

LESLEY HOATSON shares her approaches to building communities. She advises: “Lets not get mystified by all the new language. Going back to basics is an excellent place to begin!”



Twelve months ago I felt overwhelmed by the new language of community building, community capacity and social capital, and I was left wondering whether I was sufficiently equipped to be a community worker and teacher in this new environment.

A year later I have concluded that central to “community building” is still the knowledge and skills of community development that we have built up over the past 20 or 30 years.

Let me share with you some of the things I’ve learnt about how you start to build strong communities. I am going to talk about a group I was

Building strong *communities*



involved in, but the ideas equally relate to a broader community focus.

In one of my early jobs I was working in a low-income community. I didn't have much of an idea where to start, but I could see from the demographic data that there were lots of old people living there. I asked some students on placement with me if they would find out what the issues were that concerned elderly residents. I thought they would come back to tell me the residents were frustrated with local transport but they returned saying: "It's their feet – their toenails are killing them! And they want to do something about it!"

A month later 60 of the elderly people gathered in the local hall and together they planned a petition to the community health centre and a later deputation to argue for employing a podiatrist. Within weeks the centre agreed to use spare money to advertise for a part time podiatrist. Many of those involved had never been to a meeting, written an official letter or lobbied before. They felt excited, powerful. They were on a roll and they knew there were other things they could achieve. They soon chose people who were prepared to learn chairing and secretarial skills, and everyone in the group said they would help. I was asked to support them.

They noted that the local councillor was up for re-election and after practising what to say, soon lobbied him for street seats and the cleaning of back lanes. He was anxious to please, and lo and behold the seats appeared and the lanes were cleared in record time!

Then they wrote to government departments requesting a bus shelter and for the post office to be moved to a central location. By the end of nine months and lots of letters and lobbying, all of these requests had been met.

I learnt from this early phase that:

- It's best to start with small-scale projects that arise out of strongly

Blackstone Women at
Yulara Workshop,
Northern Territory



felt needs – people have to feel passionate enough about the issues to want to follow through.

- You need a core of people who will hang in with the issue. It also helps if there is a fairly clear and shared goal. While this group started with toenails, the underlying goal was to remain active, independent and avoid for as long as possible having to go into a hostel or nursing home.
- The tasks can be quite simple but the benefits of taking part need to be clear, immediate and shared. That doesn't mean you have to achieve your goal quickly but what participants get out of it has to be more than what they put in. So, for example, it needs to allow for learning new skills, making new friends, or just having fun.
- Building strong communities does require an initial level of leadership, knowledge and skills potential as well as commitment to succeed. Focusing on community strengths rather than deficits, encourages each person to believe they can make a contribution.
- Strengthening collective decision-making skills and clear communication processes helps avoid confusion.
- You are trying to build a group culture where as part of everyday practice you openly talk about how things are going. "Are we achieving what we set out to do?" "Is everyone kept up to date?" "Are there people who feel a bit left out?" "Is this still fun?"

Over the following year the group became more confident. Members taught newly arrived refugees in the home tutor scheme, and heard children reading in the primary school. They formed a committee with council to explore setting up a day care center for people with early dementia, and another sub-group looked at emergency alarms for people living in the high rise.

While all this activity was enormously positive and people you would never imagine would do so blossomed into active citizenship roles, there were also times when the group dynamics

became strained. There might be a disagreement about how to tackle an issue or a more basic dispute about who forgot to bring the afternoon tea. I soon learnt that you couldn't afford to ignore conflict because it would surely simmer, exploding out at a later time. We needed to know when to tackle it full-on, and when to wait and see what played out.

Most of all:

- Together we needed to learn problem solving skills to handle differences constructively. Structuring discussion so everyone gets heard, encouraging the natural bridge builders in the group, suggesting the gathering of more information when people can't make a decision, all contribute to positively handling differences.

As the group spread its wings and aimed to influence broader structural decisions it needed to speak to politicians and councillors, or influence the boards of local agencies. Eventually they decided that members of the group should stand for election in key local organisations: the community health centre and combined pensioners and tenants union. They were successful and, using these as a base, advocated for older persons.

I learnt that in a community:

- You need to ensure there are effective advocates and an ability to respond politically to government decisions. It's a bit like making sure you have a capable foreign affairs team. Those skills don't just happen, you have to have a plan to learn and practice them.
- When it's strong enough you encourage the group to look outwards, to see what changes they can achieve not just in their community but also more broadly.

I worked with this group for 12 months. By that time, they were confident enough to go on alone with the occasional support of a local community health doctor. The group lasted 16 years, only closing when they became too frail.

Building a strong community:

- may begin by starting with one group;

- gradually you may expand, working with a number of groups, building links between them; and

- establishing forums and processes where they plan together, building a shared vision for their community;

- as part of this you need to help build the ability to respond to outside threats or inside division, developing creative problem solvers who can handle differences and conflict.

So, lots of the lessons learnt in the past apply to today's approaches to building communities. Lets not get mystified by all the new language. Going back to basics is an excellent place to begin.

Useful references

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Skinner, S. (1997), *Building Community Strengths: A Resource Book on Capacity Building*, Community Development Foundation, London. (Detailed resource book on capacity building. Can be ordered over internet.)

"New Community Quarterly–Community Quarterly" was the only Australian community development magazine/journal for people interested in community development. It was started in 1983 and published for 17 years. In the last months it has been re-launched as *New Community Quarterly* and is definitely worth purchasing. Check website: www.borderlands.org.au

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