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Finding Hidden Members in Your Community

It is not uncommon for rural Nebraska coffee shop talk to touch on the topic of who is involved or not involved in the community. Typically, the conversation comes to the conclusion that the same people seem to be doing everything. The topic could relate to a civic group, community event, or even an elected office in the community. There are no new faces and no new ideas as well as there is no one there to allow for a leadership transition. Have you ever heard this conversation? Have you participated in it?

To be honest, I have participated in a conversation like that, but it probably was not the “typical” conversation. I always try to think about the “why” - why this is the case? Why does this seem to happen? Is it real or do we just assume it is real?

First off, it could be real – many communities have populations that are stagnate and as people age, or move out of the community, there are fewer and fewer people to manage the same community roles. But it also could be perceived as something that is within our grasp to change. Perhaps our tactics for getting people involved or engaged have not kept up with the changing demographics and societal trends?

An Australian community developer, Vivien Twyford, and some of her colleagues in a book focused on community engagement, lifted up the notion that there are both invisible and visible community members. To understand her thinking, it is helpful to think of an iceberg with some of the ice sitting above sea level and some below. Above the ice, and visible, are people we see all the time in our communities: the activists, the vocal minority, the articulate irate, interested retirees and community leaders. Just below the surface of the ice, and generally invisible, are unique groups of people - those that “can’t see how they can help”, are culturally diverse, “didn’t see or hear the invitation to participate” and “those that don’t trust the sponsoring organization.” Further

down the iceberg, and in dark water, are two groups that are almost always invisible, according to Twyford: youth and indigenous or native Americans.

Do those groups and that way of visualizing them connect with you? Are there other groups that should be added, in your opinion? I know the people I interact with become a part of my everyday habit of human connections. Reaching out beyond that group can be something that does not happen unless I consciously make an effort to do it. So, I confess, I am probably blind to some invisible groups. I suspect I am not the only one who might be this way.

So how can we reach out to what might seem like the “invisible members” of a community? Here are a few ideas suggested by Twyford and her colleagues: First, make sure there are no barriers to participating in community events or gatherings: Is childcare available? Is the event publicized in a variety of ways to reach different groups? Is the event held at a time when working adults can attend? Are there people available to provide transportation? If needed, are certain key pieces of information translated into another language or is there someone who could help translate? One of the simplest gestures and one often overlooked is to personally reach out to people and ask them to participate. A personal invitation can mean a lot to someone who may not feel they are welcome to join in. Finally, once there, are organizational requests for help broken down into bit-sized commitments so that people can assist and feel they contributed but not feel like they are committing to a lifetime of work?

These are all simple gestures. If each person reached out and brought just one new person to a community event, for example, that could change everything. Helping them understand that their involvement could be a series of small and timely commitments that could fit into a busy lifestyle might be a

game-changer for other people. Just a few new faces on certain projects could offer up new ideas and thinking, which could alter that local coffee shop talk.

Reference

Twyford, V., Waters, S., Hardy, M., & Dengate, J. (2006). *Beyond Public Meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision-Making*. Twyford Communications Pty Limited, Australia.

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