

28 Factors for Successful Community Building

Resource

[Community Building: What Makes It Work](#)

Contents

[Some Definitions](#)

[Community](#)

[Community building](#)

[Community capacity building](#)

[The 28 Factors](#)

[1. Characteristics of the community](#)

[2. Characteristics of the community building process](#)

[3. Community capacity building](#)

From Vince Hyman, Publishing Director, Fieldstone Alliance:

MANY OF US are involved in community-based organizations—either as staff and leaders, as consultants, or on boards. We may describe ourselves as community builders. But what do we mean by that? What are we doing when we "build community?" What are we talking about when we say we want to "improve community capacity?" Community builders may think those answers are obvious, but they are not.

Several years ago, we commissioned the [Wilder Research Center](#) to delve into the studies on community building. They found 28 factors that influenced the success of any community building effort. Those factors are the focus of this issue of *Tools You Can Use*, which is excerpted and adapted from our book, [Community Building: What Makes It Work](#).

Some Definitions

We can't get started talking about successful community building without defining some terms—especially when the terms used by community builders are often subject to varied interpretation. While the report includes many definitions, I'm going to highlight three that get used frequently: community, community building, and community capacity building.

Community

People use the term *community* in a variety of ways, ranging from "the downtown community" to the "GLBT community," the "faith community," the Hispanic community," and "the medical community." These various uses emphasize geography, socio-politics, spirituality, ethnicity, and profession. After researching a number of

“Sadie knows the *real* key to effective community building...”



possible definitions, Wilder researchers purposely limited the definition to a specific type of community:

People who live within a geographically defined area and who have social and psychological ties with each other and with the place where they live.

This definition requires both geographic bounds and social ties. Obviously, this definition does not include many types of social networks that people consider communities. Those are also valid communities—but the factors described further in this article are extracted only from research related to geographically bounded communities.

Community building

Community building generally refers to building the social networks within the community, and developing group and individual problem-solving and leadership skills. The report defines community building as:

Any identifiable set of activities pursued by a community in order to increase community social capacity

Community capacity building

The broad capacities relevant to community building are abilities to develop and sustain strong relationships; solve problems and make group decisions; and collaborate effectively to identify goals and get work done. When one builds community capacity, one is increasing

The extent to which members of a community can work together effectively.

Working with these (and other) definitions, Wilder Research Center identified 525 written evaluation studies of community building. They sorted this literature based on a set of criteria that included whether the study addressed the research question, included a measure of success, was at minimum a case study analysis (if not more rigorous), had sufficient documentation, occurred after 1950, was written, was available in English, and more.

The screening reduced the final number of reports to 48. Two reviewers independently extracted success factors from those reports; the findings were synthesized in initial and final forms. Ultimately, this process (which is detailed in the book) yielded 28 factors.

The 28 Factors

The 28 factors have been divided into three categories, 1) those that are endemic to the community itself, 2) those that relate to the way one builds community, and 3) those that relate to the people doing the community-building work, as defined here:

1. *Characteristics of the community.* These are the social, psychological, and geographical attributes of a community and its residents which contribute to the success of a community building effort.
2. *Characteristics of the community building process.* These are factors that make up the process by which people attempt to build community, such as representation, communications, and technical assistance.
3. *Characteristics of community building leaders.* These factors are the qualities of those people who organize and lead a community building effort, such as commitment, trust, understanding, and experience.

A brief description of each of the twenty-eight factors follows. In-depth descriptions of the factors, along with examples and practical applications of the factors, can be found in the book.

The factors should not be a surprise—but they do serve as a helpful checklist as you enter into a new community building situation.

1. Characteristics of the community

A. Community awareness of an issue

Successful efforts are more likely occur in communities where residents recognize the need for some type of initiative. A community building effort must address an issue which is severe enough to warrant attention, and which affects enough residents of a community to spark self-interest in participation.

B. Motivation from within the community

The motivation to begin a community building process is self-imposed, rather than encouraged from the outside.

C. Small geographic area

The geographical area is small where planning and implementing activities is more manageable.

D. Flexibility and adaptability

Communities exhibit flexibility and adaptability in problem solving and task accomplishment.

E. Preexisting social cohesion

Other things being equal, the higher the existing level of social cohesion (that is, the strength of interrelationships among community residents), the more likely that a community building effort will be successful.

F. Ability to discuss, reach consensus, and cooperate

Communities have a spirit of cooperation and the ability to discuss openly their problems and needs.

G. Existing identifiable leadership

There are residents whom most community members will follow and listen to, who can

motivate and act as spokespersons, and who can assume leadership roles in a community building initiative.

H. Prior success with community building

Communities have prior positive community building experience.

2. Characteristics of the community building process

A. Widespread participation

Participation is representative of the community and members continuously recruit participants.

B. Good system of communication

The process includes effectively communicating within the community and to the rest of the world.

C. Minimal competition in pursuit of goals

Existing community organizations do not perceive other organizations or the leaders of a community building initiative as competitors.

D. Develop self-understanding

The process includes developing a group identity, clarifying priorities, and agreeing on how to achieve goals.

E. Benefits to many residents

Community goals, tasks, and activities have clear, visible benefits to many people in the community.

F. Focus on product and process concurrently

Efforts to build relationships (the process focus) include tangible events and accomplishments (the product focus).

G. Linkage to organizations outside the community

Community members have ties to organizations outside the community.

H. Progression from simple to complex activities

The process moves community members from simple to progressively more complex activities.

I. Systematic gathering of information and analysis of community issues

The process includes taking careful steps to measure and analyze the needs and problems of the community.

J. Training to gain community building skills

Community residents receive training to increase their community building skills.

K. Early involvement and support from existing, indigenous organizations

Community organizations of long tenure and solid reputation become involved early.

L. Use of technical assistance

Community residents use technical assistance (experts providing consultation or hands-on training in their area of knowledge) to help them gain competence in a particular area.

M. Continual emergence of leaders, as needed

The processes produce new leaders over time.

N. Community control over decision making

Residents have control over decisions, particularly over how funds are used.

O. The right mix of resources

The process is not overwhelmed by too many resources or stifled by too few, and there is a balance between internal and external resources.

3. Characteristics of community building organizers

A. Understanding the community

Successful community building efforts tend to have organizers who have a thorough understanding of the culture, social structure, demographics, political structure, and issues in the community.

B. Sincerity of commitment

The effort is organized by individuals who convey a sincere commitment for the community's well-being.

C. A Relationship of trust

Organizers develop trusting relationships with community residents.

D. Level of organizing experience

Organizers are experienced in the many facets of working with communities.

E. Able to be flexible and adaptable

Organizers are flexible and able to adapt to constantly changing situations and environments.

Sincerely,

Vince Hyman
Publishing Director
Fieldstone Alliance

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