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BUILDING COMMUNITY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

A SERIES OF 5% SHIFTS: COMMUNITY

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Building Movement Project develops tools that help organizations align their social change principles with their social service practices. Our research and experience shows that relatively small shifts in service provision can cause ripple effects; raising up constituent voice, fostering community cohesion and increasing engagement in advocacy efforts. This series highlights "5% shifts"—as we are calling them—that don't rely on organizations completely changing course and reinventing themselves. We lift up shifts that are both simple and achievable, to inspire service providers to adapt what works.

These reports are structured to include both conceptual framing based on research and literature in the sector, as well as case studies of on-the-ground experiments initiated by organizations. They also include discussion materials and other resources to help staff and leaders reflect on the case examples and apply the lessons to their own organizations. We hope that organizations will take what is useful, build on their strengths, and exercise judgment and wisdom in tailoring these examples to make "5% shifts" that fit their specific community and organizational contexts.

We invite organizations to spread these lessons and learning throughout the nonprofit sector, and to reach out to BMP to share experiences or to request additional resources or coaching. Feel free to email BMP Co-Director Sean Thomas-Breitfeld at sthomas-breitfeld@demos.org.

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INTRODUCTION AND FRAMEWORK:

BUILDING COMMUNITY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

The concepts of community and social capital are connected to feelings of belonging, interdependence, trust and reciprocity; and both ideas have been integrated into frameworks for helping marginalized people and addressing social problems. Sense of community is linked to psychological well-being and is one of the most commonly researched ideas in the field of community psychology.[1] Social capital gained popularity over the last two decades, thanks in part to Robert Putnam's best-selling book Bowling Alone, and to foundations promoting the concept as "useful to help families escape poverty and build healthy communities."[2]

The popular focus on community and social capital may draw criticism for being romantic or naïve as a social change strategy,[3] but in direct service delivery, both concepts point to the hard-to-quantify benefits that social service agencies provide. In neighborhoods that have been marginalized by economic and racial inequities, service providers often see specific problems of homelessness, hunger, unemployment, addiction, etc., linked to more generalized social distance and alienation. Therefore, when nonprofit organizations take a holistic approach to helping people, they should not overlook the importance of building a sense of community within their organization and among clients.

This report includes two case studies of community building efforts by nonprofit organizations in Detroit and New York City. St. Matthew's & St. Joseph's Episcopal Church's hot breakfast program in Detroit offers a model of a small shift in engagement with community members seeking healthy meals in the midst of an urban food desert. Their decision to shift from using a soup line mode of serving individuals to serving groups with shared 'family-style' meals leveraged the power of ritual around meals, which are both nostalgic and deeply affirming, to transform dynamics between clients and volunteers. But more importantly the shared meal time became a way to model the kind of community the church envisions for Detroit—one of mutual aid, sharing and abundance. The other case—Queens Community House—provides an example of community building among staff. The organization took on the challenge of fostering relationships among staff; not to boost morale and retention, but to live its values and principles in all parts of the organization.

These community building experiments are rooted in the long tradition of formal service delivery. The Settlement House movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries linked community values with social, educational, humanitarian and civic services, in order to address the social problems of that era. Although these early reformers' vision of an ideal community was limited by the race and class biases of the day, Jane Addams—the founder of one of the first settlement houses—was instrumental in articulating many values that continue to define the service sector. For instance, some of the major goals of settlement houses were to break through segregation and fragmentation among neighborhood residents, extend democracy, foster progress and actualize what Addams called, "the solidarity of human race."[4] Those goals still resonate for change agents and service providers today.

1 Townley and Kloos (2009)

2 Schneider (2004)

3 Epstein (2010)

4 Yan (2004)

The values of solidarity, reciprocity and cohesion are critical to building a sense of community. While they are certainly shared by organizations and staff whose purpose it is to help people, the grinding work of service provision can erode these values. The pressures of government contracts and donor demands to take on the methods and values of the market can conflict with the role nonprofits have historically played in advocating for the common good, and building bonds of trust and reciprocity that are critical to the functioning of a democratic society.[5] Despite the challenges to building a sense of community within organizations—among staff at all levels, and between staff and clients—organizations overcome these barriers every day in small ways.

Community building is not a new practice. It is deeply ingrained in both the history of our sector, and the fabric of the neighborhoods that organizations are embedded in. Organizations may define community differently, and community building efforts will look different from organization to organization. The two cases profiled here focus on staff and clients, but organizations around the country are innovating to build a sense of community with volunteers and boards as well. Organizations who find inspiration in these examples and new insights from the tools and discussion questions are encouraged to find and develop their own practices. There is surely something within every organization that can be built upon to create that familiar sense of belonging that makes the notion of community so appealing. It just takes a small shift for organizations to tap into the feeling of community, and the benefits will reverberate beyond an organization's walls.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Is community building an important goal for your organization? What activities and practices reflect this goal?

5 Eikenberry and Kluver (2004)

CASE EXAMPLE 1:

BUILDING COMMUNITY BY EATING TOGETHER

BACKGROUND

Sharing meals together has been demonstrated to have a variety of positive impacts on children and their development.[6] In fact, this style of meal service is promoted by the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the federal program that administers funds and sets standards for Head Start and other children and adult meal services.[7] Here we profile the St. Matthew's and St. Joseph's Episcopal Church's hot breakfast program in Detroit. Instead of lining up to be served, individuals share food 'family style' in a small group. This case study highlights how the program's unique way of serving food has led to more participant ownership as well as a greater sense of community between participants and volunteers.

The hot breakfast program was initially prepared for church parishioners attending early morning Sunday service and for people from the community, including individuals from a nearby foster care center. The church's guilds rotated each week in preparing and serving food. When Alethea Belfon, a retired property assessor, joined one of the guilds and started volunteering, she noticed that there was a divide between parishioners and non-parishioners: individuals sat on two different sides of the dining room depending on how they were associated with the church. So she and others in her guild made it a point on their Sundays to be friendlier and to talk to individuals who came to the meal. They also encouraged members of the congregation to sit with people from the community to get to know each other.

Eventually, because it was becoming difficult for the church's older congregation to keep up with the meal program's physical work, and church members had stopped coming to the meals after early morning service was canceled, Alethea and several other members took over the management of the breakfast program. "We wanted to create a sense of caring for one another and to try to help develop a sense of community," says Alethea. She and the team understood that, fundamentally, the way they structured the program—how they serve food and the individuals who came—impacted the way individuals interact and relate to each other, so they tested different manners of service. Alethea recalls, "We went from the chafing dishes on the counter to serving the trays in the kitchen, and at one time, there was one of the ladies that would serve the tables."

About four years ago, they decided to try serving family style. Reverend Joan Ross, who is the

BEFORE:

Participants line up to receive food served by volunteers.

5% SHIFT:

People sit together and share food "family style" out of communal dishes.

IMPACTS:

The transition to family style meal service helps to create an atmosphere of community, leading participants connect with each other, and gain a greater sense of collective ownership over the program.

6 Fiese and Schwartz (2008)

7 United States Department of Agriculture (1993)

Executive Director of the recently established Greater Woodward Community Development Corporation housed at the church, was also a key figure in this development. According to Alethea, "It was Reverend Ross who was talking about this lining up mentality. Every time you go somewhere, you get into a line. You go to the welfare office, you get into a line. You go to the grocery store, you get into a line. Why is it that when you come to church, when you're coming to break bread, you're lining up again? And maybe we can break that cycle. See if we can create a sense of eating together, of having fellowship with one another. And that's how it started."

HOW IT WORKS

Bowls of food and serving utensils are brought to each end of a long table. Four people are expected to share the food. Meal participants are asked to choose their own seats but are encouraged to sit with others they do not know as long as they are comfortable. They are never assigned to seats or asked to move into a group just because there are empty seats. Alethea emphasizes that people have to feel safe and not be turned off from coming.

Before the meal begins, an announcement is made about eating family style. "We remind people to wash their hands, use the serving utensils, and be courteous to each other."

RESPONSE & IMPACTS

The practice has been fully embraced in the last four years after an initial pushback from participants concerned about hygiene and sharing food. Individual participants now know what to expect, but Alethea or another volunteer always makes sure to include reminders in their welcome remarks to address these concerns.

Alethea noticed that individual isolation has begun to melt, and program participants are talking to each other more, even if they are not sitting together. Significantly, a community is being built through everyone's active participation. It is no longer just volunteers who prepare food and program participants arrive only to eat. More and more, when Alethea arrives at the church in the early morning to start setting up, eight or nine program participants are already there waiting to help. The volunteers who do not participate in the meals also feel a deeper connection to this community, so they want to do more. They are discussing how to address other needs, including starting a literacy program. In this way, participants and volunteers are taking on larger

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- A brief introduction about eating together family style is always announced so that everyone knows what to expect.
- Before implementation: Find out if the people you serve would be comfortable trying out family style. Explain it well. Get a core group of people together and see if they would help to implement it.
- Check with your local Department of Health and other relevant agencies on food safety and health guidelines regarding family style meal service.

roles in the program and creating opportunities for deeper engagement and leadership.

Through the shift to "family style" meals, program participants have become community members who foster a new culture of sharing and caring for one another. They protect the space by ensuring that it is safe and stepping up to resolve conflicts when they arise, or stop by to check on the church and its volunteer staff when they are in the neighborhood. They look out for one another. When a light rail plan in Detroit threatened to reduce bus services, program participants along with other community members helped to start an organization to work on transit equity in the basement of the church. Through being a part of a community, people transform the space at the same time that it transforms them.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

How does your organization define community?

How do service delivery practices at your organization break down (or replicate) isolation between constituents?

CASE EXAMPLE 2:

BUILDING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY THROUGH A STAFF NEWSLETTER

BACKGROUND

Two decades after its founding, Queens Community House had experienced enormous growth from a small organization to a multi-program, multi-site service delivery agency. Despite its growth, the organization was committed to return to its activist roots, and hired Dennis Redmond as the Director of Community Programs. Dennis helped to change the relationship between staff and clients, using the concept of reciprocity to level the playing field between provider and client. Embracing the norm of reciprocity—which is critical to building trust and social connection[8]—involved creating opportunities for participants to give back to the organization as volunteers and through peer support networks.[9] At the same time, he understood that in order to build a community that includes everyone, staff needed to see themselves as part of this community and identify with the organization and its mission. This case study describes one strategy to build internal community among staff, and the effect on other efforts.

Dennis recalls, "At that time, the organization was run similar to how it had been run in the beginning." However, Queens Community House was no longer a small agency; its work was spread out over multiple sites in the large borough of Queens in New York City. Staff from one site or program did not know staff from other sites and there was no way to share their program changes and news. Staff identified with their program or site, but not with the whole organization. Furthermore, site-based staff often perceived the original location (where the executive team was located) as the "bad guy" that determined their budgets and limited the staff's program autonomy.

Dennis, together with an internal Community Building Committee consisting of staff from different departments, was implementing a variety of strategies to address these concerns and build community amongst staff, including garden parties and annual retreats. The committee acknowledged that it needed to find a way to facilitate further communication among staff and to build a common identity across the agency. A staff newsletter was key to achieving this goal.

BEFORE:

Staff members are spread out across multiple service sites and lack professional and personal connections to each other.

5% SHIFT:

The organization creates a regular newsletter dedicated to writings by and for staff.

IMPACTS:

An organizational culture is both formed and reinforced through the newsletter. Staff feels like they are a part of a larger community with shared values and traditions.

8 Fabricant and Fisher (2002)

9 See the Building Movement Project's Making Social Change: Case Studies of Nonprofit Service Providers for more on Queens Community House's concept of reciprocity and community building process.

HOW IT WORKS

The newsletter was emphasized as "staff only," and not shared with donors, supporters, volunteers, or constituents. The staff was free to be informal and goofy in their writings, and the newsletter was designed in-house, reflecting this spirit. Dennis worked with a few social work students who wrote, compiled, and edited articles for a printed newsletter published about once every two months. Each newsletter had a loose theme related to the time of year, a current event, or a community building concept. For example, the first newsletter had a contest to pick a name for the newsletter. CHATTER won through the staff votes, though later, probably no one remembered that it stood for "Community House Articles, Timely, Toned, and Events Reported."

Through CHATTER, staff had a place to collectively recognize each other's accomplishments, both personal and professional. Staff welcomed the opportunity to share their program descriptions and updates across different sites. Organizational priorities such as decisions and outcomes from the annual retreat were also highlighted in the newsletter so all staff could be on the same page about what was important to the agency at that moment.

At the same time, staff were excited to share personal news of themselves getting married, having kids, graduating from college, etc. In one issue, the newsletter asked staff to send in their "falling in love" stories, or, in another, to participate in a baby picture contest. There was a section called "Comings and Goings" that welcomed new staff and honored outgoing ones. "We saw it as being able to put out things that would connect to this idea of community building. A community is about *knowing* people in the community, and when you know people in the community, you feel more connected to them," Dennis explains.

RESPONSE & IMPACTS

When the first newsletter came out, Dennis was surprised by the staff's willingness to share information and to embrace it as their own. Staff took time out of their day to contribute to it and had a sense of communal pride in it. The newsletter was part of a larger strategy to form a common organizational identity amongst staff, and in this way, it succeeded.

The organization was beginning to feel like a cohesive whole as the newsletter helped to reinforce other processes like the staff retreats. It was one of the key ways for the agency to manifest its values and principles, so that community was not just a need of clients but something that both providers and recipients valued. For example, the value of inclusion was always present in the newsletter because Dennis and others would ensure that a program was represented in one way or another in the newsletter through the course of the year. Staff saw that they had a voice in the agency through the staff opinion section and through the way that the newsletter encouraged input and transparency. It established an internal culture and a way of relating between staff. Instead

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- A staff newsletter transmitted not only program information and personal stories, but also organizational values and identity.
- The newsletter transformed into a ritual for celebrating to the organization, further consolidating the sense of community.

of antagonism toward the original site, staff started to feel a deeper connectedness and familiarity with each other through light-hearted personal stories or pictures of the agency's leadership as babies.

Ten years after the first issue, the printed physical newsletter was beginning to seem out of date in the internet age, but it has morphed into something unexpected; becoming an honored tradition and a ritual that staff uses to celebrate a staff member who hit their twentieth anniversary at Queens Community House or when a long-time staff member leaves. These special editions of CHATTER feature photos of the staff over the years, their achievements, and greetings and stories sent from other staff. "In any community, there's got to be some aspects of celebration and some sort of mechanism and means for it," Dennis says. "We can put on a party. We can buy a gift for that person. But this became a way of saying that this is part of who we are." This tradition is now so deeply part of the collective identity that recently, when Dennis could not publish the special editions, staff took the masthead and put together a newsletter for their colleagues or supervisors who achieved this milestone. "People have to have their special edition of CHATTER. It means something to people."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Do staff at your organization tend to collaborate and cooperate in ways that reflect the value of community?

Are there ways that organizational systems are at odds with (or reinforce) the values you profess?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Purpose of this Discussion:

Have participants reflect on the case studies and their own experiences of community, in order to identify opportunities for community building.

Hoped-For Outcomes:

- Begin to develop a common understanding of community
- Identify barriers to developing a sense of community inside the organization
- Brainstorm shifts to practice community building

60-MINUTE AGENDA AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Round of Introductions and Personal Reflection 10 min

Start with a round of introductions where people respond to the following question:

> When you were growing up, where did you most feel a sense of community and belonging?

If time allows, ask for reflections on common themes across people's individual experience of community and belonging.

Reflect on the Organization as a Community 30 min

Explore people's sense of community within the organization:

> As staff, do we feel like members of a community together? Are we united as an "us" or divided into separate camps of "us" and "them" (whether by program, location, etc.)?
>
> Do we engage with constituents as members of the same community we are part of? Are participants part of the "us," or are participants a "them"?

Explore the value people place on community-building in the work:

> Do the examples of the difference made by building a sense of community in the two case studies in the report offer any parallels to our organization and programs?
>
> If we were to emphasize community building more, what benefits or impacts could we imagine being possible?

Begin to Explore Strategies for Community Building 15 min

Reflect on the two case studies to consider community building activities your organization could undertake:

> What "community building" activities do we currently have in our organization? Are they focused on staff, clients, board, volunteers, or some combination? What benefits or impacts of these efforts?
>
> If we were to do more community building, how might we restructure an existing program to achieve that goal?

Note: it may be helpful to break the group into two smaller teams. Use two sets of flipcharts to visually record report-out's from each group.

Closing and Evaluation 5 min

Ask people to identify one thing they liked and one thing they would change about the conversation.

Close the discussion and thank people for their participation.

Note: if there was continued energy during this exercise, you may consider forming a group that will continue to work on this issue in your organization and plan for how to move ahead.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION GUIDE AND EXERCISE

Purpose of this Discussion:

For those individuals who were particularly engaged or excited by the last meeting, you can use this agenda and worksheet to delve deeper into individual programs or areas of your work to begin to generate more concrete ideas for next steps.

Hoped-For Outcomes:

- Identify opportunities for community building in your organization
- Generate a list of concrete practice shifts that can be proposed to others in the organization building

60-MINUTE AGENDA AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Round of Introductions and Personal Reflection 10 min

Start with a round of introductions where people respond to the following question:

> (If any participants were not part of the first meeting, have them first reflect on this question) When you were growing up, where did you most feel a sense of community and belonging?
>
> (For those who participated in the first meeting) What most excited you about our last discussion?If time allows, ask for reflections on common themes across people's individual experience of community and belonging.

Note: you may want to write down answers to the second question on a flipchart for everyone to see and remember.

Identifying Community in your Organization 5 min

As a group, quickly brainstorm answers to the following questions. (If you have the flipcharts from the first meeting, you can have them up as well):

> What "community building" activities do we have in our organization now?
>
> Who is included in the community building – staff, clients, board, volunteers, or some combination?

Four Components in your Community Exercise 40 min

(10 min) Break the group into small teams of three to four participants and ask each one to assess the current practices of a program area identified earlier according to the "four components of community" worksheet.

(10 min) Then have the small teams focus on the worksheet's right-hand column to brainstorm some possible shifts.

(10 min) Once they have generated some ideas, ask them to reflect on the following questions to begin mapping out a community building plan:

> How would community building work in practice in this program? What concerns or risks might there be in implementing community building? What would be the first step to implement this new program? What would be the next two steps?

(10 min) After giving each group 30 minutes to work in teams, bring everyone together to report out their ideas.

Closing and Evaluation 5 min

Ask people to identify one thing they liked and one thing they would change about the conversation.

Close the discussion and thank people for their participation.

Note: if there was continued energy during this exercise, you may consider forming a group that will continue to work on this issue in your organization and plan for how to move ahead.

FOUR COMPONENTS OF COMMUNITY

Use this chart to assess the community-building elements of a program and to craft strategies for shifting it to build a sense of community.

	Assess Current Practices	Brainstorm Possible Shifts
Membership feelings of belonging and identification	Who participates in the program? Do they see their participation positively?	Foster collective identity and connection between clients
Influence individuals influence the community, and vice versa	How do participants have influence over the program?	Allow for client leadership in program planning
Fulfillment physical **and** psychological needs are met	Does the program ***also*** pay attention to people's needs to feel that they belong?	Focus on whole person (with physical and emotional needs)
Connection connect positive effects of membership to community	How are participants' successes celebrated? How are participants asked to support others?	Elevate the values of reciprocity / mutual support

Note: The 4-part structure is adapted from the four components identified as vital to a sense of community in Townley & Kloos (2009)

ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND USES

Many community-building practices involve sharing and learning as a group. While this 5% shift is focused on small steps you can take in your organization, you may decide to go one step further and formally learn together on an ongoing basis. To do that, you may consider using a learning circle format. Learning circles provide a space for structured learning that relies not only on group reading, but also on the expertise that each participant brings to the discussion. The goal is to learn about the root causes of some of the issues clients face. To learn more about setting up a learning circle, check out the tool on our website at

www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Learning_Circle.pdf

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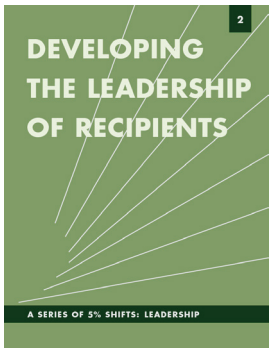
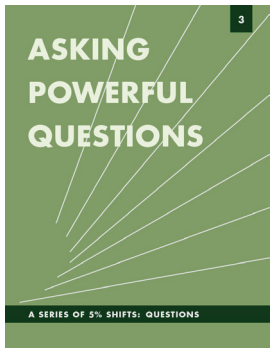
OTHER REPORTS IN THIS SERIES

For over a decade, Building Movement Project has been advancing the potential for nonprofit organizations to have an impact in building movements for progressive social change. In our Service and Social Change work, we help develop the capacity of social service organizations to engage constituents in changing the systems that impact them. Our 5% Shifts Series focuses on small organizational shifts agencies can make that lead to big impacts within the communities they serve.

Download these reports and other resources at www.buildingmovement.org





If you liked the tools compiled in these reports, go to www.buildingmovement.org and click on the "Tools" tab for similar resources to download and use.

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