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Silos or Spider Webs: Community in the 1990's
By Susan H. Holton

In the farmlands of central Ohio, no hills get in the way of the expansive view—only silos. These cylindrical castles of concrete and metal predate the city's skyscrapers. They exist in isolation, one or two to an average farm, but they are not connected. Each silo stands by itself, containing the grain needed to sustain the fields and flocks for the winter and the next planting season. Work in today's organization too often fits the metaphor of the silo. Either literal or metaphoric silo-like structures house specialized departments and divisions. Connecting to no other part of the farm—or institution or workplace—the silos serve to isolate the inhabitants. And because of this silo mentality, there is an erosion of community in modern society.

The companion to this erosion, however, is a cry for connection, a cry for a return to community. At virtually every level of today's workforce people sense something missing. Workers—in academia and beyond—decry the lack of community and yearn for something they know can exist. People feel isolated and disconnected. They feel like silos, joined to nothing. The expressways are full of cars with solo occupants, heading to the city to stare at a computer screen in a cubicle. They may e-mail others, perhaps, but they rarely talk face-to-face. After nine hours of work they return to their cars and return home. On campuses throughout the continent, faculty members drive onto campus, search angrily for a parking spot, see a student or two during office hours, teach their classes and go home. While faculty members may share a common grievance over parking, modern workers are held together by common irritation over traffic.

But there is a growing dis-ease over this lack of connection. Jane Tompkins, an English Professor explained it: "For some time now, I've been restless and dissatisfied with my life in the university, hungry for some emotional and spiritual fulfillment that it doesn't seem to afford. I crave a sense of belonging, the feeling that I'm part of an enterprise larger than myself, a part of a group that shares some common purpose."

Michael Hooker, former Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, believes that much of the mistrust, win/lose mentality and tension that exist in society today are due to the lack of community. While it is not clear that the "good old days" of the community sense in the workplace ever truly existed, there is clear agreement that community is missing—to the detriment of everyone.

Americans feel a lack of connectedness in their public lives. Interestingly, most Americans are satisfied with their private lives, recent surveys reveal. What they are deeply unhappy about is their public life—the direction in which our society as a whole is headed. This lack of community has been the subject of innumerable articles and studies. In the famous "Bowling Alone" premise, Robert Putnam argues that "the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades." He contends that Americans are less involved in organizations that require and provide social connectedness. In many of the organizations that have replaced the former primary social affiliation, "for the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter." Putnam's research reports that many small groups which exist today "merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest obligations."

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Some question the metaphor of "bowling alone"; whether people are, in fact, disengaged. In an article in Time, Richard Stengel and Ann Blackman argue that the community exists, but it is online rather than in person. "We are sitting alone staring into our computer screens...but are we bonding together?" But this asynchronous anonymous connection...
is not, argue Hallowell and others, true community. The silo metaphor continues, with the individual computer-silos on each person’s desk.

What is needed is a spider web rather than a silo. People need interconnection rather than isolation. The call for community is heard throughout organizations. Robert Zarefsky says that many voices have risen to “urge that society cultivate a stronger sense of responsibilities and obligations to match freedoms and rights...rekindling a sense of community at every level, from the local to the national.”

Community is needed for multiple reasons. It improves an individual’s physical and emotional well-being. A decade-long MacArthur Foundation study on aging found that “the top two predictors of well-being as people age are frequency of visits with friends and frequency of attendance at meetings of organizations.” It is hard to believe that all those meetings are health-giving, but in fact they provide the sense of community and connection.

Hallowell reports on the physiological reason for the increase in health. When people are in community, they experience an increase in hormones that promote trust and bonding. “These hormones...rise when we feel empathy for another person, in particular when we are meeting with someone face-to-face. These bonding hormones are at suppressed levels when people are physically separate.” Hallowell continues to explain that “scientists hypothesize that in-person contact stimulates two important neurotransmitters: dopamine, which enhances attention and pleasure, and serotonin, which reduces worry and fear.”

Working face-to-face in community enhances the intellectual, social, physical and emotional well-being of those in the organization. The establishment of community, or perhaps the reestablishment of a sense of community that has disappeared in the workplace, is possible. Ernest Boyer, the late director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, delineated six principles that define community. Boyer’s principles can be adapted to every organizational environment.

A workplace needs to be 1) purposeful, 2) open, 3) just, 4) disciplined, 5) caring, and 6) celebrative. These six principles, when put into practice, will allow an organization to be a “spider web” rather than a “silo.”

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A **purposeful community** is one in which every member of the organization knows and has a stake in the goals. The purpose of the organization should be that which engages and energizes everyone. In academia every person at the institution – from the president to the groundskeeper – has a stake in strengthening teaching and learning on campus. The way in which they manifest that goal is different for each person, but the goal is the same. In a purposeful community, attention is paid to keeping everyone actively engaged in the mission or purpose of the organization through training, special programming and social activities.

In an **open community**, each person’s freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and civility is powerfully affirmed. In this community, every meeting, every encounter, every class reflects open, honest communication. That is not easy in today’s workplace. Concerns for freedom of expression are weighed against worries about deceptive or abusive language. But the balance must be maintained; the participants in the workforce must have the opportunity to “speak the truth as they know it.” Boyer contends that “In an open community freedom of expression must be uncompromisingly defended. At the same time, offensive language must be vigorously denounced. An open, honest community means viewing language as a sacred trust and affirming that truth is the obligation we assume when we are empowered to use the words.”

As important as an honest community is a **just community** where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued. Issues of justice abound today, but they are too often considered "out of bounds" for the workforce. They are not, for an unjust workforce for anyone weakens the community. Everyone needs to make a
commitment to make a safe and just community for everyone who feels isolated, for those who are minorities because of lifestyle, sexual orientation, physical ability, color, gender or any other reason. In working toward a just community, it is important that every person in the workforce, regardless of title or position, feel safe, honored and sacred as a person.

What is the behavior of the common good in the organization? Boyer says that a disciplined community is needed where individuals accept their obligations to the group, and where well defined procedures guide the behavior for the common good. This requires that the individuals in the community gather together to determine standards of acceptable behavior. Before someone "crosses the line" she or he needs to know where the line is. Even in churches today, guidelines for acceptable behavior are common. The disciplined community allows everyone to know what is acceptable.

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In order for the web to be strong, each organization needs to be a caring community where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported, and where service to others is encouraged. Too often today the notion of feeling cared for is an oxymoron. The Human Relations School of organizations which, in the 1960s, stressed "feeling good" has unfortunately been replaced by the 1990's "lead, follow or get out of the way." "Sink or swim together" has been replaced by "You sink, I swim; you swim, I sink." This mentality has caused serious interpersonal rifts in organizations.

The call for a caring community calls for reflection on the social bonding that all humans (and other mammals) need for their well-being. Caring is the glue that holds human organizations together. The saying that "students don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care" reflects that yearning for the caring community in academia.

How often do people within organizations celebrate? Are there rituals in the organization which affirm both the tradition that holds the group together, and the change that propels it forward? A work community rarely celebrates too much. For most organizations the problem is quite the opposite. While people generally know that a good celebration brings the community together, they too often worry that it hinders progress.

The ideal community is purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring and celebrative. Does your organization fit that profile? Do you have a solid sense of community? Community is invaluable in every organization. Parker Palmer, a senior fellow of the Fetzer Institute noted: "When community breaks down, we have lost the greatest reward of all, which is feeling ourselves authentically connected to other people, sharing a vision and a goal, and willing to help each other pursue and sustain the difficulties of pursuing it. That is the greatest reward that exists in human life."

In his call for a solution to the conundrum, Palmer calls for creating communities of discourse where people within organizations join together to talk about what it means to work in that organization, to reflect on their practices, to reflect on shared experiences and practices. He suggests that people gather together to say, "This is what works for me, here is what doesn't work for me, here is what is troubling me, here is where the excitement is." This reflective conversation will work in academia, or in any other organization. Palmer says that when these conversations occur, two things happen: people get better at their chosen work, and the personal pain of disconnection begins to be lifted.

Creating community is the biggest challenge to organizations today. It is also their most significant opportunity.

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