

Building Community at Work

CEOs searching for ways to develop community in the workplace — a culture in which coworkers really care about each other, the association, and the people it serves

— may find ideas within two nontraditional models. *by Seth Weaver Kahan*

Traditional management makes it challenging for people to work across organizational boundaries, share knowledge, and understand — let alone address — the multidimensional problems associations confront in today's marketplace. An age-old solution with a human face is already at work in your organization: community.

Building communities in business has become a priority in knowledge-sharing organizations around the world. Communities in the workplace enable people to quickly build working relationships, share knowledge with those who need it when they need it, and perform well under stress. The warmth of community encourages everyone to share personal accountability for achieving the organization's objectives. But how is it done?

I began to compile a list of what worked to build community in pursuits outside of business and started applying these concepts in organizations. Soon, I experienced significant successes. I used these ideas while a member of the team that initiated knowledge management at the World Bank, now internationally recognized as a leader in the field. In addition, I have presented these ideas to numerous private and public organizations.

A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS

Let me tell you a story about how one unlikely community formed and went on to achieve great results. I worked for a global organization that was building its first Knowledge Management System. The system was to be an Intranet in which subject matter experts (SMEs) could catalog documents, spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations, and audio files that are valuable to staff.

It was a high-visibility project that attracted the organization's best staff. People devoted significant time beyond their normal 40-hour workweek to culling and preparing materials for electronic publication. In addition, outside technical expertise was sought to incorporate the latest thinking in technology. These "techie" were excited about this cutting-edge project, incorporating countless bells and whistles to make the new system the best it could be.

But the techies and SMEs were on divergent paths. The SMEs understood the knowledge and had ideas about how it should best be represented on the screen. These didn't fit with the technical platform the techies had assembled. The techies thought that the

SMEs didn't understand technology and made unreasonable requests.

Eventually, techies and SMEs sat on opposite sides of the table arguing, and the project froze. Brought in to break the logjam, I displayed two props at my first meeting: a picture of my young son, Gabriel, and a replica of an Egyptian deity from the British Museum.

First, I introduced Gabriel and explained what I thought was special about this project: we were creating the future. We were fashioning one of the first systems in the world that would share human knowledge using the latest in technology. Gabriel's picture symbolized all of our children, reminding us that our work would change the world they will inherit.

Next, I held up the Egyptian deity — a king, bowed on knees, holding a round wine cask in each hand. The statue symbolizes holding two worlds simultaneously. In myths around the world, this is a symbol of bridging realities. I used the statue to symbolize bridging the worlds of technology and knowledge. It is important not to let go of either; the magic is in holding both. It is not okay to develop technology at the expense of the knowledge it is designed to share any more than it is

...attention is the most valuable gift one person can give another.

okay to ignore the technology and focus only on the content; each needs the other to be most effective.

After a long pause, reconciliation began. First, the techie leader began to brainstorm how the SMEs could have their way on a particularly onerous request. Then, some of the SMEs talked about how they could conform to the new technology platform. The group soon identified itself as “the Collaboration Community.” Whenever an argument began to take form, we took out the picture of Gabe and the Egyptian replica and rekindled our common spirit. The Collaboration Community delivered an impressive system.

TWO NONTRADITIONAL MODELS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

Theater

In the late 1970s, I began performing and directing experimental theater. What I loved most was the improvisational work. It was fascinating to watch people express conflict, resolution, and the many ways they fashioned one from the other. I learned that people relate to one another in ways other than through speech and rational thought. Some of these include the use of body language, sound, and movement.

For example, as a group facilitator, I learned to read the “energy” of a potential community by walking around the room and noticing what was going on without listening to the details of conversation. This is a common facilitator technique. If the room is quiet, people are not facing each other, and motion is subdued, we say the energy is low. If people are animated or engaged with each other, and there is a buzz of noise, we say the energy is high. This feeling for how a group is doing is invaluable in sensing whether a group is coming together and collaboration is present.

Another powerful theatrical tool — applicable to association management — is the use of symbols. Symbols are used regularly in advertising and public relations because of their positive impact on the bottom line. And like the Egyptian statue and the photo of my

son, symbols work well as community-building devices within organizations.

The most important quality of a symbol is that it is meaningful. The picture of my son and the statue worked because they were important to me, and the group adopted my meaning.

Once, when leading a divisional retreat in the World Bank, I asked participants to bring pictures of loved ones. One by one, each participant shared their picture, introducing their family to the group. The pictures were put on a tray, where they sat for the remainder of our event. People met at the photo tray to chat and look at the pictures often. The array of family pictures worked well to help participants easily bring to mind what community is all about, creating a common reference point. It was a symbol of who we were, and the technique brought our extended family into our gathering.

If you want to find symbols you can use to enhance community at your workplace, take a look at the way people decorate their offices in your association: inspirational quotes, paintings, pictures of family, and so on. If you find a common theme, bringing variations of it into public spaces can catalyze community in your organization. For example, if you notice that your staff members pride themselves on their cartoon collections, consider hosting a community cartoon bulletin board and hold informal gatherings nearby. People will use the board to start conversations and build rapport. With thought, these conversations can be used to jumpstart business discussions and provide insights into what’s on people’s minds.

Ceremonies and Teachings of Indigenous People

My work in experimental theater fired an interest in another community-building model: rites of passage that fashion adults from children. These are among the most profound symbolic activity of our species. These pivotal events transform dependent children into adults who take responsibility for sustaining the community.

To explore this model, I traveled into the wilderness, where I participated in several ceremonies, including a “vision quest.” Some form of vision quest occurs

in many indigenous traditions. In this ceremony, an individual goes off alone, usually into the wilderness for an extended time, to learn more about who they are and their unique gifts. Later, they return to share what they have learned. Their home community is fundamental to the success of their quest. Without a community to return to, there is no one to benefit from the gifts they bring back.

In my case, I was one of 16 men questing under the leadership of three guides. Our guides helped us become a community, inviting us to share what was most important in our lives. This is a beautiful form that I’ve used often in business settings to quickly build a sense of rapport within a group.

Before our solo experience, our guides told us that when we returned, we would each feel differently emotionally. Some of us would be joyous to return; others would be sad to leave solitude. Some would want to connect with our friends right away; others would prefer to be left alone for awhile. We were instructed that we were to honor each person’s emotional state as they returned.

After three days alone in the wilderness, returning reminded me of coming home to my family after being in college. I knew I wanted to see everyone, but would they be able to relate to me as I had changed and grown? People watched me for cues of how I wanted to be received. I did the same to others. Mutual respect spread quickly and enveloped us.

I have found that meetings can lead to mutual respect when they follow a similar pattern, when people receive each other with a sense of appreciation and attentiveness. It is not the norm for meetings to commence this way, but with minor instruction and encouragement, such an atmosphere can be established. This type of emotional environment makes room for the ups and downs of business life. It accepts people as they are in a caring fashion, and at the same time promotes effectiveness toward the work at hand.

My own experience in the vision quest led me to create a performance piece, *Voices of the Earth*, which I performed in business settings. My work not only brought me into contact with corporate

audiences, but also with Native American elders. Most recently, I spent time in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a Pueblo teacher, Larry Littlebird.

Littlebird shared teachings about what it means to belong to a people. The lessons were subtle, but powerful. Littlebird helps each person think of himself or herself as a living link in the chain of humanity. The work we choose can act as a bridge between the lives of those who came before with the lives of children yet to come.

Littlebird encouraged us not to take notes and to give each other our attention. He spoke of attention with reverence, explaining that attention is the most valuable gift one person can give another. He emphasized the value of listening and described how his grandmother used to wrap herself around him when he was a small boy and tell him that everyone hears, but not many listen. Listening is something that no one can make you do. You have to choose it yourself.

We practiced listening to each other without eye contact, listening through the quality of the spoken word to the underlying spirit of what was said. For me, this simple act guided not only what I heard, but also how I responded. Today, I often ask business professionals to take a short moment of silence and then listen to how a person is saying what they are saying. What is the message behind the spirit of the words? This type of penetrating listening can lead to greater understanding. (Littlebird can be reached on the Web at <http://www.huntingsacred.com>)

THE CHALLENGE: BUILDING COMMUNITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

While participating in experimental theater, ceremonies in the wilderness, time with Native American elders, and — simultaneously — knowledge management in corporate settings, I noticed something remarkable. In my activities outside business, people bonded very quickly with each other. In organizational teams, they did not.

I witnessed this disparity repeatedly. In the personal growth work, people came together extremely fast, and they delivered well when under stress. By contrast, I was part of teams in organizations that worked together literally for

years, and many of these people never bonded. External stress seemed able to easily take apart these organizational teams, crippling them or doing away with them entirely.

Outside of business, I found that people had short, meaningful conversations about the topics that were most important to them personally. Rapport increased exponentially. People drew on many diverse areas of their personal lives to fashion and share lessons learned. These were used to create solutions when the groups were faced with stress. Difficulties such as changes in mandate or leadership were often overcome with the spirit of adventure and camaraderie.

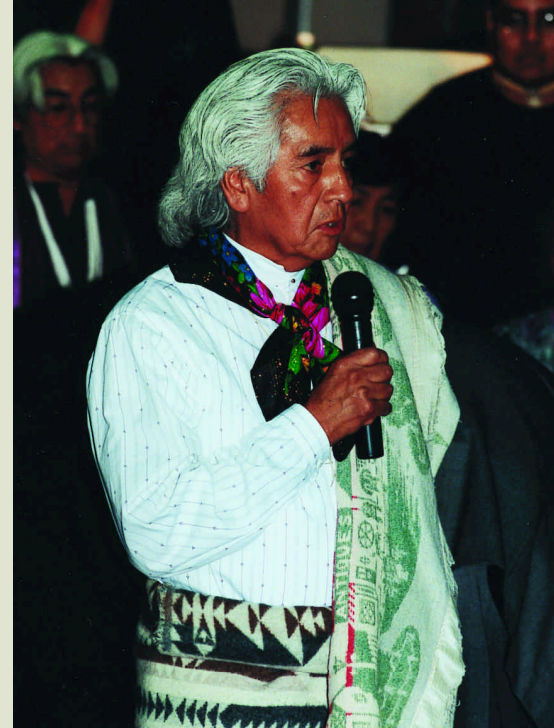
At work, however, people seemed linked together only by the checklist of their work program. Conversations were most often meaningful only in the context of getting the job done. In fact, it seemed rare that the topic of a conversation lit a spark that captured the personal interest of team members. In contrast to my other experiences, rapport was stunted, growing slowly and clumsily as the team progressed through its project plan.

The only exception was when a few members of the team had an outside experience that brought them together. In one group, several staff enjoyed ballroom dancing on the weekends. When they found their common interest, they started lunching together, and a small community began within the larger project.

When stress hit most work teams, they suffered heavy casualties. Members were adept at finding some way to leave or not care. In fact, caring about the work program seemed to be something that most everyone strived to avoid — except the manager.

Managers in organizations often single-handedly shouldered the burden of caring about a project. No one else seemed willing or capable of making decisions to ensure the success of a project. This rift between manager and subordinates was a regular feature of work teams, with individuals sometimes chiding a manager publicly or privately.

However, the leadership I witnessed among Native Americans was quite different. Elders often began their teachings by emphasizing their ordinary-



Pueblo teacher, Larry Littlebird

ness, making no pretense of special stature and power. They listened more than they spoke. Everyone naturally shared responsibility for successfully carrying through the task at hand.

I began to wonder, “What is it that is happening in personal growth and ceremonial gatherings that allows people to come together so quickly in helpful, healthy ways? What is happening — or not happening — at work that keeps people from working in these same effective ways? Can anything be done about it?”

The answer is “yes” — building community in organizations renews and revitalizes work. It harnesses the enthusiasm, intuition, and brainpower of the association’s most important assets: its people. And people love it — everyone takes pleasure contributing to their community, working together to build a better organization. Community brings associations to life! [EU](#)

RESOURCE LINK For specific guidelines on building community, visit www.executiveupdate.com and click on Kahan’s article in the “electronic,” online-only part of the Executive Update Web site.

AUTHOR LINK Seth Weaver Kahan was a Senior Information Officer of Internal Communications at the World Bank. Kahan will be giving one of the major presentations at the November 8 launch of The Center for Association Leadership in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.gwsae.org.

E-MAIL Seth@SethKahan.com

WEB LINK www.SethKahan.com