



Building relationships The key to volunteer engagement

Relationship building is a process that ensures long-term sustainability of community-building efforts. It is a process of making intentional connections with and among people to realize or develop a community vision. The relationships are based on self-interest, mutual respect, accountability, and access to power. Relationship building is the glue that holds an organization and community together, regardless of whatever issues it struggles with. A relationship-building approach to change increases collective power. It is humanistic, communal, and produces long-term, consistent, sustainable community-building results.¹

Key elements of relationship building

1. People are connected to each other as well as to the ROC as a whole
2. Long-term commitment to the ROC is developed
3. Support for the community (volunteers, membership, participation on the board of directors) increases
4. People are listened to, vs. preached to and controlled
5. Members' self interests are acknowledged and respected
6. Collective power is created and increased

Volunteer motivation

Relationships motivate action. Most of us volunteer when someone we know asks us to do something. We can blame people for their lack of involvement, or we can talk with people and challenge them to act on the things they say are important. We must go to people, rather than expect them to come to us. Very few people volunteer in response to a generalized flyer or e-mail. If you ask people why they donated money or gave time to an event, they frequently say, "Because I was asked."

Understanding values and self interests

Some people volunteer because of a generalized sense of "wanting to do good." Others volunteer because they want to solve a problem. Still others may want to meet their neighbors, gain new skills,

¹ This piece is adapted from Basics of Community Organizing, and is reprinted with permission from NeighborWorks America.

or attain prestige in the community. Understanding what's important to people can be the key to unlocking their participation.

Here are some examples of what we can learn about people's motivations if we take the time to talk and listen to them:

- Jim and Doris moved to Easy Living Community after living on their own two-acre parcel in an isolated, rural setting. They chose ROC living because they like the idea of getting to know their neighbors, being around children again, and helping each other out. If you know that these are Jim and Doris' *values*, you can appeal to them to take part in the volunteer life of the ROC.
- Jessica is a regular volunteer in her church. When her daughter was young, she was a volunteer at the local elementary school. Jessica gives of her time because she feels blessed that others helped her in her time of need, when her daughter was critically injured in a car accident. If you know about Jessica's struggles and *values*, you will have a more meaningful relationship with her, and it will be easier to solicit her involvement in the ROC.
- Irene, a neighbor, is beside herself because of lack of sleep. Her young child is easily awakened and has trouble falling back to sleep. Irene is so tired she can barely get herself to work in the morning. A ROC committee is talking about rules enforcement, including how to reduce noise after dark. If you know that sleep is one of Irene's *self interests*, you can reach out to her to take part in the committee.

How to build relationships

Fostering relationships means listening – truly listening – to what's on the minds of our neighbors. It also means understanding people's values and self interests. This cannot be left to conversations that happen by chance, in the yard or at the grocery store. It should be done purposefully through the life of the ROC.

Here are some ways that community groups have fostered relationships and strengthened their organizations. These methods have been used to increase volunteer involvement and build powerful organizations with strong leadership teams.

- **One-to-one meetings and conversations.** Structured one-to-one meetings allow us to discover the hopes, dreams and self-interests of our neighbors, which can be key to involving them as volunteers. These conversations also help us distinguish between the “complainers” and the “problem solvers.” You can do a meeting on your own or as part of a plan launched by the board of directors. You can also integrate one-to-one conversations into the agenda of an annual meeting or membership meeting.
- **House meetings.** These are purposeful gatherings of six to 12 people in someone's home. Often, they follow one-to-one meetings and are ways for members to share ideas

and concerns. They are also opportunities for new leaders to emerge and take charge of projects.

- **Door knocking.** This can be a good first step to meet neighbors, generate interest in upcoming activities, or to gather data or opinions for a community survey.
- **Social events,** such as parties or barbecues, are good ways to kick off a relationship-building effort, but they cannot substitute for one-to-one meetings or house meetings. That's because social events tend to draw those who are *already* involved in the community. They also don't provide opportunities for deeper conversations, where people reveal their hopes, concerns, and possible motives for becoming more involved.

