

# Leaders Build Community

Leaders need to focus on facilitating the process of people getting to know one another because it is difficult to trust someone you don't know.

BY JANN E. FREED, PH.D.



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One of the lessons I learned in the process of writing "Leading With Wisdom: Sage Advice from 100 Experts" is this: Leaders need to invest the time to cultivate, encourage, and nurture relationships. This might be one of the most important tasks for leaders as our society is losing its sense of community. Research indicates that people have fewer people they trust. Even though we can be "connected" 24/7, people report feeling disconnected. We may have thousands of "friends" on Facebook or connections on LinkedIn, yet many people are lonely. Many of us don't have front porches where the neighbors come and hang out so we get to know each other. We often define a "good neighbor" as someone who does not bother us. In fact, we put up privacy fences to keep the neighbors out.

Robert Putnam brought the lack of community to our attention in his classic book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community." People used to join the PTA, bowling leagues, Masons, Shriners, etc., for a sense of community. Participation in these organizations has decreased, and many people feel they are "bowling alone." Yet groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight Watchers are successful because of the support of the group. The power of the group manifested through the building of community strengthens a person's commitment.

## ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE...

Recently, I was conducting a "lunch and learn" for a corporate group about the lessons in my book. After we discussed the chapter on how leaders build community, a young woman in the group exited. Since this was during the lunch hour and it is common for people to have to respond to a call or e-mail, I did not notice her leaving. My client informed me later that I had hit a "nerve" with the topic of community, and for this employee it rang true. She revealed that she was extremely lonely. My client said this discussion was eye-opening and she considered this revelation a gift. As the team leader, she now was going to be more aware and invest more time

and energy into building community within her team.

After decades of surveying people to assess employee engagement, Gallup concluded it can accurately measure it by asking only 12 questions Gallup calls its Q12 survey. The survey has been used with more than 25 million employees around the world. Interestingly, two of the survey statements are:

- I have a best friend at work.
- My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.

These two questions reflect how a sense of community matters. People are more engaged when others care about them. Gallup links increased engagement to improved financial performance through a direct connection to increased employee productivity, retention, and organizational profitability.

I was reminded of how lonely we are as a society when Twitter went public recently. Twitter was created because the founders—Jack Dorsey and Noah Glass—were lonely. It is an interesting story that now is being told in the book, "Hatching Twitter," by Nick Bilton. Here is part of the story Bilton told Ira Flatow of NPR about how the company got its start:

*"They were talking about all these different ideas that kind of led to Twitter, but there was one seminal moment and it was one night. It was in a car. It was rainy. Jack Dorsey and Noah Glass were on Valencia Street in San Francisco. Noah was going through a very difficult time and a divorce.*

*His company, Odeo, was failing and all of his friendships were crumbling. He felt incredibly alone and he kept telling everyone how lonely he felt. And Jack had brought up this idea again, this idea to update your status online. And there were a number of other services out there that did that.*

*There was Dodgeball. Facebook was just coming about. There was a thing called Text Mob. So no one really kind of glommed onto it. But what Noah thought was, hey, wait a second. As he sat in this car and the rain's coming down and his lonely feelings, he thinks, well, if this thing existed, I could actually connect with my friends and feel less alone."*

## WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

If people are this lonely, then what can leaders do to create a sense of community?

It starts with making the time and being intentional about getting to know one another and facilitating interactions. Leaders are architects—both in building relationships and in creating the physical space where people spend most of their waking hours. Leaders should pay attention to the environment in which they expect their employees to work.

Sometimes, it feels like Generation Xers and the Millennials have seen the movie, *Office Space*, way too many times. They don't want to be stuck in a cubicle. They want spaces that facilitate building relationships and connecting. *Fast Company* had an article about how Square in San Francisco just built its new office space modeled after a city. They call the main hall an avenue, and there is a coffee shop in the center that functions as a "city square." In addition to its in-house café and barista, Square has been experimenting with pop-up stores and artisan retailers within Square's own offices.

This is how Chris Gorman, head of Square's Office Experience, describes the new design:

"The design of the office motivates people to move around the office and interact in casual, unscheduled ways—just like the well-planned public spaces of a great city. Early concepts for the office were motivated by old 18th century maps of cities. When I think about a city, I shop, I go get coffee, I go to the park, I go for walks. We wanted to create that same variety in the office."

From the research for my book, "Leading With Wisdom," I share these tips for building community:

- **Community activities:** Plan events that bring people together in a community. Examples could be bowling or square dancing—any activity that does not require talent. Everyone can participate and join in the fun. These events bring people together and facilitate getting to know different sides of people.
- **Storytelling:** Start and end meetings with stories. Start each meeting with a story "check-in." Ask people to spend one to two minutes sharing a personal story. Leave it open and flexible so people feel comfortable sharing. At the end of the meeting, close with a "check-out" such as: What did you learn? What are you personally taking out of this meeting?

- **One-on-one meetings:** Identify someone you want to get to know better. If you know the person, you might want to get to know him or her on a deeper level. Invite this person out for coffee. Explain there is no agenda other than to get to know each other better. Then start asking questions about topics that are non-threatening—interests, hobbies, activities.
- **Ask questions:** Relationships form when we know each other. A great way to get to know people and to start conversations is to ask

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questions. A good place to start is with someone's office space. People decorate their space with artifacts, photographs, and mementos that are important to them. Each item can cue up a question and conversation. Be interested in others—and asking questions is a good way to show interest.

- **Listen:** Stop talking and start listening. Paying attention is a way to show respect for others, a sense of curiosity, and even humility. Sometimes we don't have to have the answers or to offer advice. We just need to listen.

It is easy for leaders to forget the power of culture, relationships, and community. Leaders need to create spaces where people want to work. As architects, leaders need to focus on facilitating the process of people getting to know one another because it is difficult to trust someone you don't know. And it starts with letting people know the leader: What do you stand for and believe in? As Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner state in "A Leader's Legacy," "People always want to know something about the person doing the leading before they're going to become the people doing the following."

When people keep that in mind, they are on their way to becoming effective leaders. **E**