

On Community Building: An Interview with Angelo John Lewis

Angelo's interest in community building is an outgrowth of his work in the managing diversity arena in the late 1980s. After helping numerous organizations work their diversity issues, he found that these efforts after his involvement ended often became marginalized into insignificance. The marginalization took place for a number of reasons: vacillating top management support, competing organizational priorities, and/or an inability of organizations to integrate managing diversity with other human resource initiatives. Lewis came to believe that a better way to work diversity issues was in the context of working overarching issues of community, of which diversity was usually one. In that way, he believes, multiple issues can be addressed at once and diversity is addressed in a multidimensional way. In this interview, he was asked to expand on his approach to building community in organizations.

How would you define community building and its aims?

I think we first have to distinguish what type of community we're talking about. Traditional community is co-located community, where people live in the same geographic area. In that type of community, the challenges often involve having people come to grips with and creatively utilize whatever diversity exists within that community. Increasingly, this involves not just ethnic diversity, but diversity based on economic status or differences in belief systems. There are many able practitioners who concentrate on building the capacities of these types of traditional communities.

But, another type of community has arisen alongside traditional, tribal community. This type of community has always been there, but its importance and influence has expanded in concert with globalization and advances in information technology. This type of community is not based as much on location, but more on shared interests or values. Building this type of community, which exists in workplaces and in global networks, presents its own sets of challenges, challenges which are both similar and dissimilar to those in traditional types of community.

In this type of community, the core challenge is having community members rally around and sometimes create a shared vision. Inherent in the building of this shared vision is a kind of gap analysis between what exists now and our ideal state. As to the aims of community building within work places, the principal aim is to enhance the sense of employee ownership of the business. Another way of saying this is that there is an intent to create an environment in which employees feel that their contributions and opinions are fully valued.

What are the conditions of success for a community building initiative?

The most important condition of success is the belief on the part of leadership that employee ownership is an integral ingredient in the success of the enterprise. In general, this means that people in leadership must be comfortable with a team or relationship approach, rather than a hierarchical one, to problem solving.

Community building also works especially well in environments where the employees are used to working in cross-functional teams as opposed to functional silos and where open lines of communication exist between the top, the middle and the bottom of the organization. Finally, it helps for an organization to have a strong values orientation that informs its way of doing business.

What are some of strategies you might use in a community building initiative?

Community building should be thought of more as a process than as a simple event. The process I use rests on building of the capabilities of an internal committee or task force especially chartered by top management for this purpose. It is my experience that the strength of these

internal groups is the single most important ingredient in the success of community building initiatives. Once this group has jelled and begun to explore what community means in the context of the organization involved, the next step is to invite a group of influential community members – people who are influential based more on reputation than on level – to a full-day community assessment meeting. Optionally, this step can be preceded by focus groups or surveys to get an initial feel as to community concerns.

At the same time, the use of coaching with the top executive is essential as a means of having the executive foresee what types of changes might occur as a result of this initiative. During the assessment meeting, community members decide on the specific foci of their community building initiative, for example diversity, customer service, and employee recognition. Issue groups form to study these issues, a report is generated, and an interactive, sometimes public, feedback process with management begins the implementation phase of the process.

How would you recommend that an organization get started in its efforts to enhance its sense of community?

If there is a “magic bullet,” it would be the creation of a broad-based internal committee or task force. That task force must be empowered by an executive champion in the organization to do its exploration of what community means in that particular organizational context. The CEO or executive champion in turn should be engaged in a visioning process that enables him or her to envision what it means to be champion of such an initiative.