

ARIZONA HEALTH FUTURES

NOVEMBER 2008

WEAVE THE PEOPLE

Threading Healthy Communities

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SLHI

A Catalyst for Community Health



Natural History

E.B. White

The spider, dropping down from twig,
Unfolds a plan of her devising,
A thin premeditated rig
To use in rising.

And all that journey down through space,
In cool descent and loyal hearted,
She spins a ladder to the place
From where she started.

Thus I, gone forth as spiders do
In spider's web a truth discerning,
Attach one silken thread to you
For my returning.

Weave the People: Threading Healthy Communities

Each of us, like Charlotte, the wise spider in E. B. White’s classic tale, *Charlotte’s Web*, weaves a web for our “rising” and “returning.”

If we are fortunate, the end of all our exploring along this web will be, in the words of the poet T.S. Eliot, “to arrive at where we started,” and “know the place for the first time.”

Weave the People. That’s the whole of it. We intellectualize the process with our endless explanations – social reciprocity, social capital, community building, network development, strong ties, weak ties, collaboration, strategic partnerships – but no amount of cognitive deconstruction can ever fully account for this miraculous web of human connectivity.

Like Humpty Dumpty, once you take it apart, you can’t put it back together again. The web is a changing, living thing. Just weave – weave and adapt. That’s all.

Get Better Together

But *is* that all? We seek to *improve* the web of social reciprocity. We want to learn how to thread the fabric with stronger, more flexible fibers to create a *resilient, healthy* fabric. It is not necessary to take the web apart in order to better understand how it works, and how to extend its adaptability to changing environments and a future yet unknown. Instead we can *reflect* on our weaving – learning by doing – and share those reflections with others, weaving them into the very practice of weaving itself, and thereby “get better together” as we go along.

That brings us to the purpose of this *Arizona Health Futures* issue brief: to reflect on what we and our many partners are learning about weaving people together to create healthy, vibrant communities, and to disseminate these lessons as widely as possible in the hope of informing and encouraging other “web weavers” in their work for the public good.

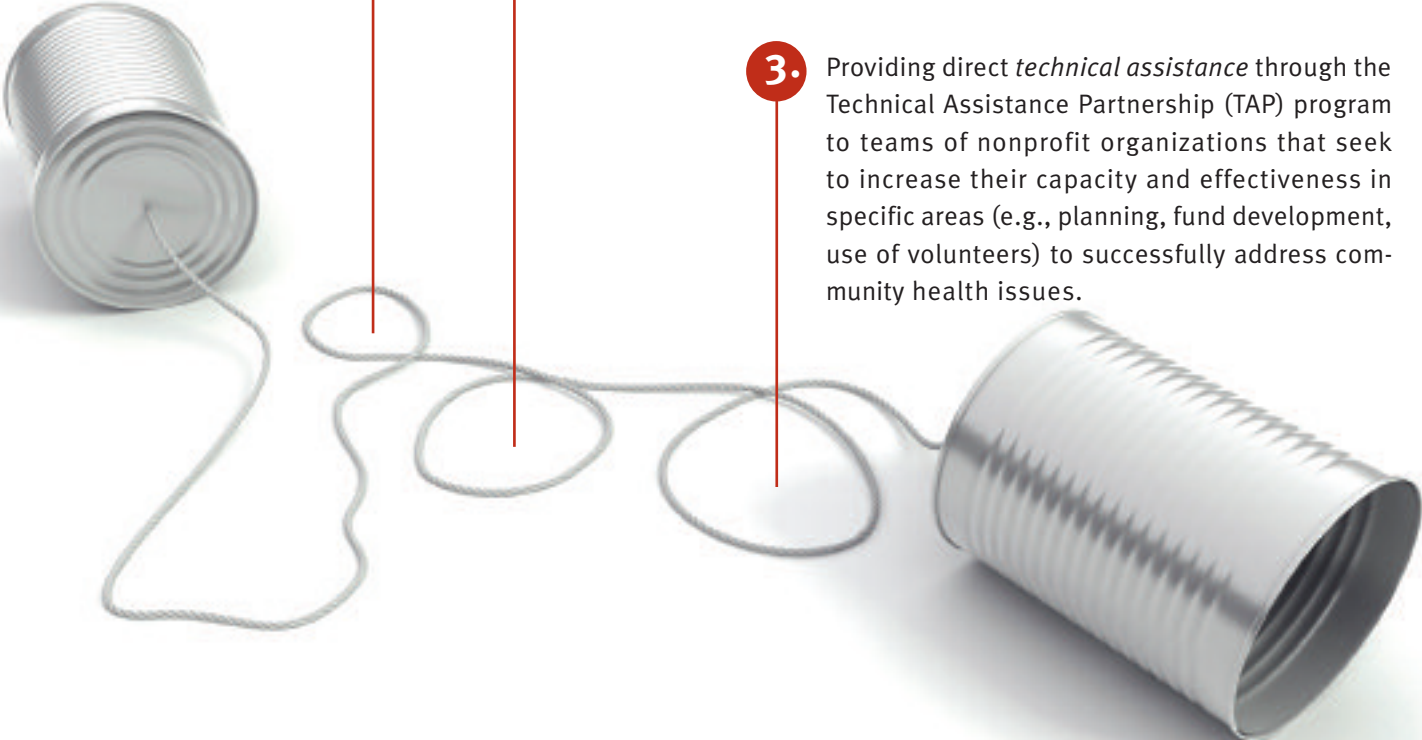
*“The more people who
are engaged and sharing their gifts,
the healthier the community.”*

— community organizer

A Community Conversation

Since 2005, SLHI's community building efforts have been organized along three central threads:

- 1.** Financial support for specific *Health in a New Key (HNK) communities-as-place* (e.g., Mesa, South-Central Phoenix, West Valley), and *communities-as-space* (e.g., shared interests like combating methamphetamine use, cancer education and support, or increasing the number of foster/adoptive families for Hispanic children).
- 2.** Convening and facilitation of *communities of practice (CoPs)* – individuals who come together to share information, experiences and perspectives on how to improve practice and create more healthy, resilient communities (e.g., HNK consultants, Message Framing).
- 3.** Providing direct *technical assistance* through the Technical Assistance Partnership (TAP) program to teams of nonprofit organizations that seek to increase their capacity and effectiveness in specific areas (e.g., planning, fund development, use of volunteers) to successfully address community health issues.



Each of these threads has its own assigned staff, budget line and formal evaluation component. In practice, however, it is impossible to separate them from each other or from the larger thread of strength-based community building that is woven throughout all of our work.

That is why we chose to undertake *Weave the People*. We wanted to create a narrative around the weaving of these separate programmatic threads, rather than pursue a more formal evaluation of the constituent parts of community building.

In essence, *Weave the People* is a *community conversation*, not a report.

Background and Method

In 2003 SLHI published *Resilience: Health in a New Key*, which laid out the principles of resilience and strength-based development as a model for building healthy communities “from the inside out.”

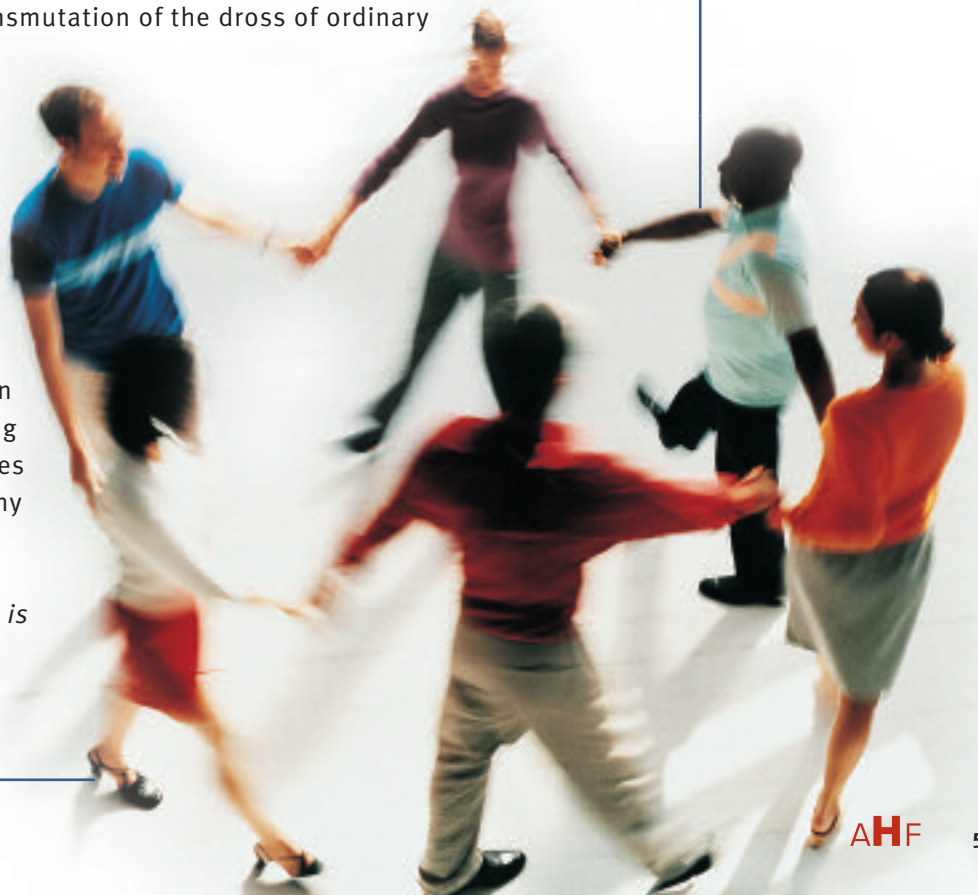
We followed by reformulating our community building work around these principles and strategies, which resulted in supporting a number of *Health in a New Key (HNK)* community projects in the greater Phoenix metro area; creating *communities of practice (CoPs)* for agencies, providers, advocates and consultants interested in sharing lessons on how to apply these principles in their own work; and providing technical assistance through our *Technical Assistance Partnership (TAP)*, *Framing Project* and other venues on specific aspects of organizational capacity and community building. More information on this work is available at www.slhi.org.

Now, five years later, we chose to revisit the initial 2003 report in light of what we and our HNK community partners are learning: what works, what doesn't, and how we can continue to *get better together*. In addition to gathering observations from the HNK and TAP communities of practice, we interviewed HNK community projects separately, conducted focus groups of community and organizational representatives, and integrated these observations with a growing literature on building healthy communities, our own research on fostering resilience through philanthropy,¹ and the informing principle of sustainability.

The *Alchemy* of Healthy Communities

This amalgamation of expert knowledge, local knowledge, history, stories, frames and conjecture is an attempt, provisional at best, to describe the *alchemy* of healthy communities: the transmutation of the dross of ordinary life into the extraordinary resilience and vitality of healthy communities through the weaving of vision, leadership and purposeful human connection. There are significant challenges and obstacles – and we can't very well go forward without addressing them – but American history and community building are filled with successful stories of this alchemy, including many right in our backyard.

Weave the People. That really is all there is. After all.



“Remember the future. Imagine the past.”

Carlos Fuentes

The *Shifting Context* of Community

Before we move to emerging lessons in how to foster more resilient, healthy communities, we set the stage by defining some terms and historical frames.

What is Community?

“Anywhere, anyplace, anytime people connect and participate with each other – that’s community.” – nonprofit executive

“It’s a simple premise. If I can connect you based upon your gift and not your need, you become part of community.” – community organizer

“How do we stay connected to a place when we are always defining ourselves by these other communities?” – association executive

What is ‘community’ is a very different question from what is ‘a community.’ The term is used in distinct, though hardly exclusive, contexts:



Community as Place

The most common use of the term ‘community’ is to describe people who are linked by social and economic ties in *specific geographical locations or settings* – the South Phoenix community, the Sunnyslope community, and so on. Community services, events, housing, economic development and the like are invariably linked to place-bound, real-time settings where people live, work and play.



Community as Space

Community also can be defined in terms of *shared perceptual space*, where people connect both physically and virtually to share common interests, concerns, ideas, values and beliefs. Whether it’s a support group for cancer survivors, a group of nonprofit professionals, a sports club or an online educational group for gardeners, we gravitate to those who share a perceptual space, interests and situations similar to our own. In this way, a community-as-place can contain a multiplicity of communities-as-space. The advent of the Internet, which is literally *everywhere* and *nowhere* at once, extends the concept of community-as-space considerably.



Community as Identity

Related to community-as-space is community-as-identity – the strong identity of self with a community that shares identifiable characteristics: evangelical Christians, African-Americans, gays, feminists, pro-life, etc. One can be part of the “American” or “global” community in one sense, but have a much stronger sense of self-identity and connection with any number of subgroups. A perennial challenge in community building is bringing together a pluralism of identity groups within a shared physical, social and political setting without them having to sacrifice what they consider to be their unique and legitimate identity.



Community as Experience

Everyone lives in some kind of community-as-place, but not everyone has a *sense* or *feeling* of ‘community’ there – the experience of social connectedness, shared norms and values, and strong emotional attachment. People can live or otherwise be *in* a community, but not necessarily be part *of* it. The *experience* of community – fully participating in a nurturing, responsive environment of social reciprocity – remains at the heart of what most people across the world take to be part of the deeper purpose and meaning of human existence.



Community as Market

We can also characterize communities as *transactional markets of potential relationships and opportunities for value, choice and access*.² This is a functional definition of community that stresses the conditions of a “healthy” market: diversity in economic base, high degree of civic engagement, environmental resources, investment in education, leadership development and a diversity of roles, skills, relationships and perspectives. These characteristics partially define a resilient community as well.

What is a *Healthy* Community?

“The more people who are engaged and sharing their gifts, the healthier the community.” – community organizer

“A healthy community is where people have the same vision and hopes and dreams, not just for themselves but for everybody. The well-being of the group is intimately connected to their own well-being, and the conditions are such that there are resources that support people, and people joining hand in hand to do their common work.” – nonprofit executive

“One of our nurse practitioners was visiting the schools, and a student came in who was having chronic earaches. The nurse took a look in the child’s ear, and there was a cockroach impacted in it because the child slept on the floor. That shows right there that health is more than just treating physical ailments. You also have to look at the environment people live in, and work to change the things you can.” – health clinic director

Ask people what defines a healthy community, and their answer will most likely go considerably beyond the absence of illness and pathology, or access to good medical care. People in a healthy community will feel safe and secure; have strong family, social and civic connections; have access to education opportunities, housing and good jobs; actively confront discrimination, social exclusion and disadvantage; and, in the face of adversity and threatening environments, have a sense of empowerment, purpose and self and collective efficacy.

The presence of illness, conflict and dislocation in a rapidly changing environment is a given. What is not given is how a community responds, adapts, recovers and eventually

thrives in the face of change. A healthy community is not a passive victim of adversity. It *chooses* to be purposeful and plan for change. It is, in effect, *resilient*.

For SLHI, the issue is not so much how we define a healthy community, but how we foster healthy communities through our individual and collective actions. In our specialized, fragmented, overwrought and technical age, where we all focus on our particular “issue” and interventions, is it possible to weave the whole cloth of healthy communities that is more than the separate threads of its parts?

How, in effect, do we weave the people into a resilient *whole*?

Back to the *Future*

In many ways, we can reach back into American history for lessons on how to empower communities in America.

The history of America is a lesson in the power of the *American Creed*: the implicit right of every citizen “to create organizations, lobby for change, and participate in political and economic developments through the voluntary sphere.”³ In today’s heavily regulated and mediated environment of large public and private organizations, we often forget that it was the *voluntary sector* that provided the impetus for the country’s free enterprise economy and responsive government:

- **ASSET FORMATION** Social reciprocity and the establishment of trust between individuals are necessary conditions for asset *formation*, whether considered as resources that people use to create a life for themselves and others, or as capabilities people have to act on those resources (human ‘agency’). In 1727, for example, Benjamin Franklin created the Junto Society, one of America’s first “social networks” of apprentices, like Franklin, drawn from a variety of trades for purposes of self-education, public service and self-help. Sound familiar?
- **SOCIAL PROTECTION** We call it the “safety net” today, but during the Revolutionary War and thereafter, volunteers (primarily women) came together to create charities, orphanages, hospitals and similar institutions to help the infirmed and needy who otherwise couldn’t “bounce back” on their own from adversity. What’s different today is that government and other public institutions are involved in a lot of this.
- **ECONOMIC AGENCY** Resilient communities are built on strong economic foundations. From the colonial days on, volunteers received “charters” from the government to create savings banks, make microloans to tradesmen to start their own businesses, and “prevent pauperism.” Communities literally “grew their own” economic institutions and businesses, starting with their community assets and strengths. There was no one to bail them out. They had to rely on their own ingenuity and perseverance.
- **SOCIAL ADVOCACY** From the beginning of American history, philanthropy and volunteer action invested in the right of free speech and petitioning the government for grievances. The federal government soon subsidized a growing postal network, and volunteer advocacy organizations used it to advance civil rights, shape public policy and pursue legislative change. Social advocacy and community building then, as now, went hand in hand.



The *Technocratic* Age

When we reach into the more recent past – say, the past 100 years – for lessons on community building, we note some fundamental shifts:

- **FROM RETAIL TO WHOLESALE ASSET FORMATION** The ability of people to adapt to a rapidly growing and industrialized society at the turn of the 20th century required ever more formal programs of education, social amelioration and control. Major philanthropists, in concert with expanding public institutions, invested in the “wholesale” development of a vast educational, training and research infrastructure compared to the “retail” charitable transactions of goods and services between individuals in an earlier era.⁴ Informal, volunteer-driven community *building* morphed into more formal community *development*, with a growing dependence on trained professionals and “expert” knowledge.
- **THE TRIUMPH OF TECHNIQUE** The industrialization of America spawned a more centralized economy and a technological infrastructure characterized by efficiency and control. Whether in the domain of social engineering, the eradication of disease or increasing agricultural and industrial productivity, a growing cadre of experts approached all problems as questions of applying optimum techniques, or “the most efficient ensemble of means to achieve a given end.” The emphasis on applying these “scientific” practices through cost-benefit analysis found its way into formal community development projects as well.
- **THE CHANGING NATURE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL** The view of social capital as being primarily constructed in shared norms of reciprocity in voluntary civil society – a ‘Touquevillian’ view of democratic life – had to accommodate a growing technical and “managed” corporate-governmental apparatus that began to shape and regulate individual and collective capacity to successfully adapt to change. All sorts of organizational intermediaries and “brokers” of expertise and access to resources were gradually introduced into the more informal, voluntary and local mix of community building. In effect, the construction of social capital became *mediated* and *professionalized*.
- **FROM DIVERSITY TO PLURALISM** Diversity in the sense of different functions, structures, roles, relationships, responses and activities is different from diversity in the sense of *pluralism*, where members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious and social groups are able to maintain their particular identity and cultures within the confines of a larger society that itself might be remarkably uniform in its central economic and political functions. Arguably, investments in community development in the latter half of the 20th century, combined with the growing climate of identity and special interest politics, have contributed to a less, not more, diverse and adaptable society.

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From Culture to *Hyperculture*

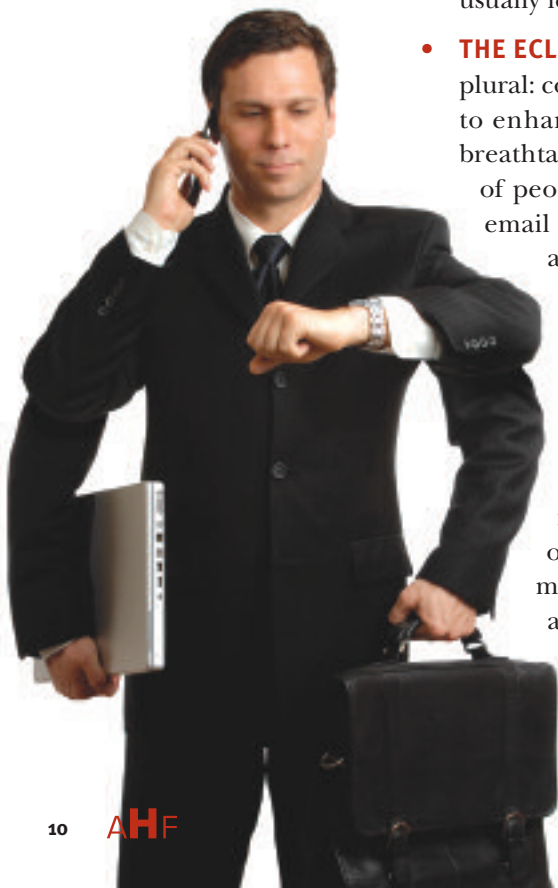
Today, many of us live and work in the *Hyperculture*, which is a kind of *semantic shorthand* to refer to the symbolic-mediated presentation of social, political and economic reality through modern commercial media in all of their myriad forms and venues.

This is a culture of hyperbole, or “hype.” It is characterized by exaggeration, speed, short-attention spans, compressed timeframes, “fast-breaking” events, fragmented lives and lifestyles, the desire for immediacy, and addiction to choice and novelty. It is thought by some to foster purposeless and frantic activity, and to destroy cultural memory and stability of self and society.⁵

When we combine characteristics of the Hyperculture with a growing (though hardly foreordained) global economic and regulatory order, a number of powerful forces come into play that will severely test the ability of communities to successfully adapt and thrive in the face of ceaseless change. Here are a few of them:

- **A SHRINKING FUTURE** In the Hyperculture, the future shrinks into the “Long Now.” Events and timeframes are compressed; the focus is on what is happening *now*. Events are spread across the surface of daily, weekly and quarterly short-term reports, all breathlessly recited with a degree of urgency that demands our immediate attention. “Long-term” commitments for some funders now mean a period of three to five years; progress is measured in six-month or annual intervals. Community agencies scramble to produce short-term assessment reports when they know full well that it takes literally a *lifetime* to foster individual and community resilience.
- **THE ASSAULT ON PLACE** In the new global economic order, physical place is increasingly contingent on economic criteria as local input and control take a back seat to system decisions made elsewhere. Whether it is a loss of well-paying jobs to outsourcing, the dominance of “big box” stores over main street merchants, or the decline of civic engagement and local leadership in the face of corporate dislocation, communities can be affected by larger forces over which they have little control. Place – physical location – becomes potentially fungible.
- **REMOTENESS⁶** The assault on place can result in *spatial remoteness*, where decisions are made physically remote from the communities and conditions in which members have a stake. Or there is *consequential remoteness*, where the consequences of decisions impact others but not necessarily those who make them (e.g., legislators who cut health services for the severely disabled). There is also *temporal remoteness*, such as deciding to expand Medicare now and letting future generations figure out how to pay for it. Finally, there is *virtual remoteness* – psychologically “disappearing” into a virtual, online world of connections that supersede social connectivity and reciprocity in physical settings. Communities high on the remoteness index are usually less adaptable and resilient than those lower on the scale.
- **THE ECLIPSE OF PUBLIC SPACE** In the Hyperculture, everything singular becomes plural: communities, not community; publics, not public. The promise of technology to enhance a common public life has instead appropriated public space into a breathtaking pluralism of private spaces occupied by these publics. Gather a group of people today to discuss public policy, and everyone is checking their private email and text messages. Walk into a public place like a restaurant or elevator, and many people will be having a private conversation on their cell phone. How does one “build community” in this kind of privatized hyperspace?
- **THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNITY** In the face of a shrinking sense of the future, the assault on place, remoteness, and the eclipse of public space, it is no wonder that many of us yearn for a “sense of community.” We want to “belong” somewhere and feel “at home.” Some still find this in a physical place; others find it in the experience of communities organized both in real-time and virtual settings by interests, ethnicity, religion, age, work and other dimensions. One of the issues we face today is building a sense of community in time- and space-bound settings where boundaries of self and place are fluid and unsettled – a characteristic of the emerging Hyperculture.

And so we return to the central questions we posed at the outset: What is community? How do we foster community health and resilience in face of some of the trends and challenges outlined here?



PRISON PRISM?

Evaluation: Prison or Prism?

Organizations like SLHI are up to their eyeballs in the literature and research on evaluation. We have conducted numerous formal evaluations of various programs like TAP or past community grants, replete with logic models, metric schematics and reports from evaluation consultants. Staff go to evaluation workshops, read a growing body of evaluation research, and attend confabs with organizations similar to ours to discuss new methods of improving our common “evaluative practice.”

This is useful – to a degree – and no doubt we will continue to refine our evaluation methods and explore new ways of demonstrating to ourselves and the communities we serve that we are “making a difference” and being “accountable” to serving the public good.

But whether these tools and approaches add anything fundamentally different from what common sense and daily practice already tell us – and whether we should encourage our community partners to adopt more formal evaluative practices in their own work – is another matter.

The Prison

If we’re not careful, evaluation can become a prison – a straightjacket – of metrics, forms and community indicators that we ask our community partners to adopt in assessing their performance. Time and again, we hear from community agencies, advocates and volunteers who say they spend as much time filling out some funder’s evaluation “matrix” as they do working with people in their community. They complain of filling out a multiplicity of forms, or having to devise some “logic model” of their work, or having to report in ever shorter timeframes for agencies that are obsessed with “monitoring” performance. Obviously none of this is the intent of funders and their hired evaluation guns, but it is often the result of formal evaluation practice. People end up *counting* and *accounting*, rather than *doing* and *learning*.

The Prism

Instead, evaluation should be a prism – a means of dispersing light into its constituent spectral colors, or a *rainbow* of perspectives. Prisms are also used to reflect light so we can study its components with different polarizations and determine how they interact, or how to reorient and reposition them. We should reflect on the light of evaluation *together*, weaving the language of counting and accounting with the language of local knowledge, stories, history and shared cultural mores and rituals.

Can the prism of evaluation be captured in one evaluation “report?” We are beginning to think not. For SLHI at least, the portfolio approach – with room for creativity, elasticity and ambiguity – is better.

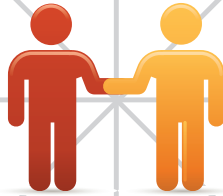
“A community doesn’t need to be taught a logic model process. I’m sorry, they just don’t.”

community center director

Threading *Healthy Communities*



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



COMMUNITY BUILDING



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING



The Web of Community Building

In our 2003 report, *Resilience: Health in a New Key*, we distinguished between community organizing, community building and community development:

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT A more formal approach to community building, with an emphasis on planning, structure, design and technical assistance. More **top-down**.

COMMUNITY BUILDING Establishing new connections, relationships and associations (collaborations, partnerships, etc.) both within and across communities to leverage assets and effect positive, goal-driven change. More **horizontal**.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING Grassroots efforts to organize citizens in politically powerful constituencies to effect change in their communities. More **bottom-up**.

Then, as now, we stressed the central message that we create healthy, resilient communities by engaging in *all three* of these strategies (not to mention ‘community engagement,’ ‘community empowerment,’ etc.), and not by relying on any one of them alone. In this conversation, we primarily use the term ‘community building’ as a placeholder for all three strategies, with the implicit understanding that ‘community organizing’ or ‘community development’ may be more applicable in specific situations.

“However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”

Winston Churchill

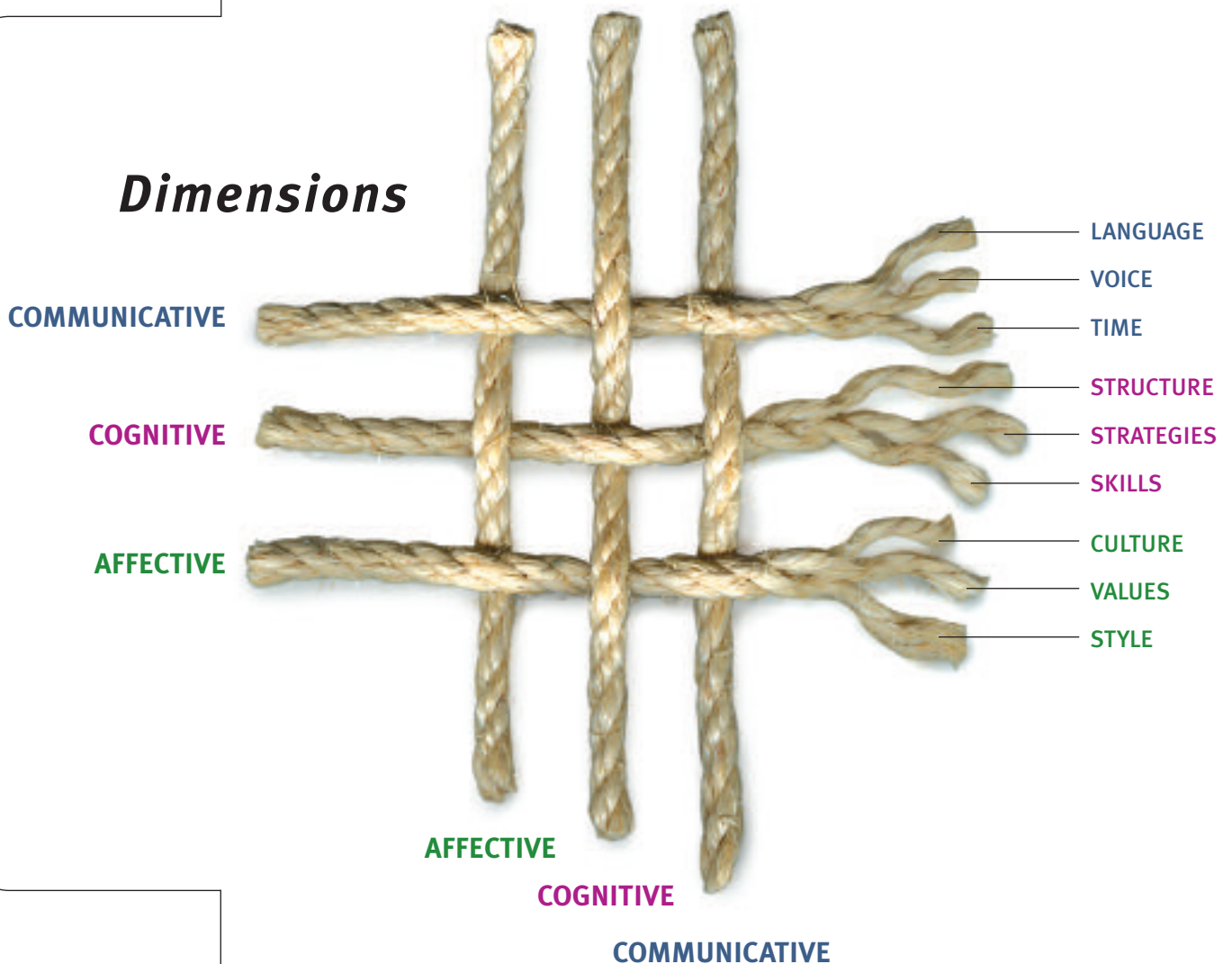
How do we thread healthy communities? What are we learning from our work in community building? What has been our shared experience with applying the principles and strategies of resilience and strength-based community development? How can we improve practice?

We posed these questions to 50 people in different *Health in a New Key* communities of place and practice. They represented a tapestry of roles, relationships and perspectives: community organizers, nonprofit agency execs, nonprofit consultants, community development corporations, city officials, government agencies, churches and community centers, evaluation experts, academic researchers, advocates, community health workers, health care and public health officials. We recorded and transcribed these individual and group discussions to glean common themes, issues and quandaries.

Then we wrestled with the central question of *framing*: What is the optimal *context* for a constructive conversation on fostering healthy communities from a strength-based perspective?

Three Dimensions of *Community Building*

There are any number of ways to frame a conversation around community building. Here, we have chosen to frame what we have learned around three principle dimensions:



These dimensions, as the figure above illustrates, are not discrete and separate but are interwoven and fall back through and around each other within a dense web of social connections. They arose naturally and spontaneously out of our community conversations, and not from mapping a more formalized structure onto the process.⁷ Admittedly, they are arbitrarily selected but not without reason: their interplay establishes the rich *context* in which all community conversations take place.

Context, not content, is what we are after here. We take up each of these dimensions in turn as a way of organizing the conversation, and not as a way of deconstructing it. We then conclude with a concise summary of lessons learned on how to thread resilient, healthy communities.

The Communicative Dimension

Language

Community arises out of social communication. The self – self identity, group identity – is social, and arises out of language. Whether they explicitly acknowledged it or not, all of the informants we interviewed were concerned with issues of language and identity.

What's Your Problem? (and How Can I Help You Fix it?)

Since all of our informants were either directly involved in or contemplating the application of the principles and strategies of strength-based community building in their respective areas, much of the discussion centered around what many perceived to be the corrosive effects of the dominant language of needs and deficits, and its attendant culture of service provider-client relationships.

Some representative comments:

"I try not to start a conversation with 'What's your problem, and how can I help you fix it?' Beware those that do." – nonprofit executive/consultant

"We don't have clients. These are our neighbors. These are our amigos and amigas." – neighborhood organizer

"What motivates people is being proactive, being engaged, taking leadership, connecting with each other. These are natural principles in psychology, which we often forget when we call people 'clients' or 'patients.'" – clinical psychologist/researcher

"If you can't find that same sense of community you grew up in, you look for it in other places. You look for it in your church, or you look for it in your professional organization, and too often our churches and professional organizations are more of a social service model than they are a community-based model." – pastor/community organizer



"The one critical issue is civic engagement. When you talk about a service agency that has been perceived as having a client-provider relationship in the community, it is not the same as civic engagement. It's one thing for a neighborhood resident to come to a service agency and identify a need and have that need met by a service. It's another thing for that same entity to tell that individual, 'You need to address policymakers and, using your voice, let them know what a vital component you are, and what you can contribute to the larger community.'" – community development intermediary(CDI) executive

"The influx of the new population that's come in [to Phoenix] is not as engaged in decision making. They see themselves as consumers first, citizens second." – CDI housing specialist

It is impossible, of course, to avoid the language of deficits and needs, and in some instances (disasters, gross inequities, etc.) it is entirely appropriate to call for the alleviation of suffering and meeting basic human needs. Informants agreed, however, that people become much more engaged and motivated to participate in purposeful community building when these same providers of necessary services employ the language and strategies of a strength – and not a deficit – based approach.

Some found it especially challenging to change the language and corresponding attitudes of their own employees and co-workers, many of whom are so embedded in a culture of needs and provider-client relationships that they are unable to see themselves as anything but a provider and/or regulator of discrete services.

What Are Your Metrics?

We recorded some spirited discussions on the often jarring disjunction between the language and formal models of funders, state agencies, community planners, consultants and academicians, and the everyday language and concerns of “street” organizers, community residents, faith-based groups, harried community development agencies, service providers and the like.

This often plays out as the clash between the formal, rationalist language of “scientific” or “strategic” planning, replete with an emphasis on measurable outcomes, reliability, replicability and scalability; and the considerably more informal, contextual, everyday language of the street – the shared stories, myths, hopes and dreams that engage and motivate people.

On the one hand:

“It’s a challenge to have a constructive conversation when you have two different languages: the language of quantitative metrics and the language of passion and all the people rallying round. They have to cross over and merge. It hasn’t come to that yet.” – community development director

“People have been studied to death. They do not need another ‘assessment.’” – community development corporation (CDC) executive

“You look at all these groups that bring resources, and they want us to produce ‘community’ or something, but it all has to fit in their paradigms and structures. Instead of community being made to fit into the paradigms, we have to get these organizations and funders to respond to community. We have to reverse it.” – community center director

“I have to file different reports for different funders and agencies, using different metrics, different logic models and change paradigms, when what I really need to be doing is being out in the community connecting people.” – nonprofit director

“We have this rational model, and it’s the same old thing. We have a theory, so let’s test this out. And the problem is, you need certain kinds of metrics to test it, and only certain things are measurable, or valid to measure, and as social scientists we bring in this whole bias against other kinds of knowledge, or things like religious values that are really important to people.” – program director

On the other hand:

“When you say the scientific approach can’t measure things like religious values or local knowledge and approaches, I disagree. It’s challenging, because not everything is measurable in the same way, and it’s hard to define the metrics, but a scientific approach doesn’t rule those things out.” — advocacy organization CEO

“Conceptually I buy into the notion that community building should be more scientific, but in real life I’m not sure we could ever get there.” — nonprofit director

These differences are real and not trivial. Some participants – funders, regulators, evaluators, researchers – are on the outside looking in. Their language models imply that problems can be clearly defined, quantified and managed. They often ignore the language and evidence of those on the inside looking out “that is more informal, experiential, tacit and explicitly value-laden.”⁸ As a result, people talk past each other, or sometimes don’t talk at all.

Then, too, there can be an imbalance of power between the outside people with the cash and expertise, and the inside people who “need” some of it. As some of the excerpted quotes imply, language can reinforce the imbalance of power and breed resentment. Despite the difference in language and where people “sit” in the community building conversation, all of the informants agreed that starting that conversation in the language of a strength-based approach was more conducive to bridging power relations than the outside-in language of risk and its correlate risk assessment strategies.

Voice

Much of the conversation was imbued with the language and values of *listening* to the community: what does the community define as its strengths, its needs and central issues, and how do we (conveners, funders, policy makers, service providers, etc.) make sure that the community *voice* is heard and *owns* the community building process?

A Collective Voice

Just what is the community voice?

“What is the voice of community? We try to speak with one voice, but it’s hard because you have all these different voices trying to speak at the same time, and they don’t always agree or understand each other or even speak the same language.” — nonprofit director

“It’s not about one voice. It’s about a collective voice that really changes what happens.”

— hospital community benefits manager



"We're all members of multiple communities. And the challenge is, which of those communities do you take responsibility for, for being in and for improving and making a commitment to? All of them?" — nonprofit CEO

| Some have been more successful than others in establishing the voice of the community:

"The [name of community] has lots of individuals and families who are vocal. They don't hesitate to let their opinions be known. We have a lot of community-type meetings [examples given]...where about 30 to 50 people will show up, including different service providers, so it's sort of speaking with one voice. Different forums bring different messages, but the underlying message in all of those is that we [any specific organization] don't need to be the answer for homelessness or some other situation. We listen, we participate, but it's not healthy to see your organization as the solution for every problem. Things have to come from the community."

— community health program director

A Voice of Consequence

It is not enough to find the community's collective voice. That voice has to be *heard* both in and *across* communities to have real consequence. According to some informants, this can be unsettling:

"I'm not sure some of the government agencies want communities to organize because then they get a voice, and they start demanding things, and government doesn't want to raise those expectations." — nonprofit consultant

"Some communities are well organized and have the level of sophistication to connect with city and private resources, but poor communities typically don't have that capacity. It's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. A community has to find that voice." — city official



Authenticity and Resonance

Implicit in the discussion was the assumption that individuals and families are the “authentic” voice of communities-as-place, and “organizations” of all types are not part of the community in the same way. Organizations that wish to engage in community building in communities with strong local identities can start by using members within the community itself:

"Messages about health risk, behaviors and such are much more powerful and take hold when they are told by other members of the community. That's one of the reasons the promotoras programs have been so effective in Hispanic communities." — community development official

Ironically, many of the informants saw themselves as service providers first, and as legitimate community members second, underscoring the central problem of establishing a core individual or organizational identity in a world of multiple, shifting roles and relationships, where “voice” can be fluid and unsettled.

We might posit this tenet of the emerging Hyperculture: *Authenticity* – where something comes from – is less important than *resonance* – where something goes. Individuals and families may be thought to constitute the authentic voice of community, but unless they are connected to economic, social and political resources of consequence, they are unable to fully participate in, and take ownership of, a common civic life.

Engaging and empowering people to establish and sustain these connections is the essence of threading healthy communities.



Time

Time and time again, time was a subject of discussion on how to foster healthy, resilient communities. Informants agreed that unless you have time, take time, and use time wisely, your community building efforts won't be successful.

This may seem obvious, but it turns out that, just like the use of language, not everyone is on the same definitional and perceptual page when it comes to time. Misunderstanding and frustration can easily result when people on different clocks are expected to work together.

Time and Trust

There was a great deal of talk about the necessity of establishing strong bonds of *trust* between community building participants, without which nothing of any lasting significance can be achieved. And it takes time to build trust – not just any kind of time, but *face time*.

“People have to really spend time together to trust each other. It’s face time, which is not today’s world. It’s all email.” – community development director

“Community building, establishing that trust, takes a very long time, and if the motivation isn’t a motivation that’s good for everyone, it’s going to show up. It always does.” – neighborhood association president

“It takes time – face time – to build a relationship of open communication and trust between agencies. It takes a lot of communication to work through, and you have to include a lot of active community involvement and feedback in the process.” – nonprofit executive

As a convener and facilitator of community building activities, the importance of face time in building trust is not lost on SLHI, which held over 300 meetings in its offices last year, the great majority of which involved food. By providing an environment for people to meet face-to-face and break bread together, we both gain the trust and acceptance of local partner organizations and leaders, and nurture bonds of social reciprocity among participants. This in turn enhances trust and communication in the daily work of community building.

Time and Control

Community building cannot easily be fit into neatly defined beginning and ending points. But funders, city officials and others who seek to foster the health of local communities are often compelled to operate under a more formal and tightly defined clock of fiscal year, grant cycle, project schedules, evaluation exercises and the like. Out of the necessity to account for, assess and control the deployment of resources over time, they impose their operational clock on the community. This can create friction and even be counterproductive:

“One of the challenges working in communities is that they get used to people coming in, and even if they do get excited in the beginning, they often know that this is a project that is going to last a year or two, and then it’s gone. So why are they going to get excited and motivated to change, when they’re used to all this starting and stopping?” — community project director

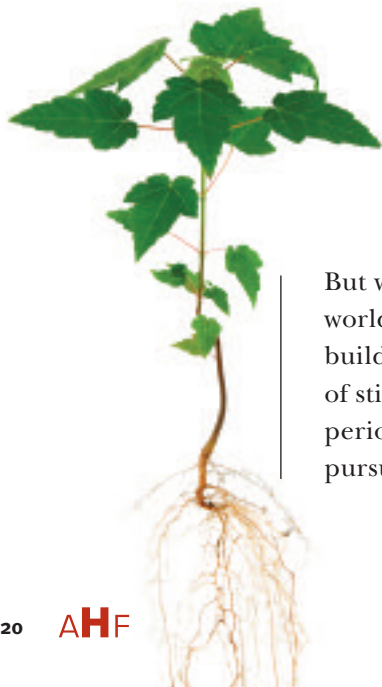
“One year grants are draining on everybody. Sometimes you’re just getting your staff together halfway through the grant period.” — nonprofit director

“It takes time to build partnerships, and sometimes it starts out as a forced partnership because of some grant requirement, and it doesn’t work, and you have to go back and start over, but the project period may be over.” — development director

All informants agreed that community building works best when funders and other outside agencies commit to it for the long haul:

“I’m lucky. I’m in a project that has longer term funding, and it’s given us the security to get through our initial struggles and make changes, knowing we had the support to experiment and try something else. We’re a lot more successful today because we had that time.” — association director

But what is “longer term” funding in today’s time-compressed, results-expected-yesterday world? For foundations and other agencies that have resources to invest in community building activities with local partners, it is a delicate balancing act to weigh the benefits of sticking with one area of focus or a small, selected number of projects for a longer time period, compared to sowing seeds across a broader field for a shorter time period and pursuing those that take root and start to grow.



Time and Energy

All of the informants gave eloquent testimony on the day-to-day heavy lifting that goes into community building at the local level, whether they were trying to meet payroll, manage volunteers, provide services, deal with political issues, or simply finding the time and energy to be present and purposeful in the world:

“One of the central challenges [in community building] is people not having the time or energy to do something in the community that’s beyond surviving the daily tasks of taking care of the kids, going to work, dealing with the house. You can’t carve out time and energy if it’s already being used up.” — nonprofit executive

“How do you flip that switch in each individual to turn them from an inward-besieged person that’s hanging on into someone who believes they have the time and energy to go out and accomplish something in a world they see as monolithic?” — program director

“In our work, it’s one person at a time. Nobody is the same. Everyone has a different life story. We try to get our staff to listen to people’s stories and be where they are in that moment. But it takes a lot of time, and you don’t always have it. There are no shortcuts.”

— agency executive

“Community building is slow work, and that can be frustrating, especially when you’re working with a lot of volunteers, who can leave just as fast as they join, and you have to deal with all that. No wonder people get burned out.” — nonprofit executive

People may be on different clocks, but they are on the clock nevertheless or, in the language of the Hyperculture, on the *Grid*. In terms of promoting and sustaining health, we have known for centuries that humans run down, wear out and turn off sooner rather than later if they aren’t nourished, replenished and restored physically, emotionally and spiritually. There is a natural cycle of renewal in all adaptable, sustainable systems, and the imposition of clock time can reek havoc with it.

Much of the time in community building, we are on the grid. And if we want to foster healthy individuals and communities, we occasionally have to get off.

That, too, takes time.



The Cognitive Dimension

“Community” is the effect of “building” – not the cause.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)

The communicative dimension – think of it as the lifeblood of community building – flows through the cognitive dimension, a dense network of social, economic and environmental structures, roles and relationships that both effect and respond to change. This is the “stuff” of community building – the projects and programs, partnerships and collaborations, systems and sectors that we work *on, in, through* and *with* to get something done *together*.

Structure

Talking about community is not at all like building it. ‘Build’ is an action – a verb. For one informant, community itself is a verb:



“Community is action. It is belonging in action. That action is the process of engaging individuals in a common purpose, utilizing the resources, making them feel important. People have their struggles, but they are also the ones who have answers.” – community organizer

- | Building community is not any *one* thing, but many things. Still, we have to start somewhere:

“You start with the task. People may see it differently, and have a different language for it, but what is the task at hand? This is what we’re working on, and we bring all of our languages to the table.” – psychologist/researcher

- | Even if your first task is to talk about what the task is, you need structure:

“You have to have structure. If you call a meeting and have a bunch of people, and you don’t have structure, you are pretty much not going to get anywhere. But the structure needs to be open-ended enough to allow for creativity, and maybe some of the first exercises that we miss sometimes are just basic exercises in listening and understanding before you get into anything at all heavy.” – public policy researcher

- | Further, the task – the activity – should be something meaningful:

“I’m not a big believer in team-building exercises. I’m a believer in working together on something. Like, when my daughter and I go down to the [name of agency] with her school friends, and when you’re in an environment where you work together to get something accomplished, even one night’s meal. That’s when you build relationships. Not some kind of staged activity, but something meaningful.” – community development director

Maps and Models

Like the use of different language models and assumptions in the communicative dimension, there are competing models and assumptions of the structure of community building in the cognitive dimension. One informant with knowledge of more formal community development activities in the 1960s through the 1980s made the following distinction:

“What’s commonly thought of as community empowerment is a first step towards community building and community development as we think about it. It’s difficult to do it the other way, starting with community development. You know, like in the urban renewal days, where people made decisions like, we’ve got an idea here, we’ll tear up this neighborhood and tear up that neighborhood and put a freeway in here and relocate a bunch of people, and maybe build some high rises, low-income rent, and make it a real community. And how does that work? Well, it doesn’t.” — public policy researcher

The same informant went on to describe what he took to be the optimal model for community building:

“If you had a formula, an equation for community building, then the bottom-up stuff suggests that a heavy weight in that formula should be the development of genuine feelings of community, self-worth, empowerment, ability to get things done, efficacy, inclusion. If you aren’t working in that zone first, I think you’ve got a problem.”

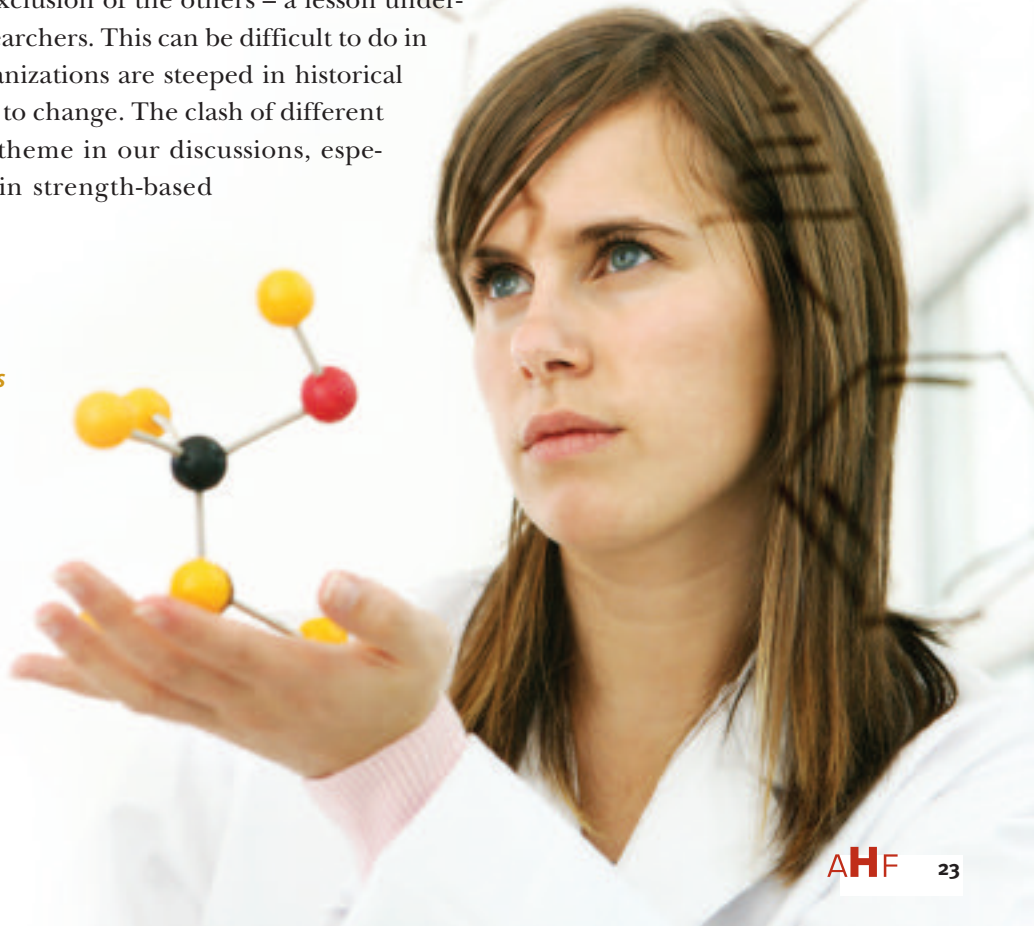
— public policy researcher

Service Agencies

The potential mismatch between the bottom up (community organizing), across (community building) and top-down (community development) structural models comes when one approach is used to the exclusion of the others – a lesson underscored by both practitioners and researchers. This can be difficult to do in practice, where individuals and organizations are steeped in historical roles and relationships that are hard to change. The clash of different structural models was a recurring theme in our discussions, especially the role of service agencies in strength-based community building:

“People get used to doing business in a certain way. We invite them to do things with us, but sometimes, understandably, they fall back on their traditional patterns, which are more like giving programs to the community rather than working alongside the community. They’re working on it, though.”

— community center director



“Social service agencies that focus on people’s needs are really not helping to build people or community. That’s not to say that they are not a safety net or not needed, but there are healthy and vibrant communities where you are hard-pressed to find a social service agency. So you would think if the most serviced community in the city is the most problem community, there’s a disconnect between services equating health.” — pastor/community organizer



“The inertia of the social service system is an amazing force. We’ve created this huge social service system that is basically an employment system. It’s a significant part of the GNP of this country, and it’s tough to mess with. If you look at what keeps executive directors [in this system] up at night, it’s not, ‘Gee, how can I do Health in a New Key to be more effective.’ It’s ‘how do I keep my employees employed?’” — community organizer

“My experience with city government varies, depending on the personalities involved. I’m not sure some officials understand the dynamics of what is happening in this neighborhood – the large number of Latinos, and neighborhood association mostly made up of gray hairs. Plus some officials have this old paradigm – experts coming out to fix problems. One thing that really irritates me is people who don’t live in the area coming in and making the action plan, and not really engendering real, significant community input.” — community center director

Community Wells

At the local level, space- and time-bound communities are enhanced by the presence of accessible and trusted “wells” of information, services and social connections. This is especially true in communities characterized by high rates of transience and diverse populations such as the Phoenix metro region.

The nature of these wells is changing in a drive in, drive out world:

“When I grew up, the village well was the neighborhood school, and every parent walked their kid to the same school, and parents met at the same place and they were all at the PTA meetings, and there was a sense of community. Well, community schools kind of went by the wayside for the sake of integration and other things. Even many of our churches are now metropolitan in nature. People drive in from all over, so it really doesn’t have a community sense.” — pastor/community organizer

Community wells are organizations that engage people, and that people trust: |

“The reason we’ve had some success is that the community has learned to trust us, not only as an organization but as people. We go out and we say we’re going to do it, and together we make it happen. We do it with our partners, and there is a confidence in the community that we collectively have the ability to make things happen.”

— community health program director

“There are a lot of mental health issues in this community stemming from immigration problems, people being afraid to drive, to go out, people losing jobs, even losing hope. And our Center is an oasis. A lot of people who come here for the classes and socializing, they tell me, ‘I like to come here because I can free my mind. I relax here.’ When I saw those ladies sewing last week, I was like, Man, I haven’t seen this much joy since the first grade, like the first time you ever jumped into a swimming pool.” — community center director

Communities and Fear

Place is absolutely central to the idea of building healthy communities, because place is where the impact of macro social, economic and political forces plays out in everyday life.

Chief among these in Arizona communities are the effects of immigration laws and policies. Informants we interviewed who work in communities with large numbers of undocumented immigrants spoke of a climate of pervasive fear that made it hard to “build” a sense of community:

“Many people in this community are undocumented. They live in constant fear. They need medical services but are afraid to go to a clinic. They need police for community safety but are afraid to call the police. I had a woman who was having a lot of bleeding. I told her I would go with her to the clinic, but she said no. The next night she got really sick and had to call an ambulance, but she was really scared.” — promotora (Hispanic health worker)

Immigration laws and policies can work against authentic community engagement in surprising ways:

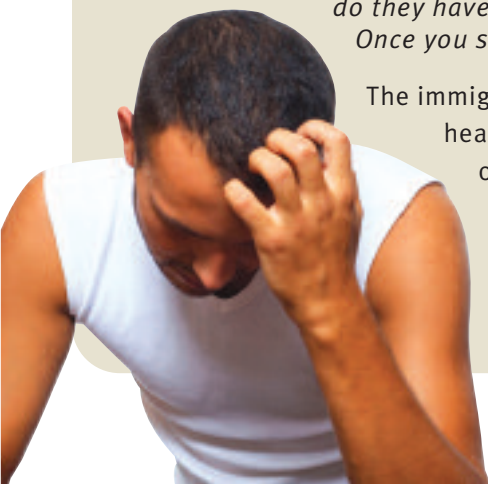
“We could definitely have more people from the community volunteering, but they can’t be a volunteer here unless they are fingerprinted. That’s a definite barrier.” — community center director

It is hard to stay healthy and sane in a climate of constant fear. And yet people still do:

This community [comprised primarily of undocumented immigrants] has real fear, but what else do they have? And of course, they have resources and capacity once you start asking. Once you start asking, you find out about it.” — clinical psychologist/researcher

The immigration issue underscores the central connection between community health and basic economic and political tensions. Those on the front line of community building are compelled to organize and address those tensions if they ever hope to make any headway in improving the lives of individuals and families.

It’s not just important. It’s critical.



| One informant pointed out the importance of establishing a diversity of wells:

“The thing about having a resilient community, a healthy community, is having a diverse source of wells, because any individual well is going to fit some people, but not everybody.”

— neighborhood association volunteer

| Time and again, respondents came back to the difficulty of establishing community wells in a service-oriented structure:

“Agencies that see themselves as primarily providing services to clients can’t get to the community engagement and trust piece. When you ask people what their strengths are, and they list all the services that are provided to them, you know you don’t have that engagement, that empowerment.” — community organizer

Families and Neighborhoods

Public and private agencies provide services to families – the core social structure – in specific physical places, or neighborhoods. All manner of other organizational structures sit in this space – churches, community centers, schools, businesses, community development corporations, etc. – but it is with families in neighborhoods where the work of community building occurs.

There were varying views of how well this work is going:



“In our area, I’m not sure the neighborhood association reflects the entire population or even a fraction of it. It’s almost like it’s kind of an elitist group that wants to control certain things going on in the community. As a community development corporation, we’re trying to bring folks together to appreciate the different cultures and ethnicities, and the neighborhood association has kind of separated itself from that.” — CDC executive

“It’s astounding how well Phoenix has done with organizing the city by neighborhoods and neighborhood associations. It’s easier for people to organize this way and talk about issues and services in their particular geographical community.” — hospital executive

“What’s happening in the Valley is that we are very big. We have a lot of transition and mobility that cause us to become schizophrenic in how we identify the community. It’s not the traditional way, like when you knew everybody around you, and your extended family lived not far away. You may not have any strong ties to your neighborhood.” — hospital community benefits manager

“The whole premise [of community building] starts from the community-out, not a top-down basis. Our partners and ourselves support a lead agency in a neighborhood that can really do the community engagement, the community organizing, the planning component with all aspects of the community... But the truth is, not all neighborhoods have such an agency. You may find a good CDC, a good social service provider, but the critical part is the civic engagement piece, and that’s less transaction-oriented.” — CDI executive

Despite issues with identifying the right lead agencies or working with neighborhood associations, many participants spoke with great feeling and passion about families, and their resilience in the face of perceived deficits and adversity:

“We have a lot of loyal, dedicated families in the community. They may not have what others might think of as the necessities, but they are very supportive of each other. People look out for each other. It’s not uncommon in the evenings to see little streets with everyone out on the front porch and everybody talking to each other. Lots of other communities with more of the material necessities don’t have this kind of community.” — community health program director

“Our families are a great strength. They stick together, and the big difference is, the children are taught to be respectful. Families are trying to stay on track and just be respectful. They struggle, and it’s not easy, and they might have to work two or three jobs, and of course immigration is a major factor, but it’s amazing how much resilience some of these families have.” — community center director

“I grew up in a so-called poor community in south Phoenix, and even though we didn’t have a lot of money, we got things done. We didn’t realize we were as poor as we were until somebody labeled us that way. We were rich in family. We were rich in relationships. You don’t have to be top of the line to have peace of mind.” — CDC executive

Informants in the clinical research community also reminded us of the extraordinary ability of individuals and families to stay engaged and proactive, even in the most dire of circumstances:

“I always refer [in my work with patients suffering from post-war disorders] to the example of the boy who played his violin whenever his city was bombed [in WWII]. This wasn’t a stress response. He was proactive, engaged. People find resources within themselves to be in hell, so to speak, and they come out well.”

— clinical psychologists/researcher



Strategies

Strategies and structures flow in and out of each other in the process of community building. We devise strategies within structures, and we employ strategies to create structures.

Collaboration

As a noun, collaboration is a structure. As a verb, collaborate is a strategy. To create the structure from the strategy, it is necessary to first build a basic level of community engagement and trust, which came up repeatedly in our conversations. Our respondents were frank about the “forced” nature of collaborations often required by funders, agencies and others who want to “build” community:

“The problem we face in my organization is, we think we have the answer, which is all of you have to work together, and then we wonder why others think it feels coercive.” — program director

“There’s this idea that what you believe is what everybody else should believe. That’s not a strength-based model, for sure.” — nonprofit agency executive

“Everybody wants you to collaborate, collaborate, collaborate. And that’s fine, but when it’s forced, when people have different agendas, it doesn’t always work.” — nonprofit consultant

| Collaborations – partnerships – are like a marriage:

“Maybe you don’t need to be in a partnership or collaboration all the time. Being in a partnership is like being in a marriage. You have to work at it all the time. Sometimes you want a divorce, and maybe you should get one. Sometimes you have to do it on your own.” — hospital community benefits manager

| Further, not all the stakeholders are on the same page in terms of resources, skills, political power and social connections:

“Sometimes your partners in the community aren’t always fair players. You can get the short end of the stick in these relationships. They may have more resources, more clout. They say they want to collaborate, but what they really are interested in is control and taking the credit for success. It happens, you know.” — nonprofit executive

| But when collaboration works – and there are many examples of successful collaborations in the Valley – it’s a beautiful thing:

“We have a leg up because there is a large safety net of providers in this area, and a lot of them are here for the long haul and have a shared mission of helping families the best they can. There are times when we don’t have the finances or capacity to do something, but then one of our partners does, and we’ve just learned to trust each other. We’re going to problem solve together if it’s something we all want badly enough.” — community outreach worker



“There is just something unique about this community. We had the judges, the heads of agencies, community service clubs, police chiefs, law enforcement, probation, all across the board. It was amazing to me that here we are talking about the betterment of the community, and you have all these folks at the table with minimal turf issues.” — behavioral health center director

Organizing and Planning

Strategies, organizing and planning may seem obvious enough in any purposeful human activity, but the informants came back to their importance in the community building process time and again:

“I’m a firm believer that there is one ingredient that we’re missing, and that’s enough people who are actually doing neighborhood organizing. The job is to connect people in the neighborhood and begin to do the work.” — community organizer

Some stressed the importance of organizing to build a political power base that enables communities to acquire access and influence:

“Politicians and city officials pay attention when you can turn out hundreds of people at public meetings and hearings about things like housing, jobs and the condition of neighborhoods. Grassroots organizing works. We’ve seen it.” — nonprofit executive

Others stressed a more consensus-based approach to organizing to build relationships, find common ground both internally and outside the community, and to establish partnerships:

“This isn’t about marching on City Hall. This is about what we can do with what we already have in our neighborhood. We may need to strategically partner with City Hall, but we want to do that in a true collaborative model, and not just demanding services or a response....Organizing around power and confrontation is appropriate in many instances, but we think that is organizing with one hand tied behind your back. We think there’s a lot of things citizens can do just by coming together. We need to work in that part first, and then for the citizens themselves to identify where there may be some pressure points they need to deal with.” — community organizer

One informant bemoaned this more “corporate” model of organizing and leadership development:

“Some [organizations and leaders] seem to be taking more of a corporate model and less of an activist model, and that may be a sign of the times. Personally, I would say that would be a big loss, because one of the things about activism is that sometimes you buck the system, but for good reason. It shouldn’t be just to complain.” — psychologist/researcher

Regardless of the approach to organizing – and community building needs both – the process starts with active listening:

“This work [strength-based community building] is just active listening. You learn more by listening to the people in the community than you do by offering education or some kind of service. Unless you wait for them to uncover how you might be helpful, there is not going to be a change in that community. Basically you [the agency] are not going to be the driving force. It’s really hard for them [agencies] to get their head around that.” – community development director

The process also requires thoughtful planning, but of a certain approach and type:

“We need to do thoughtful planning. But do it in pencil, so you can erase it.” – nonprofit consultant

“What you sometimes see is the agency or funder that comes into a community and says, hey, we need to do some planning here, and it turns out that they already have a plan and want you to buy into it. That’s not what I would call a strength-based approach.” – nonprofit executive

“We do planning for things like biological disasters, and that’s one thing, but community planning for things like neighborhood safety or increasing volunteerism, that’s another. It’s not just bringing together experts and agencies. It’s more participatory and inclusive, which means it’s more fluid and takes more time.” – public health official

Slicing Up Success

Nothing succeeds like success. This point was brought up repeatedly by the informants:

“Part of the sustainable communities process is having some early successes.” – CDI housing specialist

“We celebrate our victories. We’ve been working on getting more affordable housing in the community, and just did a deal with the City. It’s huge. We know we can do more.” – CDC executive

One community achieves success by slicing it up into doable pieces:

“You have to empower versus enable. Everybody feels like here is this big salami, and instead of tackling the whole thing you have to slice it up into smaller pieces, and everybody is responsible for their little slice and then it’s not so overwhelming. Yet they all feel like if they do their little slice, they contribute to the whole. So it’s helping to slice it up and serve it, and then everybody can come to the table and be part of it.”

– community health program director



This same community – one of the more longstanding and notable successes in the Valley
– tries never to ask others to do what they can do themselves:

“We have good relations with the City, but we don’t ask them to do stuff for us that we can do ourselves. We invite the City to participate, to help plan, to provide expertise, maybe to bring resources to bear we don’t know about, but everything still has to come from the community. The [name of] project is a great example. The traffic flow study that came out of residents’ concern for the high level of pedestrian accidents was an eye opener for everyone, including the City. The lighting was a big issue, and the City took the lead and wrote a huge grant for street illuminated lighting. And those were resources that didn’t come from any of us asking the City to do that. It came because they participated in the community process, heard the concerns, identified the issue and helped to solve the problem.” – community health program director

Attraction, Not Promotion

Successful community building is due in part to both tapping into the strengths and assets of the community itself and then linking those assets to outside sources of resources and influence that can leverage significant change. People said it in different ways, but one strategy to build these bridges with external resources is to model, rather than promote, a healthy community:

“We’re hopeful that at least ten women will self-identify as health leaders in their neighborhoods and start health hubs around topics like a diabetes support group, a walking club, or cooking and nutrition. The promotoras will help to support these health hubs, which are really about neighborhood ownership of health issues. We’re optimistic that more of that will happen as funders say, ‘We like what you’re doing; what do you want to do with the community?’ instead of ‘Here is what we want the community to look like.’ Communities don’t always look like what someone thinks a nice community, a perfect community, should be.”

– community center director



“I didn’t call city government and tell them to get out here and look at this mess. What we did was provide them with an instrument that went through the City Manager’s office to the police, through the Council, to the Mayor and said, these are our stats. Don’t lump us with somebody else. This is what we look like, and we’re going to take action. If there is anybody out there who wants to play, give us a call. We got lots of calls.” – neighborhood association volunteer

As so many told us, attraction starts with strengths, not deficits:

“I look at someone and think, if I shake this tree, what is going to come down?...We want to tap into the reservoir of community. We want to know exactly what is it that you like to do; what is it you can do; what is it that you can teach; what is it that you can’t do; what is it that you don’t want to do; and then the final wrap-up question is, what is your dream?” – community center director

Skills

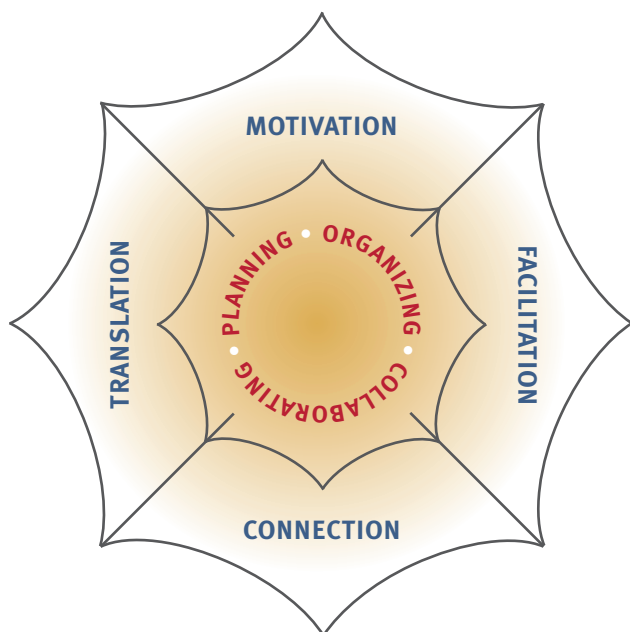
Just as healthy, resilient communities are composed of diverse individuals, groups, structures and strategies, so, too, do they depend on a diverse set of skills that bridge the communicative, cognitive and affective dimensions of the community building process.

Cataloging those skills is beyond the scope of this conversation, but what emerged in the interviews and focus groups was a central focus on the importance of *leadership* threaded along and within a matrix of four dimensions: *Motivation*, *Connection*, *Translation* and *Facilitation*. These dimensions, in turn, are spread out across the activities of organizing, collaborating and planning – the structures and strategies of community organizing, community building and community development respectively (see below).

Motivation

The sense of motivation that drives direct engagement in the day-to-day work of community building, and the ability to motivate others to join in a common task, transcends the limiting boundaries of class, gender, resources and style. It arises out of the opportunity to actively engage a wider world with passion and focus:

A Leadership Skills Matrix



“There’s a word in Spanish that I like a lot. It’s ‘brotar,’ which means when a flower or something else buds, sprouts or comes forth. That’s what we hope to see in community building, in leadership development.” – community center director

“This [project] is going to work, because leaders in the partner groups are all strong, passionate, mission-driven people. Leadership is a huge factor.” – community development director

“In our studies of leaders [in the Hispanic community], there is a deep root of goal-directedness. It’s hard to know what the right term is, but it’s like meaningful focus. Leaders exercise resilience by focusing on something that’s really important to them, and that becomes the driving force that keeps them going, no matter what.” – psychologist/researcher

Connection

In the networked environment of community building, the leader’s ability to connect people, resources and ideas can be more important than being a spokesperson, manager or even a facilitator:

“This is where the gold is – teaching and providing resources, and connecting people. Once we connect people, we build the relationships, the healthy community. You build that interconnectedness, where people then rely on each other instead of relying on the government coming in to fix everything.” – neighborhood association head

“We fund an agency, and they begin to work in a neighborhood. The first step [in community building] is to develop that resident-leadership team. And they do that by connecting people with each other.” — funder

“You need that threshold of real resources, real money that you can leverage. There is plenty of community concern and desire out there, and you can use that, too, but in the end you need to find adequate resources and connect people to them.” — public health official

“You have to mobilize political will, connect people to power and influence. I know it makes some people uncomfortable, but that’s how you influence outside agendas that impact your community. Like immigration.” — community organizer



Translation

In today’s hypercharged, fragmented and increasingly transitory environment, not everyone comes from the same place, shares the same space, speaks the same language or occupies the same rung on the social and economic ladders of opportunity. Much of the conversation around the importance of leadership to the community building process highlighted the special skills of speaking and motivating across community boundaries and groups, which one informant characterized as *translation*:

“This work [community building] is a series of translations. So you need translators, not just translators who can wed action to ideas, but who listen at the same time and maximize the creative energy of the group.” — public policy researcher

Or, in the words of many informants, getting things, done, making things happen: |

“Every community needs a champion, or champions, someone or some organization that steps up to the plate and can make things happen, get things done. A lot of great community building projects wither away when the champion leaves. That’s why leadership development is so important.” — CDC executive

Even when the champion sticks around for a long time, there’s a potential downside: |

“Your greatest strength can sometimes be your greatest weakness. [Name of organization] is one of the greatest assets of the community, and sometimes there’s this feeling, well, you know, they will just take care of things. Like you can propose this interesting program, say, focusing on teen pregnancy, but who is going to step forward and provide leadership in the community? So people will say, great idea, and then they leave the room and say, ‘let me know how I can help.’”

— community health program director

Whether these champions – these community translators of ideas into action – sit inside or outside the community makes a difference:

“We did a project with border communities, and we put together some data that ran counter to conventional images about these communities, pointing out high home ownership rates, high citizenship rates, very high bilingual rates, lower school dropout rates than the rest of the state. We did presentations, people were interested in the results, it was strength-based and felt empowering, but then it was sort of like, where do you go from there? We never really figured it out. The trick is to find leaders in the communities who can keep it going and take next steps. It’s challenging.” – nonprofit executive

Facilitation

Motivating others, connecting people to resources, organizing collective efforts and translating ideas into action are all part of leadership-as-facilitation, or moving things toward a common goal as effectively as possible.

This is a deeper notion than the technical notion of facilitation, where a professional “facilitator” might be hired to run a meeting or help to organize a strategic planning exercise. The skilled leader-as-facilitator has the power to *convene*:

“I always like to refer to John Gardner’s definition of leaders we need now as ‘community guardians,’ people who can convene and focus on the greater good of the community, people who can frame the issues, ask the right questions instead of providing all the answers, and move things forward.” – public policy researcher

“Calling people together has to do with status or whatever, and then running the meeting, that’s more technical. But inevitably with people like [name of well-known community leader], you end up saying we accomplished something today, and we’re going to accomplish something tomorrow.” – public policy researcher

This same informant expanded on this deeper notion of facilitation: As important as the concepts of community champions and community guardians are, many informants returned repeatedly to the central notion of taking a strength-based approach as the key to fostering sustainable, healthy communities. Everyone in the community has skills to contribute. They need to be identified, encouraged and asked to be facilitators themselves:

“When [Name of individual] came to this church, he was homeless and didn’t have a job. But he had a desire to be part of this community of faith, and we found out he had a talent for numbers and liked working with people. So we put him in to work in this [VITA] program, and he just blossomed. Plus he helped a lot of people in the process. For me, that’s the essence of the strength-based approach.” – CDC executive

“It’s possible to do all sorts of meaningful interventions, but don’t dress it up and say we’re coming in to intervene here, bringing in the troops. It’s facilitating the asset structure that you find anywhere. You can find it anywhere.” – clinical psychologist/researcher

The Affective Dimension

The communicative and cognitive dimensions of community building swim within the deep sea of the affective dimension – the “water” of feelings, emotions, culture mores and beliefs, self-identity, deeply held values, strong and weak ties to others, and our modes and styles of being present in the world – our *presentation* within it.

Many of the comments recorded in our interviews and focus groups under the communicative and cognitive dimensions could just as easily have been recorded under the affective dimension, so tightly interwoven is our language and social structures with the realm of emotion, feelings, values and beliefs. Nevertheless, we were able to tease out some general observations in this arena that draw some of the earlier observations together.

Culture

Community building takes passionate, committed people, and they often come from quite different cultures – mores, language, beliefs and expectations.

“Reason is the slave of the passions, and can pretend to no other office than to serve and obey them.”

David Hume

“In this [newer] project, we’ve seen some tension between African-Americans and Hispanics. I’m not sure what to attribute it to, except they come from different local cultures and don’t spend that much time together. You can usually work through this, but it takes time.” – CDI executive

“There is no such thing as adoption in Mexico. There is foster care, but it’s not the same. In this [Hispanic] culture, taking care of somebody else’s children is very common, but not doing it formally through a court process. Historically, it’s been hard to get first and second generation Hispanic families to engage with a state government agency.”

– development director

“Our [city] government has its own culture. It prides itself on operating well, and it takes a methodical view of how to improve. So it moves very slowly, everything by consensus, and sometimes it is hard for government to react to major changes and how the world works. There’s this idea that we’ll take care of the future by operating efficiently and effectively. It’s not a criticism. It’s just this muddle-through, incremental approach to things.” – CDI executive

“There’s just a culture of community participation here across a broad spectrum of people and organizations. I came from a similar position in [name of Arizona city], and they just didn’t have that same history of working across groups to get something done.” – behavioral health director



Gender

A number of informants remarked on the disproportionate share of women involved at the local neighborhood level in community building activities, especially in Hispanic communities:

“Most of the people coming to our center for the classes and socializing are women. That’s because many of them are still home with the children, and the men are working outside the community, but that’s starting to change with some of the evening activities.” — community center director



“Working with men is a whole different culture, okay? They will take information from him [a male community organizer] far better than they will from me [a female community organizer].” — neighborhood association head

The Haves and the Have-Nots

A few informants drilled down past culture to basic inequities in economics and power:

“Culture, values are important, but to me it comes down to the haves and have-nots. In almost every community, the battle lines are over where resources go and where they don’t go. The community becomes a series of power relationships instead of cooperative building relationships.” — nonprofit director

“People move up, they develop ties outside their community, they get ahead. And then they often break those ties with the local culture and move out, and both they and the community lose something. It’s there, you know, this sense of loss.” — nonprofit executive

The Observer and Observed

Just as in the clash of different language models in the communicative dimension, we noted the clash of broader cultural models of values and beliefs in the affective dimension:

“You’ve got the people who study things and the people who do things. And the people who study things, or who are paid to put together all these programs, come from an entirely different place than most of the people living in these communities. We [people who study things] know we have to adapt our models to the local environment and culture, but I’d have to say many of us aren’t very good at it.” — funder

“There are leaders and others in the community who basically don’t think that we [academicians, researchers] have anything to offer them. And there are academics who, quite frankly, never go into the community. They don’t care for it. So we have to find that bridge...and it’s those people who navigate back and forth [between theory, research and community practice].” — psychologist/researcher

Values

Despite all the obstacles and challenges in community building, most informants were optimistic that change was in the air, and a fundamental shift in values could be occurring:

“This country was founded on a debate over two kinds of liberty: reciprocal liberty and ordered liberty. For a long time we’ve placed our bet on ordered liberty – representative democracy, institutions that will work and so forth. Reciprocal liberty has to do with the values of communitarianism, and working on having authentic, genuine involvement in changing things. Often they start to be smaller things, but they create networks and groups that feel they have a stake in the leadership of the community. I see more of that happening now.” – public policy researcher

“It’s a shift in values, in approach. Let’s not continue to pour into the emptiness of people’s lives. Let’s focus on their abilities. We believe the glass will only fill as we expand the capacity that’s in the glass. And I think most people have learned over the years that you cannot fill capacity by pouring into. We’ve poured into poverty, we’ve poured into poor people, we’ve poured into poor communities, and at the end of the day we still have the same situation. That has to change.”

– pastor/community organizer

Strength-based Values

Informants spoke passionately about the values that families and others in communities bring to the strength-based process:

“One of the greatest strengths is values of caring for their children that Hispanic families have. It’s largely untapped, I think. We’re trying to bring in these families and help them create a community within a community.” – development director

“Some of our lower income families are well rooted, happy families. They have strong religious values, strong social ties. Our goal is to help families reach their highest level of self-sufficiency, whatever that means to them. Maybe it’s just learning how to budget their money better, how to stretch their food dollars, and if we can be part of that process and help to relieve some stress, that’s great.” – community health outreach worker

“We value what we can contribute. It’s not about ‘we need.’ It’s not about ‘this is the problem.’ It’s ‘what are you going to do about it,’ even when it’s a small thing, and then you start building on that, and the resources start to flow from within and without, and it gets easier.” – nonprofit director



Individualism and Separateness

At the same time, informants were candid about the values of a fragmented, commercialized world, and its emphasis on “me” instead of “us.” Some even suggested we can tap into it to extend the power of community building:

“Not to pigeonhole people, but in my square mile there are two kinds of immigrants: people who came to live here permanently and have a good life, and those who came here not to become American citizens or whatever, but to get what they can and then go home.” — neighborhood association head

“It used to be a kinder community. Even people who disagreed pretty heavily could understand, they could work together, and it was just a different type of philanthropy. There’s lots of philanthropy now, but it’s geared more toward pet projects. Everybody wants to do their own thing.” — CDC executive

“People have to have a billboard, a sign that says MMFI – Make Me Feel Important. Your billboard can be big or little at any given moment, but you always have it. It’s not necessarily negative. You can tap into it to build community. Highlight their strengths. Let their light shine.” — hospital community benefits manager

The Old and New

Some of the informants who were engaged in hands-on community building activities in neighborhoods – housing projects, business development, increasing diversity of residents and services – described the inevitable tension between the values and interests of older, long-time residents and a younger, more diverse population moving in and “upsetting” established patterns:

“Not everybody values diversity. We have residents who are upset with so many single parent families or people of color, gays or whatever coming into their area of town. People can’t understand why the community can’t be the way it was 40 years ago. There is a tension between new and older residents.”

—CDI executive



“The clash comes when the children get acculturated much quicker than the parents, and they can’t understand why their kids are doing the things they’re doing. We oftentimes hear that our families need new ways to parent their kids because life is very different in a town or village in Mexico with everybody watching over the children. It’s a very different pace of life than it is here, with gangs and bullying and the like.” — community center director

Core Values

When in doubt, stick with your core values. That message came through loud and clear:

“Prioritizing the work is huge. Just because something is a great idea doesn’t mean we have to do it. First you do a temperature check to see where the support is. Not every great idea or program is going to be sustained, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Funders can help get something started, but they are probably not going to be there in another three or four years, and then you have to draw your own conclusions at the end and decide whether you can really continue the program with other support. You really can’t chase the money. Just because the grant opportunity is there doesn’t mean you should be going after it. If it doesn’t fit with your mission, core philosophy and values, don’t do it.” — community health program director

“In our Health in a New Key [community of practice] group, we have people pushing each other and saying, ‘What is your neighborhood telling you? What did they say? Did you involve them? This is a core value in a strength-based approach.’” — community development director

“Just getting clear on your core mission and values is huge. That is what you use to measure everything else by. Circumstances, opportunities and challenges will change. Your mission and values – who you really are – don’t.” — nonprofit executive

Style

Culture, values, language, voice, structures, strategies and skills combine in an individual’s or organization’s *style* – our way, or manner, of doing things, of presenting ourselves to the world and interacting with others. Any of the following concluding comments could just as easily have been included in the dimensions of community building previously discussed, but they are inserted here under the dimension of style as a way of summarizing and stressing some key points:

“It depends on what style of organizer you are. If you’re in the front of the room talking, you’re not an organizer. If you’re in the back of the room, you’re an okay organizer. If you don’t need to be in the room, you’re a great organizer.” — community organizer

“The kind of leadership style that’s effective [in community building] is the listener, the connector, the facilitator. And of course if you follow the principles of resilience, you want more than one type of leader. You also need the framers, the motivators, the translators.” — public policy researcher

“This is how we do things. We have a lot of success stories from our work. Some people disparage it by saying we have anecdotal information, but not enough sound evidence. But what are stories if not evidence of people connecting with each other? The science is learning from everything you do, especially working with people, and the positive changes you see every single day.” — nonprofit executive

“The area we’ve been weakest in is economic development. Housing is not an issue if you have a decent job, if you have access to basic health services and the like. Engaging and developing businesses is challenging. They aren’t as emotionally embedded in an area as a resident is. They’re more interested in how this [development activity] is going to affect their bottom line, and rightly so. It takes a different style of developer to work with them.” — CDI executive

“To move from a deficit model to a strength model [in community building], we have to think less in terms of transactions and more in terms of engagement. You don’t start with the standard service-client model. You start with drawing them [community residents] into the conversation. You engage and empower people. Do it right, and you’ll [service provider] be out of a job.” — community organizer

“Don’t think systematically. Think associationally.” — pastor/community organizer



Weave the People: Emerging Lessons

In our 2003 report, *Resilience: Health in a New Key*, we offered *Ten Rules of the Road* for building healthy communities that have been widely disseminated. In that spirit, we distilled the experience and wisdom of our community partners and conversation participants into the following emerging lessons on community building. In many ways, they restate and expand on the essential lessons from the past:

- 1. FOCUS ON COMMUNITIES-AS-PLACE.** We build healthy, resilient communities in physical, space-bound settings where we live, work and play. The siren song of communities of interest, practice and identity can enhance our ability to improve community health, but it can also direct our attention, resources and energy away from place-bound connections of social reciprocity and support.
- 2. START WITH SHARED CONVERSATIONS.** This will lead to shared relationships and shared identity. These, in turn, will contribute over time to shared meaning, shared trust, shared motivation and shared action. The result is the adaptable, engaged community.
- 3. PULL, DON'T PUSH. ATTRACT, DON'T PROMOTE.** Invite others in to build networks of engagement, involvement and shared action. Don't treat people like consumers or clients. Attract others by modeling the result you desire. Don't promote an ideology or set of techniques everyone else has to accept.
- 4. TAP INTO INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY STRENGTHS.** Use these to build tangible assets (housing jobs, infrastructure) and develop the knowledge and skills (education) that create the conditions for optimal health and sustainability.
- 5. DEVELOP AND EXTEND NETWORKS OF LEARNING, PRACTICE AND ACTION.** Think associationally. Build up and out, down and in simultaneously.
- 6. BE A CONNECTOR.** Channel and connect ideas, energy, resources. Everything flows from this.
- 7. SPEAK TO POWER.** Find and encourage the community's collective voice to connect with economic and political resources in ever wider circles of influence, investment and consequence.
- 8. CONSIDER THE AUDIENCE.** Adapt your language and message frames accordingly.
- 9. MOVE FROM ACCOUNTABILITY TO LEARNING.** Disseminate what you learn as widely and transparently as possible. Accountability will arise naturally from the shared learning (meanings) of the community.
- 10. SEED AND FEED.** Start with a focused task or project that has a good probability for success. Build on success by scanning for new opportunities and sowing seeds. Pursue those that take root and start to grow. Not all of them will.
- 11. INVEST FOR LONGER TIME PERIODS.** Seeds that take root do better with focused, longer-term investments of human and financial resources. Be watchful – but don't be in a rush to hurry on to the next big thing.



What can we take away from this Arizona conversation on how to thread more resilient, healthy communities?

12. **TAKE TIME TO MAKE TIME.** Community building is long distance and never ending. Get off the clock now and then. Replenish yourself and others. It always winds back around.
13. **DRINK FROM THE WELL.** Find, nurture and drink from community wells of trusted information, services and social connections. They are individuals and organizations alike. If you can't find one, drill for one. Connect others to it.
14. **PLAN TO ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE TO PLAN.** Do both in pencil so you can adapt to change.
15. **LISTEN, LEARN AND LET GO.** People come from very different places. Let them speak. People learn in different ways. Give them options and time. Lead by example. We raise healthy children this way. Why would communities be any different?
16. **FIRE, READY, AIM.** In community building, clarity emerges from practice, not practice from clarity. Start with action (fire), refine your practice based on what you're learning (ready), then develop your theory of change (aim). Use that theory and knowledge to inform further practice, and so on in a cycle of never-ending adaptability, learning and change.

Weave the People. That's how we thread healthy, resilient communities. It was true at the founding of America, and it remains true today.

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*“It’s not about one voice.
It’s about a collective voice that
really changes what happens.”*

— hospital community benefits manager

Our Mission

To improve the health of people and their communities in Arizona, with an emphasis on helping people in need and building the capacity of communities to help themselves.

The purpose of *Arizona Health Futures* is to unravel an important health policy topic of relevance to Arizonans, provide a general summary of the critical issues, background information and different perspectives on approaches to the topic, tap into the expertise of informed citizens, and suggest strategies for action.

Arizona Health Futures is available through our mailing list and also on our web site at **www.slhi.org**. If you would like to receive extra copies or be added to the list, please call 602.385.6500 or email us at info@slhi.org.

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Comments and suggestions for future issues, as always, are welcome.

St. Luke's Health Initiatives is a public foundation formed through the sale of the St. Luke's Health System in 1995. Our resources are directed toward service, public education and advocacy that improve access to health care and improve health outcomes for all Arizonans, especially those in need.

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