

## CHALLENGES IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

IYER GANAPATHI S.

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### ABSTRACT

The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people. Theodore Roosevelt

One of the most profound experiences we can have in our lives is the connection we have with other human beings. Positive and supportive relationships will help us to feel healthier, happier, and more satisfied with our lives. Human beings are naturally social creatures we crave friendship and positive interactions, just as we do food and water. So it makes sense that the better our relationships are at work, the happier and more productive we're going to be. What's more, good relationships give us freedom: instead of spending time and energy overcoming the problems associated with negative relationships, we can, instead, focus on opportunities. Good relationships are also often necessary if we hope to develop our careers. Overall, we all want to work with people we're on good terms with. We also need good working relationships with others in our professional circle. Customers, suppliers, and key stakeholders are all essential to our success. So, it's important to build and maintain good relations with these people. Community building occurs one-to-one. We need relationships in order to win allies to our cause. Our relationships give meaning and richness to our work and to our lives.

### WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP BUILDING ALL ABOUT?

Relationships are the building blocks for all community organizing activities. The relationships we have with our coworkers, the communities we serve, and even our adversaries are the *means* for achieving our goals. People don't work in isolation: we need to be working together! We need lots of people to contribute their ideas, take a stand, and get the work done.

It is also the people who motivate us to reach our goals. As community builders, we care deeply about people and caring is part of our work. It is our caring for others that motivates us to work as hard as we do. It is often the health and happiness of our children, neighbors, and coworkers that we hold fixed in our minds as we push ourselves to overcome obstacles and take on challenges that can feel overwhelming.

If you are the official leader, or an active citizen without an official title, you will be most effective if you establish many strong relationships around yourself in the community.

#### FUNDAMENTAL REASONS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS:

- Community building occurs one-to-one. You need to build relationships with people one-to-one if you want them to become involved in your group or organization.
- We need relationships in order to win allies to our cause. In order to get support from people outside our organizations, we need to build relationships in which people know and trust us.
- Our relationships give meaning and richness to our work and to our lives. We all need a community of people to share the joys and the struggles of organizing and making community change.

#### YOU ARE AT THE CENTER

Imagine a wheel in which you are at the hub or center and each spoke represents a relationship with another person. It takes a lot of spokes to hold the wheel together and the wheel is what helps move the initiative along. There is enough room in the group for everyone to create their own wheel of strong relationships.

The point is that you have to take the time to set up and sustain relationships. If you wait for others to establish relationships with you first, you may spend a lot of time waiting.

**One reminder:** It doesn't make sense to form relationships just to get people to do work for you. That won't work because people will feel used. Community builders approach relationships with integrity. We form relationships because we genuinely like someone, because we have something to offer that person, or because we share some common goal.

#### WHEN DO YOU BUILD AND SUSTAIN RELATIONSHIPS?

Some relationships require more time than others. As community organizers with few resources, we are often under enormous pressures that distract us from paying attention to relationships. We feel the urgency of achieving important goals. We mistakenly feel that spending time on relationships is the fluffy stuff that makes a person feel good, but doesn't get the job done. Often, however, relationships are the key to solving a problem or getting the job done. Building and sustaining many solid, strong relationships is central to our work as community leaders.

#### RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE GROUNDWORK

Often building relationships is the groundwork that must be laid before anything else gets done on a project. The bigger the project, the more relationships you will usually need as a foundation.

When you plan a project, you need to include the time it takes to build relationships into your *plan*. People need time to build trust. Whenever people work together, they need to have trusting relationships. If things are not going well, back up and try an easier challenge.

### ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE YOU NEED THEM

It's always better to build relationships *before* you need them or before a conflict arises.

### ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS IN A CRISIS

It is not impossible to establish relationships during a crisis, and often a crisis can bring people together. While it may seem unusual, make the most of your organization's crises. Call for help and people will rise to the call. You can build relationships when you are in need, because people often want to help.

### HOW DO YOU BUILD RELATIONSHIPS?

#### AN 11-STEP PROGRAM

1. Build relationships one at a time. Fortunately or unfortunately, there are no short cuts. Sending out a newsletter helps you keep in touch with lots of folks, but it's no substitute for getting to know a Real person.
2. Be friendly and make a connection. This may seem self-evident, but a friendly word or smile can make someone's day. Try to find something in common: all of us want to have close connections with our fellow humans.
3. Ask people questions. People love to talk about themselves and about what they think. If you ask people about themselves and then take the time to listen attentively, they can become your fast friends.
4. Tell people about yourself. People won't trust you unless you are willing to trust them. Tell them what you genuinely care about and what you think.
5. Go places and do things. If you want to make friends, you have to go where the people are: picnics, conferences, events, fundraisers, parties, playgrounds, bowling alleys, little league games, bake sales, etc..
6. Accept people the way they are. You don't have to agree with them all the time in order to form a relationship with them. No one likes to be judged.
7. Assume other people want to form relationships, too. Underneath the crabbiest looking person is often a lonely soul hoping someone will make a crack in their shell.
8. Overcome your fear of rejection. Most of us suffer from a fear of rejection, and there's only one thing to do about that: get over it. If you want to form relationships, plan on being rejected some of the time.
9. Be persistent. People are often shy and suspicious. It takes a while to win trust. You can almost always form a relationship if you stick with it.

10. Invite people to get involved. People want to become part of something bigger than themselves. Many people are looking for an opportunity to meet other people who share common goals. At the worst, people will be flattered that you invited them to join.

11. Enjoy people. If you genuinely enjoy people, others will be attracted to your attitude. People will more likely want to be around you.

### **HOW DO YOU BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS THAN YOUR OWN?**

- Learn about the person's culture. Any effort will go a long way in showing that you care enough to find out about the reality of another person's life.
- Put yourself at the center of another person's culture. Especially if you are getting to know someone who is not a part of majority culture, try going to their cultural events where you are the minority. If you are willing to take risks and put yourself in a situation in which you might feel uncomfortable, people will be more inclined to want to get to know you.
- Take a stand against the person's oppression. Actions speak louder than words. People who experience oppression need allies to speak out against injustice. Strong relationships are forged when people act courageously on behalf of each other.
- It's okay to make mistakes. You may have to make mistakes as you build relationships with people who have different cultural backgrounds than your own, but people are generally forgiving, especially if your intentions are good. Remember, hang in there even if you feel rejected.

### **HOW DO YOU BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE WHO HOLD POSITIONS OF POLITICAL POWER?**

- Don't be intimidated. People who hold titles or positions of political power are humans, too. They like to form relationships just like everyone else does.
- Listen and withhold judgment. People with titles rarely get a chance to be listened to. They rarely get a chance to think through an issue without someone pressuring them to vote one way or another. One way to befriend such a person is to take the time to listen to them. See what you can offer them, not just in a political context but as a sympathetic human being.

#### HOW DO YOU SUSTAIN RELATIONSHIPS?

Okay, now you've built some relationships. Relationships, like any other living thing, need care to keep them alive and healthy. So what do you do with them to keep them going?

- **Pay attention to people.** Check in with people when you need to. This may take only a few minutes a week, but those few minutes can make the difference in helping your friend or co-worker remember the importance of the work you are doing together.
- **Communicate openly.** People need to communicate. It's a good idea to set aside some time just to talk about the way things are going. When people don't have a chance to talk about important issues, misunderstandings can occur and tensions often build up. Communication is a discipline that has to be practiced regularly; it's like taking vitamins or doing push-ups.
- **Appreciate each other.** Everyone needs to be appreciated in order to keep relationships going. If you notice that someone did a stellar job of collecting the necessary data for the committee, say so. If you enjoy working with someone, let them know. We are all human beings and appreciation helps us thrive.
- **Extend yourself.** Go a little out of your way, at least once in a while. If your co-worker needs to spend some extra time with his daughter, you might tell him go home early and you'll finish up the grant proposal.
- **Volunteer to do some work for their organization** (if they are not already in yours). If you lend them a hand, they are likely to think well of you and give something back in return.
- **Challenge each other to do better.** We all need a buddy to help us stretch ourselves beyond what we think we can do. We can also build stronger relationships by challenging our work partners to take on bigger challenges.
- **Back each other when things get tough.** Loyalty is essential to keeping relationships healthy. We may not agree with a co-worker or friend, but we can stand by him or her when they are in a jam.

#### WHEN RELATIONSHIPS GET MESSY

Many relationships get messy sooner or later and that's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, sometimes people need a good fight or a clearing of the air in order to get a relationship back on track. A conflict doesn't mean the relationship has to come to an end. Remember: we often fight with the people we care about the most and with whom we share our greatest hopes.

- **Take time to listen to each other.** This is not always easy. Each person should take time some time to listen without interrupting, while the other person talks.
- **Put yourself in the other person's shoes.** Everyone in a conflict has distinctly different views of a situation. In the thick of a fight, people are usually convinced they are absolutely right. Try to see why the other person sees things the way they do. Just your attempt to do so will help the other person see that you are trying.
- **Look at what is true about what the other person is saying.** See if you can correct the situation. If you need to apologize, go ahead. It may feel horrible, but an apology can often help a relationship get back on the right track.
- **Separate emotions from reality.** Everyone has emotions that surface intermittently. People often say things they don't mean when they are in the middle of an emotional upset. Allow time and space for people to feel their emotions before you try to work things out.
- **Continue to appreciate and respect each other.** Even though it may be difficult, focus on the positive aspects of the relationship. If you model appreciation, the other person will often follow.
- **Speak from your heart.** As you try to unravel the difficulty, keep focused on what you and the other person care about most: the goals of the project, each other, the community, etc.
- **Don't give up your principles.** Don't sacrifice what you believe in just to make a relationship work. If you give up on your principles, you won't be effective and the relationship won't work anyway.
- **Hang in there when things get hard.** You can take some breathing room, but try not to give up on the relationship altogether. When things are the toughest, there are important lessons to be learned. It's best to keep a relationship that you've invested your time and caring into?
- **You can act independently to improve any relationship.** Even if the other person or group of people is acting rotten, you can act in a way that is positive, respectful, constructive, and thoughtful. This may surprise people, and they may follow your lead.

### RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADVERSARIES

- You can disagree and still build relationships with individuals who are working against your goals. If you do so, members of the other camp will begin to see you as human rather than viewing you as the enemy.
- You can set up a dialogue group to hear why adversaries view the issues the way they do. You can hire a neutral facilitator to come in and lead a discussion about the areas of disagreement.

### SUMMARY

Building and sustaining relationships are at the heart of organizing communities. The strength of community lies in the strength of the connections that we have with each other. With strong connections, people have the power to make real change. Relationships are the often the source of our greatest joys and greatest challenges. Understanding relationships is no simple task. People are so unique and complex that there is no easy formula.

Whether you are a "leader" or a follower, you have the ability to build a community of friends, colleagues, associates, allies, partners, and buddies around you. Together, there is no telling what you can do.

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