilitate or inhibit their sense of community. A shared emotional connection is influenced by 1) the frequency of contact; 2) the quality of interaction; 3) a good closure to events (e.g. a sense of achievement); 4) shared valence (going through something significant together, even crisis); 5) honour and recognition received; 6) spiritual bond (connection to an existence or purpose larger than themselves, such as that experienced by religious or quasi-religious communities).

In summary, strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share, ability to resolve them positively, opportunities to honour members, and opportunities for members to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond.

Asking the Right Questions. It is important to clarify that we are not implying that all communities should aspire to become "superglues". The desired state for each community would depend on its purpose of existence. A successful community is by definition one that is fulfilling its stated purpose. It is merely a classification tool that could offer us some insights and help us to appraise where our own membership communities are today. By plotting the current position and contrasting it with a desired position, we can become clearer in the desired direction of growth. If there is no gap between the two, then all we need to do is to preserve status quo.
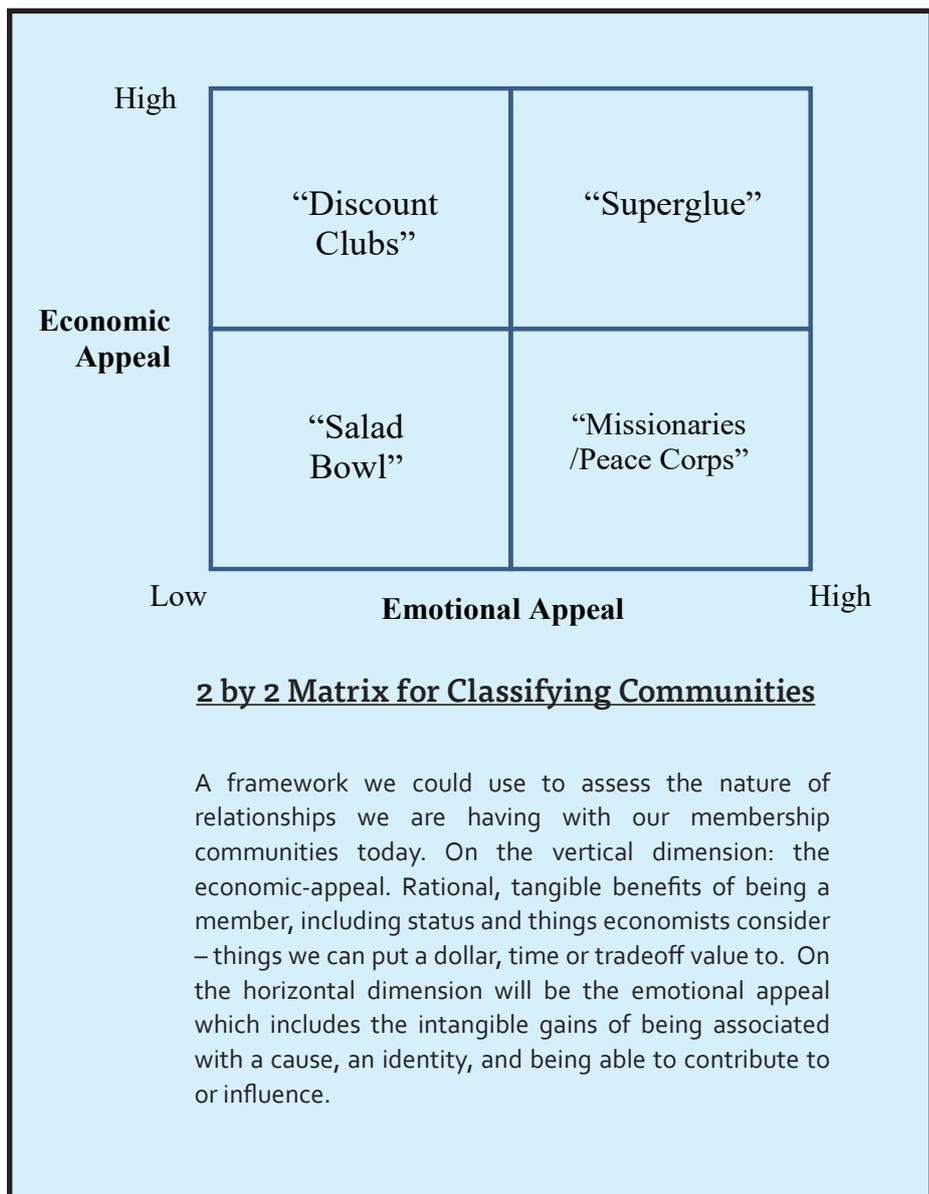
If there is a gap, then we need to ask ourselves, what are the ways we can strengthen the relationship we have with members in this community? Would it involve making the economic appeal even more compelling? Or would it involve engaging them more as co-creators and participants of the community? As in all frameworks, its greatest value is to help us to surface our assumptions, and also compare our perspectives with others in conversations, thereby enhancing our collective understanding.

Building Emotional Connections in Communities with P.I.E.S.S. We could look at the quality of relationship that a member has with an association or community as a hierarchy of relationships. We refer to these as the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of relationships1, with each level representing a stronger sense of emotional connection.

Physical - "Can See". The first level of interaction is physical. By that we mean the tangible representations and manifestations of the association or community that they can touch, see, or interact with. For example, for a religious community, this will be the place where members gather to worship - temple, mosque or church. It might also be the first usher that greets one at the door. For a country club, it might be the 'take one' brochure at a restaurant counter that you noticed when dining for the first time as a guest at the club. These are physical 'touchpoints' that would catch the potential members' attention and form the primary impressions of their experience. A new church attendee, knowing little

2 by 2 Matrix for Classifying Communities

A framework we could use to assess the nature of relationships we are having with our membership communities today. On the vertical dimension: the economic-appeal. Rational, tangible benefits of being a member, including status and things economists consider – things we can put a dollar, time or tradeoff value to. On the horizontal dimension will be the emotional appeal which includes the intangible gains of being associated with a cause, an identity, and being able to contribute to or influence.

"Salad Bowls" have transient, short term and transactional relationships with its members. The "members" are really not integrated in any sense, exhibiting little loyalty and affiliation and might switch between communities readily. There is little or limited interaction, interrelationship and interdependency in existence, hence the salad bowl analogy where the ingredients are much more like a collection than a system. Groups in this quadrant do not have many characteristics of a community.

"Discount Clubs" exist primarily because of the strong economic appeal they offer to their members. By economic appeal, the value proposition could be classified into affordability, availability and accessibility. Financial gains is the primary draw, followed by convenience and ease of use (or access), which might also translate to cost savings ultimately. Members who are attracted by economic reasons may stay as long as there are no other equivalent substitute services or products at the same "price". There is limited relationship, other than the tangible benefits they are getting from the service provider.

"Missionaries/Peace Corps" exist primarily to fulfill emotional and spiritual needs of members. The relationship of the members to the entity is formed primarily because of the psychological (and spiritual) fulfillment they experience. Being able to contribute towards "something larger than oneself" is one of the central appeals of such communities. The hypothesis is the stronger the emotional/spiritual appeal, the stronger will be the relationship of members to the entity. Groups in this quadrant would fit with the earlier research findings on definition of communities.

"Superglue" refers to communities that offer both economic and emotional appeal. Communities in this quadrant are most likely secular in nature, and exist to provide both tangible and intangible benefits to members. The term "superglue" is used to imply the robustness of the relationship with its members, which extends beyond a one-way transactional exchange. Other than rational benefits, such communities also provide a sense of belonging; offer a space for contribution and as a result, lead to the fulfillment of a holistic system of needs.

about the content of the religious experience that the community has to offer, might choose a church that has the most attractive banner on the outside to attend. Similarly, the ambience of the restaurant may appeal to me, but just as importantly, the food needs to taste just as good. These physical aspects help me to make a decision on whether I would come back next time. It may be superficial initially, but it provides a concrete vehicle through which the membership experience is created. However, it is an essential dimension of the experience and it can either make people feel "at home" in the world or completely "out of place".

Intellectual - "Can Rationalise". At the Intellectual level, members begin to seek out information pertaining to the rationality or perceived value of the membership.

One might begin to create a rationale on the likely utility one is going to drive by being a member. This would include economic benefits, such as discounts, as well as other rational benefits such as economic costs one would save as a result of convenience or accessibility. One way to think about rational benefits of a service would include affordability (price), accessibility (ease of use or friendliness), and availability (convenience of location, having it nearby). If it is intellectually appealing, it would be attractive to remain as a member, or at least there could be implicit costs involved in switching providers. For example, mobile phone providers make it attractive to stay as a subscriber by offering free phone vouchers and premium discounts for extension of plans, and in the not too distant past,

imposed significant costs on customers who want to switch providers such as a fee for number transfer. The level of 'stickiness' would have increased from a mere physical touchpoint to one that is anchored by intellectual (or rational) touchpoints. The connection is purely from having invested time or money in exchange for the membership experience, through participation or patronage.

Emotional - "Can Feel". This is where the service or membership experience goes beyond physical and rational benefits, to one that is much more connecting at an emotional level. The experience of being a member or a customer generates a positive feeling or a positive-emotional-attractor (PEA) in psychological terms. It is a compelling emotional driver for us to come back again the next time. An emotional connection could be derived from a direct experience or in the use of service or participation in events, or could be derived from interaction with other members who are present. This happens only when the members utilize their membership entitlements repeatedly or in a wider variety of ways, such as participating in multiple events offered by the community. The sense of familiarity, predictability that one gets when a friendly doorman greets one at the door, or knowing that a magazine rack is always updated with the latest copy of your favourite magazine, that a restaurant always opens late on Friday nights for family dinners makes all the difference to you and fellow members. For a community, participating in the latest performance, family day, or representing one's club for a regional sports meet, leads one to feel that one finally belongs to the community. This sense of emotional-connection begins to give rise to a sense of loyalty and shared identity.

Social - "Can Relate". Social-level connection extends from the emotional experience, to one where you have formed a micro-network with other members, and it satisfies what William Schultz refers to as the

three fundamental interpersonal needs of inclusion, influence and intimacy (as in friendship). You might choose to stay in the community because you are respected by fellow members and in fact might choose to serve in leadership roles in the community. You might also feel that being part of this club, association or community fits with your personal values, a cause you support, or your social status. You might also be there simply because you have formed some very meaningful or enjoyable friendships with fellow members. We can start to say the community has become more "sticky" for you.

Spiritual - "Can Contribute". We do not refer to spiritual in a religious context, but rather in the broadest sense of being connected to a larger whole or larger purpose. At the spiritual level of connection, the sense of loyalty comes with one is being able to not just participate but begins to contribute as a true stakeholder in every sense of the word – to hold a 'stake' in something means to be an investor, or one whose pains and loss would be tied to it. The most magnetic or 'stickiest' communities are ones where there is a core group of members who would invest their own time, energy and resources to keep it viable and vibrant. They create a hospitable space and help to share the experience for other members and as a result, the entire community becomes much like a magnet that attracts new members, believers, and investors in turn. At this level, the power of the community comes from the collective sense of purpose and meaning that is forged, in ways that it creates a perceived value or "generative common" that is greater than the sum of the members present. The United Nations is probably the most prominent example of such a membership community where nations are united as force for global peace.

Communities are essential for Transformation. M. Scott Peck, a US based psychiatrist and bestselling author, expressed his view of communities in the following way: "There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community." From this it is clear that the concept of the individual is not and cannot ever be separated from the concept of community. Without the primary community of our family, or the secondary communities discussed above, we could not develop stable personalities as individual human beings. This conveys some of the distinctiveness of human community and the significant contribution of connectedness, cohesion and sense of belonging. At its very best, communities such as the Olympics, have the capacity to unite people, inspire the human spirit to transcend self interests and reach for the extraordinary.

CONCLUSION We found in our research that the strength of relationship between members and communities depends on whether

a) we have built a holistic and robust relationship with members that involve multiple dimensions (tangible + intangible gains, value and benefits); and

b) there is reciprocity in their relationship with the community (ability to participate, influence and contribute towards).

The challenge will be how to achieve breakthrough in our existing relationship with the communities we are serving together today. In what ways can we create an even stronger, more lasting relationship with each, so that a stronger sense of connection and relevance is felt by our members?

Creating a membership club is different than starting a movement. People connect to common causes and not organisations per se. There is much more we can do to synergise our offering and improve upon the value proposition we are providing to each membership community. It also surfaces the potential and possibilities for leveraging on other external partners who would be interested, relevant and important in helping us fulfill our mission.