

## What is relationship building all about?

*Relationships are the building blocks for all community organizing activities.* Whether you want to organize a volleyball game or get rid of unfair housing practices in your town, you will need lots of good relationships. Why? Because the relationships we have with our coworkers, the communities we serve, and even our adversaries are the *means* for achieving our goals. People don't work in isolation: we need to be working together! It is our relationships all added together that are the foundation of an organized effort for change. We need lots of people to contribute their ideas, take a stand, and get the work done.

It is also the *people* who motivate us to reach our goals. As community builders, we care deeply about people and caring is part of our work. It is our caring for others that motivates us to work as hard as we do. It is often the health and happiness of our children, neighbors, and coworkers that we hold fixed in our minds as we push ourselves to overcome obstacles and take on challenges that can feel overwhelming.

If you are the official leader, or an active citizen without an official title, you will be most effective if you establish many strong relationships around yourself in the community.

In this section, we will talk about building and sustaining relationships and give you some practical tips and general guidelines.

And remember: ordinary people learn the skills of establishing and maintaining relationships all the time. You don't need to be particularly charming, witty, or talented. However, if you *are* charming, witty, or talented, these guidelines may help you, too!

## Why do we need to build and sustain relationships?

Let's look at this example:

### **Example: Organizing a block party**

Suppose you want to organize a block party. What kind of relationships do you need to make it happen?

#### **Who will help you plan the block party?**

You don't want to do all the planning and legwork by yourself, do you? It would be much more fun, not to mention easier, to work with a few neighbors to make this block party happen.

#### **How do you get local approval and cooperation?**

In many towns, you need the city council or government groups to approve block party permits. Having a friend or two in local government might help you figure out how to work your way through the bureaucratic hoops to get your permit. If you don't know anyone, you can build some relationships along the way.

#### **Who else might lend a hand?**

If you already have a relationship with your corner grocery store owner, she might donate some watermelon or drinks for the block party. If you know your neighborhood firefighters, they may be willing to bring over a fire engine for the children to climb on. Do you have a friend who is a clown?

#### **Who will come to the block party?**

Last, but not least, in order to have a successful block party, you want as many people from your block to come as you can get. If your neighbors know you or anyone else on the planning committee, they will be much more willing to overcome their shyness and show up.

Overall, the more people you know, the easier it will be to organize a block party and the more fun it will be for everyone.

So, back to the question: Why do you need to build relationships?

### **Here are a few fundamental reasons:**

1. *Community building occurs one-to-one.* You need to build relationships with people one-to-one if you want them to become involved in your group or organization. Some people become involved in organizations because they believe in the cause. However, many people become involved in a community group or organization, just because they have a relationship with another person who is already involved.
2. *We need relationships in order to win allies to our cause.* In order to get support from people outside our organizations, we need to build relationships in which people know and trust us.
3. *Our relationships give meaning and richness to our work and to our lives.* We all need a community of people to share the joys and the struggles of organizing and making community change. A little bit of camaraderie goes a long way.

### **What kinds of relationships are we talking about?**

Every relationship is different, but they all matter. If you smile and say hello to the school crossing guard on your way to work every day, you have formed a relationship. That crossing guard may be the one who will be watching out for your kids or grandchildren when they are old enough to walk to school by themselves. The guard will remember you and your warm smile when escorting your child across the street. And maybe the crossing guard will be the one you eventually recruit to head up the citizens' traffic safety committee.

Your relationship with the crossing guard may be quite different from the relationships you have with people involved in your neighborhood park-cleaning committee. The relationships you have with the mayor's aide, with your staff, with members of your board of directors, and with your spouse will all be different but they all play an important role in community organizing.

The more relationships you have, the better. You never know when they will come in handy. A local gang member might be just the person you need to help you organize a group to build a new playground in your neighborhood. Whether they are government officials, school teachers, business people, elders, gardeners, children, people with disabilities, homeless people or whoever else--building friendships will pay off in ways you may never have anticipated.

### **You are at the center**

Imagine a wheel in which you are at the hub or center and each spoke represents a relationship with another person. Does that sound egotistical? It doesn't need to be. It takes a lot of spokes to hold the wheel together and the wheel is what helps move the initiative along. There is enough room in the group for everyone to create their own wheel of strong relationships.

The point is that *you* have to take the time to set up and sustain relationships. If you wait for others to establish relationships with you first, you may spend a lot of time waiting.

*One reminder:* It doesn't make sense to form relationships just to get people to do work for you. That won't work because people will feel used. Community builders approach relationships with integrity. We form relationships because we genuinely like someone, because we have something to offer that person, or because we share some common goal. (See [Chapter 14, Section 5: Building and Sustaining Commitment.](#))

## **When do you build and sustain relationships?**

**You do it all the time.** If you take an extra five minutes to ask the person who is stuffing envelopes how they think the baseball team is doing this year, you will have built a stronger relationship.

Some relationships require more time than others. You may want to meet for lunch once a month with all the other directors of youth organizations in your town. You may need to meet twice this week with a staff member who has some built up resentment about the job. You may want to call your school committee representative every now and then to check in about issues of common concern.

As community organizers with few resources, we are often under enormous pressures that distract us from paying attention to relationships. We feel the urgency of achieving important goals. We mistakenly feel that spending time on relationships is the fluffy stuff that makes a person feel good, but doesn't get the job done. Often, however, relationships are the *key* to solving a problem or getting the job done. Building and sustaining many solid, strong relationships is central to our work as community leaders.

### **Relationships are the groundwork.**

Often building relationships is the groundwork that must be laid before anything else gets done on a project. The bigger the project, the more relationships you will usually need as a foundation.

For example, if you are organizing a coalition of community groups that will work to create a multicultural arts center, it would be a good idea to get to know people in each organization before trying to get them together to work on the project.

Ask yourself: "Would you be more persuaded by someone you know, or by a complete stranger?" Then be guided by your own answer.

*When you plan a project, you need to include the time it takes to build relationships into your plan.* People need time to build trust. Whenever people work together, they need to have trusting relationships. When trust is missing, people usually have a difficult time functioning cooperatively. They worry about risking too much. Disagreements seem to erupt over no important reason. Investing time, resources, and one's organizational reputation can be risky. At the least people want some return for their investment. They have to feel like you know them as a person, understand their interests, and will not let them down.

Back to the multicultural arts center example--if creating one will involve several community groups, and if you don't know them well (and they don't know each other), start working together on a smaller project first. For example, you can jointly sponsor an evening of cultural sharing. If the evening is successful, you will have gained some shared trust and confidence on which to build. You can plan several similar events that will build trust over a period of time.

If things are not going well, back up and try an easier challenge. If you begin to hold discussions on the multicultural arts center and people show signs of apprehension rather than excitement, slow down the process. Take on an easier challenge until strong relationships are better established.

### **Establish relationships before you need them**

It's always better to build relationships *before* you need them or before a conflict arises. If you already have a good relationship with the grocery store owner in your neighborhood, you will be in a better position to help solve a dicey conflict between him and some neighborhood teens. If you have already established a relationship with your school committee representative, she might be more willing to respond to your opinions about special education funding.

### **Establishing relationships in a crisis**

It is not impossible to establish relationships during a crisis, and often a crisis can bring people together. While it may seem unusual, make the most of your organization's crises. Call for help and people will rise to the call. You can build relationships when you are in need, because people often want to help.