

The New Community at Work

A sense of community has always been important in society. In tribal times, it was a survival strategy. Being a part of a tribe increased the chance of success which was measured in terms of finding food, building and maintaining shelter and creating and nurturing the next generation. These days, our basic needs are more easily sustained. Communities are now formed to address higher needs, such as a sense of belonging, networking and support. The explosion of online communities such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are an indication of the widespread requirement to fulfil society's higher needs. So, how does this almost universal need for a sense of community impact on your workplace?

If we go back to our tribes, they can give us some clues. In a tribe, the provision for food, shelter and reproduction were sustained. And if a tribe worked well together, with commitment to the shared goals of sustainability, growth and ultimate success, they happily flourished from generation to generation for centuries. In isolation, life was far more difficult and very lonely, with no opportunity for shared resources, support or companionship.

The workplace operates in a very similar way. Sharing goals within a work community is essential to workplace happiness, growth and business success. These days, we no longer have to catch or grow our food. However, the benefits of community still exist. Community offers:

- Learning and sharing
- Increased opportunities
- A support structure
- Pooled resources and increased efficiency
- Training and development
- Access to expertise
- Flexibility
- A sense of camaraderie and belonging

Organisations spend a great deal of time and financial resources striving to improve workplace engagement to increase employee retention and productivity. While considering workplace engagement, it is critical, at the same time, to stand back and look at the bigger picture. Sharing business goals within a work community creates a happy and successful work environment which goes hand in hand with workplace engagement. It is important for corporations

to focus on the engagement of individuals in the organisation. At the same time, it is equally important to recognise that there is nothing that will decrease workplace engagement faster than feelings of isolation, lack of support or lack of understanding from fellow community members. A sense of community is essential to a happy, productive and successful business.

Most businesses understand the importance of a sense of community. That is why millions of dollars a year are spent on team building activities. The question is, how effective are these team building activities in building a sense of community?

You may have noticed that the good will and positive feelings generated by your last team building activity were surprisingly short lived. Within days or weeks the time investment and the significant financial investment can be forgotten. The reason for this is that the positive emotions generated by these events do not tap into the true elements of community and rarely incorporate all members of the community. The members of your immediate, or primary team, are not the only people in your organisation with whom you share business goals or the desire for success.

In modern business we operate within many different working groups. Most obviously, there is your primary team. There are also cross functional teams, national teams, project teams, management teams, leadership teams and more. The inherent flaw in team building activities is that the people

who can influence your individual and collective business success extend far beyond your primary team. The success of teams within organisations is no longer insular. Building a sense of community requires input from many cross functional areas of the business. A thriving community also requires the cultivation of trust and respect, a shared vision and the desire for ultimate business success.

Humans are hard wired to integrate into their environment. If ever there was a time to reconnect at work, the time is now. Working as an effective community will foster a synergy of individual strengths and combined energy, improve communication and the sharing of knowledge, offer unlimited support, and create continued opportunity for both individuals and the business as a whole. It's time to stop thinking like a team, and start thinking like a community. 💡

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