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COMPANY OF FRIENDS

MODELS+MENTORS

TOOL

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THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO BRING THE PAGES OF FAST COMPANY TO LIFE–PEOPLE LIKE YOU WHO ARE CREATING CHANGE IN THEIR COMPANIES AND COMMUNITIES. THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS SPECIALIZES IN INTEGRATING THESE THOUGHT LEADERS INTO THE FC COMMUNITY BY INVITING THEM TO SPEAK AT EVENTS–AND EVEN TO JOIN THE CoF.

EXPERTS IN THE ART OF BUILDING COMMUNITY BOTH ONLINE AND OFFLINE, THESE MODELS AND MENTORS HAVE STORIES TO TELL ABOUT WHAT IT TAKES TO CHANGE A CULTURE, INSPIRE A MOVEMENT, AND INVENT A WHOLE NEW WAY FOR PEOPLE TO COLLABORATE, LEARN, AND SHARE INFORMATION.

mike abrashoff

Deputy Director, Global Information and Network System,
Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command, U.S. Navy

When it comes to leadership, Mike Abrashoff knows how to rock the boat. His breakthrough ideas about empowering people on the front lines have been tested in one of the world's largest organizations, the U.S. Navy, and in an arena of true competition: war. Abrashoff's grassroots model of leadership speaks directly to the challenges involved in keeping self-organizing groups such as the Company of Friends fully ship-shape.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR LEADERS OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS?

Set your goals and vision for the cell. This vision should complement your values and those of the cell members. I couldn't have done anything on the USS Benfold without the vision. It is also important for everyone to have a role in carrying out the vision that is consistent with their skills and the amount of time they have to give to the project.

There are so many interesting avenues that the Company of Friends could explore. There is definitely a need in many areas around the country for organized groups to do good work and revitalize their communities.

HOW DID YOU SECURE YOUR CREW'S BUY-IN TO YOUR VISION FOR THE USS BENFOLD?

I would say that I was able to relate the vision in a way that made them want to be a part of it. I showed them how important this work was for each of them–personally and professionally.

YOU OFTEN SPEAK OF YOUR 300-PERSON CREW AS YOUR "LITTLE PIECE OF SOCIETY." WHAT ROLE DID COMMUNITY-BUILDING PLAY IN YOUR WORK ON THE BENFOLD?

My goal on the Benfold was not only to leave my ship a better place, but to leave my people better people as well. I saw them as seeds that would take their experience of grassroots empowerment with them when they left the ship, spreading this model of community wherever they went. I think that if everyone had the goal of improving the small segment of society that is theirs to influence, the country and the world would be better for it. Government is not going to solve our problems–only grassroots action will make the world a better place.

"The reason you should want to be a grassroots leader is not to be liked, **but to win.** I am convinced more than ever that the most successful organizations will be those that utilize grassroots leadership. When the great shakeout comes, those corporations that don't understand their grassroots will fall by the wayside."

What do you mean when you say that grassroots leaders "listen aggressively"?

Listening aggressively means checking your ego at the door and recognizing that your people may have great ideas that you don't give them credit for. I had a young woman on my crew who took her SATs and scored a 1490. She made me think about the number of times early in my career that I had not supported the enormous brain-power and creativity of my crew and about how showing this kind of support can have great value for improving the way we do business. I thought that I knew everything because I was the leader, but this experience taught me the value of the extraordinarily smart people on the front lines of an organization. It is my job as a leader to create a climate in which my crew members feel comfortable raising their hands and suggesting changes in how we do things. If your team understands your vision and feels empowered to make decisions, then it will feel fulfilled by its contributions rather than micro-managed.

For more information on Mike Abrashoff, visit his web site www.grassrootsleadership.com, read Polly LaBarre's profile in FC #23, (April 1999) or see page 20 of this book.

Are there elements of leadership that cannot be delegated?

You can never delegate accountability–if you are the head of an organization, you need to be accountable. If you find yourself telling people not only what to do, but how to do it, then you're off track with regards to grassroots leadership. On the Benfold, I never once told anyone how to do a certain task. Instead, I laid out the requirements and I asked them if they had the proper tools, time, and training to get the task done. There are many ways to solve a problem. If you encourage people to come up with their own solutions, they will feel ownership and pride.

Why would someone want to be a grassroots leader?

The reason you should want to be a grassroots leader is not to be liked, but to win. I am convinced more than ever that the most successful organizations will be those that utilize grassroots leadership. When the great shakeout comes, those corporations that don't understand their roots will fall by the wayside. If you are wedded to the old command-and-control model, you will hit a ceiling in terms of the results you are able to produce. Grassroots organizations, however, have no limits.

PHOTO: **SUSIE CUSHNER**

UPdating the agenda

D. Michael Abrashoff: Leading a Wave of Change

What happens to a turnaround organization after its turnaround artist leaves to chart a new course? If you ask Mike Abrashoff, 39, the answer is "more of the same." When he left command of the USS Benfold for a post at the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command (SPAWAR), in January 1999, Abrashoff predicted, "Once you start Perestroika, you can't really stop it." And indeed, the $1 billion warship has maintained its status as one of the best ships in the Pacific Fleet. For the second year in a row, the Benfold has been nominated for the Spokane Trophy, which is given to the ship with the highest combat readiness. The Benfold also won the Battle Efficiency for Excellence award for its squadron, and it continues to have the best retention rate in the fleet.

Yet, for Abrashoff, a far more important measure of success is the legacy of leadership that he's left in his wake. Lieutenant John Wade, for example, found the experience of working with Abrashoff so inspiring that he applied for a post as commander of his own ship. Wade got his wish, and today, at 31, he is one of the youngest captains in the U.S. Navy. He runs the USS Firebolt in the Atlantic Fleet, a ship that was plagued by low morale and a bad performance record when he assumed command. Taking a page from Abrashoff's book, he spent his first days interviewing each member of his crew. "By starting there," says Wade, "I've been able to rid the command of several 'dissatisfiers.'"

Abrashoff has seen his practices replicated throughout the Navy. The Benfold's compressed training cycles are the basis for the Navy's revised training strategy; Abrashoff's humane adjustments to in-port duty rotation have become standard throughout the service; and his leadership lessons are now required reading in (among other places) the Navy's admiral-indoctrination program.

As for Abrashoff, even on "desk duty," he hasn't lost his zeal for change–he's simply expanded his field of play. He is working on a book about grassroots leadership, and he also speaks frequently to audiences at organizations such as Ericsson, GMAC Corp., and the Los Angeles Unified School District. "I use my own experience to show that the impossible can be done," he says. "I let people know that there's no excuse not to change."

–Polly LaBarre, FC #33 (April 2000)

craig newmark

Founder, craigslist.org

Community. It is one of those charged words that is meant to distinguish what happens on the Web from what happens in less virtual (and less virtuous) segments of the economy. One promise of the Web is that it blends the value of commerce with the values of personal interaction. Why should you be content to sell one-size-fits-all products to a disparate collection of individuals when you can meet the shared needs of a single community?

Why be content to create a marketplace when you can create a "market space" that lets people swap ideas, trade experiences, learn from one another–and then buy products that reflect their shared interests?

Community. It is one of those meaningless words that inspires bemused grins from Internet insiders. Is a stock-market chat room a "community"–or a rumor mill? Is a collection of customer reviews (of books, software, or cars) a community forum–or just a bunch of ill-informed opinions from never-satisfied consumers?

Craig Newmark knows a community when he sees one–because he's built one of the Web's most influential communities. If you ask around, you'll soon find someone who's participated in craigslist (www.craigslist.org), which acts as a virtual community bulletin board for the San Francisco Bay Area–the unofficial capital of the Internet economy. It's the plugged-in place to find a job, a roommate, a neighborhood dog walker, or the latest Internet-industry schmooze. And hardly a week goes by without at least one plaintive posting: Is there a list like this in New York? Portland? Boston? Seattle?

Craig Newmark, 47, is a Java programmer who describes himself as a "recovering nerd." This self-proclaimed "Forrest Gump of the Internet" became the Bay Area's best-known online community organizer by "happy accident." Five years ago, while he was working as a computer-security architect at Charles Schwab, he took on the role of Internet evangelist. "I'd give talks about the Internet, saying that this is how we should do business someday," he explains.

A year later, he started a small, informal "cc list" to keep his friends updated on local techie-art events. As more people joined, the number of posts snowballed, and the subject matter sprawled: from "Sublet my room!" to "We need a Web designer!" Today, the craigslist site receives 12 million page views a month from thousands of visitors and has more than 10,000 email subscribers, who receive the postings in their inboxes every day. There are now so many postings that the list is divided into 45 categories, ranging from tech events to writing-editing jobs. "What we do," says Newmark, "is give people a voice, and that's pretty powerful."

And extremely valuable. What was once a Java programmer's part-time avocation is now a fast-growing nonprofit that receives full-time devotion from Newmark and his other staffers; it's run like a scrappy startup out of an office that's quickly outgrowing San Francisco's Inner Sunset neighborhood. The business model is simple: Charge companies $45 to list job openings. All other listings are free. The community does the rest.

"Our intent is inclusive–to humanize and democratize the Internet," Newmark explains. "Too much of life is whom you know. We're trying to open that up a little more." Part of that vision is to bring the community-building experience of craigslist to other cities–the grassroots way. "We're not carpetbaggers," says Newmark. "We're interested in working with people in other places who want to do similar things. And we're creating technology that will allow people anywhere to build community sites, including neighborhood ones. We're trying to find the right ways to give this technology away."

Newmark does concede that he knows a little something about organizing a community on the Web: "I've been trying to pay attention and to learn something about it along the way." He's even taught a course called "How to Create a Successful Online Community Web Site." In a series of interviews with FAST COMPANY, Newmark explained what it takes to build a community on the Web.

WWW.CRAIGSLIST.ORG

(Virtual) Organizing Manual

Craig Newmark has devoted the past five years to maintaining and expanding one of the most celebrated communities on the Web. Here are some of his guidelines for community organizers.

- **Uncommonly good communities have members with common interests.** Often, those interests are mundane rather than profound–people who live in the same city or have the same job title. But note: People with common interests can have extremely different values. "Think of creating a community as building your own dysfunctional family," jokes Newmark.
- **To generate strong connections, provide down-to-earth information.** When most of us think of Web communities, we think of intense discussions with lots of passionate people. But the way to generate that kind of intense discussion is to present people with concrete information. "We're all bombarded with too much information, most of which is irrelevant," says Newmark. "Give people an easy way to find what's useful to them."
- **It's virtual *and* physical, not virtual *or* physical.** The online world may be a powerful complement to the physical world, argues Newmark, but it's not a substitute. The strongest virtual communities tend to encourage participants to connect in the real world. "Proximity humanizes connection," he says. "Seeing Web pages of people whom you meet or could meet in the flesh–that's what matters."
- **Think globally, act locally.** One of the most popular mantras of the Web, "Get big fast," just doesn't apply to online communities. If the strength of a community is built on the depth of the connections among members, then almost by definition, community building is slow, grassroots work. "I don't think there's any way to make a community get big fast," says Newmark. "Communities grow organically, and that's always slow at first."

–Katherine Mieszkowski

WHAT ARE THE PREREQUISITES FOR BUILDING A COMMUNITY?

Community starts with people having something in common, whether it's a subject that interests them or the city in which they live. There's a reason why people in a geographic community feel–or want to feel–connected.

We've lost contact with our neighbors. We don't know who they are, but we crave contact with them. So creating a new place for people to interact with others in their own town is one way of establishing community. Geography is something that we all already have in common with our neighbors.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT KIND OF TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES?

People need a convenient arena or forum in which they can interact. It can be at a café, around the company water cooler, or at the fax machine. On the Net, that arena is created electronically; it might be a mailing list, a bulletin board, a chat room, or a Web site that publishes information that helps bring people together in person.

But let's be clear: The Net is not about technology, it's about people–a fact that is obvious to everyone except to us programmers. The most important things we, as humans, need to do–commercially or socially–is to connect with others. An online community is no substitute for real-world interactions. In fact, the most successful online communities are the ones that throw parties, sponsor events, host get-togethers–help members meet one another face-to-face in the real world.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT TAKE TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN A COMMUNITY?

The best communities aren't just interesting, they're useful. On craigslist, there's not a lot of abstract discussion. We address everyday, real-world, down-to-earth stuff–finding a place to live, a roommate, a job, or a technology event to attend. The community has grown out of these practical concerns. At its most mundane, what we're doing is basically creating a different version of classified ads. The difference is that they're free. Because we're not charging by the word, people can say as much as they want. And in their postings, people reveal something of themselves–and others feel a sense of connection. One woman told me that she reads our lists just for the personal stories. It's a window into what's going on around her, and it provides a sense of connection and intimacy with others. That's the common theme: What's going on around us?

"AN ONLINE COMMUNITY IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR REAL-WORLD INTERACTIONS. IN FACT, THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ONLINE COMMUNITIES ARE THE ONES THAT THROW PARTIES, SPONSOR EVENTS, HOST GET-TOGETHERS—HELP MEMBERS MEET ONE ANOTHER FACE-TO-FACE IN THE REAL WORLD."

"COMMUNITY IS ABOUT CONNECTING PEOPLE WHO NEED A BREAK WITH PEOPLE WHO MIGHT BE ABLE TO GIVE THEM ONE. IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE HELPING ONE ANOTHER. THIS IDEA IS NOT NEW."

SO THE WAY TO BUILD A COMMUNITY IS TO GIVE PEOPLE INFORMATION?

Actually, the most poignant use of a Web community is to give people a voice. And if you provide the right kind of forum, anyone can have a voice. In any large organization-whether it's a company or a part of the government-the people on the front lines know how to do things well. But the nature of large organizations is that they stifle those people. Over time, these people give up trying to be heard because they have the sense that no one is listening. In that sense, community is about connecting people who need a break with people who might be able to give them one. It's all about people helping one another. This idea is not new. For a long time, people in technology have been helping others online. You ask a question, you get an answer. It's a pretty good deal. When you go to a technical conference and read someone's nametag, you may realize that you're meeting someone who may have helped you a year ago, or someone whom you've helped.

This profile by Katharine Mieszkowski was originally published in NET COMPANY #2 (Winter 2000), p.26. Since its publication, craigslist.org has continued to grow, launching sites in Boston, New York, Seattle, Washington, DC and Sydney, Australia.

WHAT ARE SOME PITFALLS TO CREATING A COMMUNITY?

Scale is one. Web sites that attempt to build a community quickly on a grand scale will not succeed. People in different areas and in different cultures know what's right for their areas and cultures. It is possible to create a big community site, but it has to be a network of affinity groups–a community of communities.

WHAT OTHER ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE TO ASPIRING WEB ORGANIZERS?

You've got to keep it real. That means being down-to-earth and open. And it means no hidden agendas. In our case, that means not using the community stuff as a way of selling ads or anything else. I spend lots of time maintaining the trusted relationship we have with everyone who uses craigslist. We don't even know how many visitors come to our site, because we don't use "cookies." We never sell any of our mailing lists or anything personal about visitors to our site. That's because the foundation of the community is trust. Another way we keep it real is with the name. I was embarrassed to call it craigslist-and I still am-but people want something personal. They want something that feels real.

PHOTO: **MARC OZAWA**

amy jo kim

Founder and Creative Director, NAIMA

WWW.NAIMA.COM/BIO.HTML

During 15 years as a designer of online communities and community tools, Amy Jo Kim has seen just about every kind of computer-mediated gathering that exists. From the gamers of Ultima Online and the self-proclaimed "nerds" of Slashdot.org to the singles of NetNoir and the auctioneers of eBay, Kim has helped shape many of the most successful online communities. Kim's new book, *Community Building on the Web* (Peachpit Press, 2000), summarizes her design philosophy and provides useful tips for designers of online communities at all levels. It has been called a "short course for putting soul in the Web." Kim shares her unique online-community experience with the leaders of the Company of Friends, an organization that blurs the lines between online and offline communities. FAST COMPANY recently got Kim's advice to volunteer leaders of online-offline communities.

WHAT DOES A POTENTIAL ONLINE COMMUNITY LEADER NEED TO KNOW?

Taking a leadership role in an online or offline community can be very gratifying, but you need to find a community about which you feel passionate–a community in which volunteers can play important roles. As a volunteer, you can develop really valuable skills (indeed, many volunteers in online communities have gone on to hold positions with the community's sponsoring organization). Still, it is important to clarify what you want to get out of the experience. Be realistic: You are doing this because you enjoy it, because you want to make the community a better place, and because you are building your skills. Make sure that you never feel taken for granted. If you do, it's up to you to cut back your involvement. If you feel burnt out, take a vacation from the community or pass off your responsibilities to others.

As a volunteer leader, you will have access to tools that other members will not. Make sure that you're informed about these tools and take advantage of training opportunities. Training programs are a great way to meet other volunteers, particularly if your community offers veteran-volunteer mentors to new volunteers. If tools and training are out of reach, look into creating these resources on your own, or in collaboration with other volunteers. Many successful online community resources were created by volunteers and later integrated into the official infrastructure. Community building is an organic process.

Don't be afraid to experiment and suggest new ways of doing things to staff members.

HOW CAN VOLUNTEER LEADERS KEEP MEMBERS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES ENGAGED?

1. Focus is key: People are more attracted to groups in which the purpose, mission, and scope are clearly defined.

2. Events need a draw: Events, whether online discussions or offline meetings, tend to engage more members if they involve some sort of presentation followed by a discussion. Unfocused discussions turn people off (unless that's what they are looking for. This means you have to know your audience).

3. Rituals provide context: Incorporate a statement of purpose into your activities. Some groups begin with a prayer, while others end their meetings with a brief mission statement that reminds members what the group is all about. Such statements can be very powerful, especially if they are simple.

HOW CAN LEADERS CONNECT ONLINE AND OFFLINE COMMUNITY-BUILDING EFFORTS?

I don't think that the phrase "online community" will mean anything 5 to 10 years from now. The Web will become so ubiquitous that our community activities will blur the lines between online and offline communication.

In terms of strategy for building joint online-offline communities, community organizers should be careful not to fight a natural division between those who are most comfortable interacting face-to-face and those who are more comfortable keeping their connections virtual. A good community leader always targets her efforts at meeting the needs of community members. It is important not to decide too fast what "real community" looks like for your group. That said, if you want to promote greater use of online tools by offline members and increase attendance at offline events of your Web-focused users, here are some ideas:

For offline users:
Find out what tools your members are already using. Try to leverage their comfort levels with those tools to get them to participate online. For instance, if you have discussion boards that you want members to use more frequently, try switching to an email format (a mailing list or digest) that uses a format with which they're already familiar. If people feel uncomfortable with a tool, you're fighting a losing battle.

For online users:
Hold the first meeting in a neutral location (not in someone's home). People will have fewer reservations about taking their discussions face-to-face. Coordinate gatherings around other events that members would likely attend such as a speaker, a conference, or a workshop.

"A GOOD COMMUNITY LEADER ALWAYS TARGETS HER EFFORTS AT MEETING THE NEEDS OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS. IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO DECIDE TOO FAST WHAT 'REAL COMMUNITY' LOOKS LIKE FOR YOUR GROUP."

Know who your audience is and when it has time. For example, I participate in an online group made up of women in their twenties and thirties, most of whom are childless. When they arrange meetings over drinks at 10 PM, I can't attend because I'm home with my son.

YOUR BOOK FREQUENTLY REFERS TO THE "MEMBERSHIP LIFECYCLE." HOW DOES THIS PHRASE DESCRIBE THE ONLINE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE?

As a member of any type of community, a big part of what keeps you involved and makes you feel like a part of things is becoming known. For instance, when you first walk in to a diner in your new neighborhood, a conversation that you might have with its owner is very different from a conversation you'd have after living in the area for 10 years. All members go through initiation and learning processes that take them from the "visitor" stage to the "new member" stage. Before they know it, they're old-timers who are sharing their experiences with the next batch of newcomers. Members and leaders of online communities need to recognize how fast this transition can take place and appreciate the needs of newcomers while providing benefits to more-experienced members.

An important but often-overlooked stage of the membership lifecycle is a member's departure from the community. The reality is that sometimes a community member will decide to leave the group–for example, workload or family responsibilities might begin to require more time. Rather than try to pressure her into staying or pretend that the departure isn't happening, it is crucial that the community offer her a dignified way out. It is very powerful to acknowledge that she is leaving in a positive way, recognize her contributions to the group, and wish her future well. Very few communities do this successfully. I think that there is a real opportunity for organizers to enhance their communities by offering members a graceful exit strategy.

–DAVID ROSENBLATT

"AS A MEMBER OF ANY TYPE OF COMMUNITY, A BIG PART OF WHAT KEEPS YOU INVOLVED AND MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A PART OF THINGS IS BECOMING KNOWN."

dan hanson

Professor of Communications, Augsburg College

In January 1991, Dan Hanson learned that he'd been promoted to vice president of corporate planning at

Arden Hills, Minnesota-based Land O'Lakes Inc. After 12 years at Land O'Lakes–first as director of sales and marketing, then as general manager of its food-ingredient division–Hanson was put in charge of the company's planning efforts and then moved into a more corporate environment.

The next thing Hanson learned was that he had cancer. "That made me realize that life is terminal," says Hanson. "It gave me a sense of urgency. I knew that I had to rediscover the meaning of my work."

It was February 1991. Hanson immediately took six months off from Land O'Lakes. He underwent a series of intensive treatments for the growths in his thyroid gland and lymph nodes–and he reflected on what he was doing at work. The medicine treated his disease; the reflection dealt with something deeper. Hanson realized that his hard-won promotion was, in fact, a serious misstep. Instead of sticking with what he loved–working closely with people and helping them find connections with their colleagues–he had moved into a corporate position that required him to look at companies and at people as numbers: assets to increase, cut, or exchange. "Corporate planning was like a game of chess," Hanson says. "I played with people as pawns and with businesses as though they were valued only by their bottom line. I was losing touch with the fact that organizations are made up of people."

Not only did Hanson beat cancer–the disease has been in remission for more than nine years now–he also rejuvenated his career: Along with returning to Land O' Lakes, he began teaching business classes at Augsburg College, in Minneapolis. He also wrote two books, *A Place to Shine: Emerging from the Shadows at Work* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996) and *Cultivating Common Ground: Releasing the Power of Relationships at Work* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997).

Hanson eventually became president of Land O'Lakes's fluid-dairy division. In his new position, he turned his attention to a problem that he thought would define the health–and ultimately, the success–of the organization. "I was frustrated with what I saw going on in the workplace," Hanson says. "People didn't seem to be finding meaning in their work, they didn't seem to be shining, and there was an energy missing." According to Hanson, when people don't find meaning or meaningful relationships at work, the problem isn't with the people–it's with oppressive work environments that stifle creativity or with unhealthy work relationships that keep colleagues

at odds with one another. Companies that want to foster internal communities must restructure their organizations and change how coworkers interrelate. His logic is both simple and compelling: "Feeling connected to your work brings energy to the workplace."

What is Hanson's prescription for building connections in an organization that is not accustomed to community? First, you have to address organizational and personal problems that affect the workplace. When an organization's growth comes at the expense of its internal sense of community, Hanson says, the people inevitably start to feel alienated. If they aren't connecting to their work or to one another, it's important to find out why.

Second, you have to highlight what Hanson calls "pockets of wellness"–teams that have changed how they do things. For example, when a flood hit Grand Forks, North Dakota in April 1997, the Land O'Lakes team in that city pulled together to control the damage. The experience became a model for the kind of exceptional accomplishment that community-based action can make possible. Third, you have to remember that community must come from the grass roots, rather than from the top down. "People feel better when their organization succeeds because of them," Hanson says, "not because somebody in management decided that the company was going to follow some program."

Finally, says Hanson, when people succeed, you have to tell them so. "Making people feel special isn't the same as pampering them or praising them for something they didn't earn. That's hollow," Hanson says. "One important thing I've learned is that people want to be challenged as well as appreciated."

–HEATH ROW
PHOTO: **DAVID BARRY**

This profile has been adapted from Heath Row's profile of Dan Hanson in FC #20 (December 1998). Since then, Hanson has left Land O'Lakes for a full time position at Augsburg College teaching courses on the new social contract in the workplace.

The three elements of community building in organizations, according to Dan Hanson:

Community is a conscious commitment to hold a life and a task in common. There is both a relationship dimension and a task dimension. This commitment can result from a crisis, a realization, or a group decision that community-building is needed, but you cannot build community in your organization without the initial buy-in of the people involved.

Organizational communities must be cultivated–I like this word because it suggests careful and consistent attention. Cultivating means recognizing that community is based in processes. When people begin to work together, norms take shape, roles get defined, decisions get made, and stories get told. Developing the organic forms of your community is essential, and it must be a group effort.

Community building requires courageous leadership at all levels of the organization. Leaders must be encouraged to emerge in the trenches to keep the process of cultivation going.

–David Rosenblatt

bill strickland

President and CEO, Manchester Craftsmen's Guild and Bidwell Training Center

In the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh's North Side, Bill Strickland has forged a series of programs to invigorate the community. In the process, he has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of children and adults, built a vibrant community center, and become a nationally recognized expert on social enterprise.

While still in college, Strickland, now 53, founded the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, an after-school program to teach pottery skills to at-risk kids. Three years later, he also took over Bidwell Training Center, a neighborhood vocational-training program. Since their inception, the two programs have each grown into more than $3 million-a-year operations, with a combined staff of 110 people. The programs reach 475 adults and 400 kids each year, and over 75% of the kids involved go on to college.

With Strickland at the helm, the two programs–now under one roof–are expanding in every direction imaginable: A concert hall is on the grounds, which spawned an innovative Grammy Award-winning record label. In June, Strickland's new commercial real estate venture held the grand opening of Harbor Gardens, a 60,000 square foot office building that houses a medical technology center and Bidwell's placement office.

The Denali Initiative, a national three-year effort funded by the Kaufmann Foundation to teach nonprofit leaders how to think like entrepreneurs, is in its second successful year, with a number of alumni-directed social ventures getting off the ground and a new class in the pipeline. Strickland is currently working with San Francisco mayor Willie Brown and jazz musician Herbie Hancock to develop a project in the Bay Area based on his successful models in Pittsburgh. Groundbreaking for this facility is expected in the spring of 2001, and programs in St. Louis, Seattle, Denver, and LA are in development.

Strickland has won a MacArthur Foundation grant, lectured at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and served on the board of the National Endowment for the Arts.

WHAT MAKES A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE SUCCESSFUL?

First You've got to have a good board that represents a cross-section of the community. That means bringing in people who may not be from the nonprofit world, but who have experience and perspective to contribute to your conversation.

Second You've got to get high-quality staff and build an entrepreneurial environment that allows the staff to use its creativity. In this model, management becomes more of a broker in the process than a leader.

Third It is very important to get a third party assessment of what you are doing. We encourage this in all of our programs.

WHAT HAS THE COMMUNITY OF MANCHESTER MEANT FOR YOUR WORK?

Well, it was where I was born. I believe in having roots and that it's very important to belong somewhere. I am not transient–I am a permanent fixture in this community. This gives me some competitive advantages because I know the community, its leadership, and its problems. People look to me as someone whom they are familiar with. I think it's very important that your constituency be able to witness first-hand the results of your efforts. It is important to demonstrate longevity and permanence. The communities I work in are often impermanent. We need to demonstrate sustainability. This has a multiplying effect in terms of new investment and opportunities.

HOW DO YOU, AS A LEADER, BUILD COMMUNITY WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATIONS?

By listening to the people you are associated with. That way, it becomes an interactive process–and a two-way street. Listening creates a climate of trust and encourages people to do better. If you listen to good ideas and encourage imagination, you'll get them–if you don't, you won't.

YOU HAVE BEEN PRAISED FOR YOUR ABILITY TO FORM PARTNERSHIPS THAT LEVERAGE FOR-PROFIT AND NONPROFIT ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE GROWTH IN YOUR COMMUNITY. HOW DO YOU APPROACH THESE DEALS?

I think it's the same process that you use in any organization; look for opportunities for both parties to participate in something productive. When I talk with companies about working together, I try to find what's in it for each of them–and what's in it for me. This goes beyond philanthropy–philanthropy is part of the conversation, but it is not the whole conversation. Opening yourself up to a range of possibilities for collaborative intersection is key.

–DAVID ROSENBLATT
PHOTO: **SUSIE CUSHNER**

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For more information on Bill Strickland, the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild and associated projects, visit www.artsnet.org/mcg or check out Sara Terry's profile in FC #17, (September 1998).