

Three Aspects of a Healthy, Thriving Community

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(Excerpted with permission from "Transparency, Equivalence, and Effectiveness — How Sociocracy Can Help Communities, Part I," *Communities* magazine, Fall 2013.)

I believe three crucial, mutually reinforcing aspects help intentional communities (and other organizations) become healthy and thriving.

One I call **Community Glue** — taking time to do shared enjoyable activities that tend to generate feelings of gratitude and trust, and which also tend to create the "pleasure hormone" oxytocin. Research shows that oxytocin in the bloodstream generates feelings of trust and gratitude towards the people one is with, although it may be experienced simply as "feeling good." And these feelings cause a person to secrete oxytocin into the bloodstream, keeping the "feeling good" going throughout the enjoyable shared activity.

Thus, community meals, shared work tasks, singing, dancing, drumming, playing music, playing games or sports, group meditation, storytelling evenings, describing emotionally meaningful aspects of one's life to friends and colleagues, making decisions together smoothly and effectively, accomplishing community goals — all tend to produce these feelings in the group. And this — the good will, the sense of "us" or "community spirit" — is like having good credit or a "community immune system" of trust and good will. The more trust and good will a community has, the more effectively its members can respond to and resolve conflict when it comes up. When a community draws on abundant community glue, it may be easier to just talk to each other simply and figure out how to resolve things.

A second aspect of a healthy, thriving community, in my opinion, is **Good Process and Communication Skills**. While this is obvious to most experienced communitarians, the need for these skills becomes obvious sooner or later in newer communities too. By "communication skills," I mean the ways people talk with each other, both in groups and meetings and one on one. By "process skills," I mean the ways members gather together specifically to get to know each other better, consider ideas, understand each others' emotions or upsets, or discuss and resolve conflicts.

Nowadays I recommend what I believe are the two most effective communication and process methods for communities: Nonviolent Communication, a way in which people speak to each other that tends to create a sense of connection and reduces conflict, and Restorative Circles, a conflict-resolution method similar in some ways to Nonviolent Communication.

The third aspect, ***Effective Project Management***, is obvious to founders of successful communities and cohousing professionals but often less obvious (or even invisible) to more idealistic or countercultural folks. It's comprised of the ways a community creates and maintains its legal entity(s); the ways it finances, purchases, and physically develops its property (including, for example, hiring any outside professional for design or construction work, bookkeeping, website design, or other work); organizes and tracks its internal community finances and member labor requirements; attracts, processes, and orients new members; and maintains the community's documents, policies, and decisions. These are all actions that well-organized businesses or nonprofits use too. Sooner or later members of new communities learn that clear, thorough, well-organized management is necessary not only to found their new community but also to successfully maintain it.

I believe these three aspects of community mutually reinforce each other. If a group has abundant community glue, for example, people will tend to feel connected enough and harmonious enough so that most of the time they'll get along well and not need to speak so carefully, and will probably need less conflict resolution as well. But if a group's reserve of community glue is low — perhaps because they don't yet realize how important it is or don't have enough time to schedule enjoyable group activities often enough — they may have to choose their words more carefully, and may need to resolve conflicts more formally and more frequently.

Similarly, if a group has effective project management, the sense of accomplishment they'll feel when people experience the community moving towards its goals can create more community glue — increasing their feelings of trust and gratitude and thus reducing their need for super-careful ways of speaking and more frequent conflict resolution sessions. But if a community is managed poorly — for example, if they miss important opportunities; experience unexpected or un-prepared-for legal problems, bookkeeping snafus, or financial shortfalls; lose documents or records of meeting decisions — this can create anger, resentment, blame, shame, and demoralization, which of course *erodes* the group's sense of trust and connection. A group in this situation will, once again, need to speak to one another more carefully and will probably need to resolve conflicts more often too.

I advise groups to go for all three, of course.