



This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment is worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy (TGA). See page 18 for details.

OBJECTIVES

- Provide insights into the critical importance of developing a sense of community among township residents and other stakeholders
- Outline approaches to engage residents, businesses and others in envisioning a positive future for their community

CORE COMPETENCIES

- Communicates effectively
- Listens attentively
- Works effectively with individuals, departments and committees to achieve desired outcomes
- Motivates others to achieve desired outcomes

The dynamics of building community

Support for township projects, active, civil public engagement during board meetings, ample volunteers for committees and commissions.

Sound far-fetched?

Townships that actively seek to engage with their residents and build a sense of community can make those visions a reality.

Evidence shows that communities where citizens *don't* have a sense of belonging can have long-range consequences, including lack of support for infrastructure upgrades, lack of attention to home upgrades resulting in lower property values, poor local services, and weak social networks. Related problems—including isolation, mental health problems, fear of crime and declining schools—can lead to relocation for those who can, and feeling stuck by residents who don't have that option.

Author and consultant Peter Block has been engaging people on the topics of building community and civic engagement for decades. Block contends that an active local citizenry is key to a prosperous and thriving community, with resident-led action, initiating positive change, and connectedness to one's neighbors, township and region.

Block challenges citizens to become “contributors” to the well-being of their community. It is no surprise that Block supports the premise of servant-leadership, where local officials work in a partnership with their residents, to be supporters of and resources to others in their efforts to better their communities.

WAXING NOSTALGIC ON COMMUNITY

One can't help but draw the parallel between Peter Block's name and communities a generation ago. In those days, for many people, their entire world was their neighborhood “block.” Neighbors sat on front porches reading the newspaper, greeting passersby, and engaging them in lively discussions around local news. Children played in groups that welcomed a decade of age differences. The mechanic down the block helped fix your car, the lawyer next door was your counselor, and the teacher down the block wouldn't think twice in telling parents what their child had been up to on the playground or classroom that day.

Parents looked out for others' kids, you shopped locally, and community policing was just that—“community” policing because the officer who patrolled your neighborhood was just as likely to be your neighbor. Neighbors helped shovel snow, cleaned out flooded basements, and drove seniors to the store, the church or synagogue. They were fully engaged in their communities.

President John F. Kennedy's entreaty, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” resonated in communities across the country where neighbors took personal responsibility for getting things done. When residents are engaged in their communities—volunteering to clean up the local park, providing transportation to seniors, helping to organize a local event—they develop a sense of connectedness and pride, establishing the roots that become the foundation for a vibrant community.

LACKING COMMUNITY HAS COSTS

Creating that sense of community comes by nurturing a sense of pride in one's neighborhood, township, region and state. Take, for example, the local food movement, which can provide a tangible connection to one's area. Today's farmers' markets—many of which are hosted in the state's townships—benefit numerous segments of the population, including low-income residents by being certified to accept WIC, allowing those with the least means to access local fruits and vegetables more easily and cost effectively. Those local foods—often grown within or nearby the community—provide a tie to the area, helping connect residents to the place they call home.

Let's get even more personal than food, though. How often do you hear others talk about our children as a product of the “school system,” rather than a product of our community? What do our schools provide that our communities and families used to? Transportation, subsidized breakfasts and lunches, social workers, school supplies, before and after school care, supervised homework time, tutors, and the list goes on. And who do we blame if our children are not successful? The school system of course! And after school, how many children and families do you see outside freely playing? This has become



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far less common than in years past. Children, too, can become disconnected from their neighbors and isolated from their communities.

In his book “Bowling Alone,” about the revival of the American community, author Robert Putnam writes about how the quality of relationships that exists among citizens impacts the health of a community. He points out that in neighborhoods where neighbors don't know each other well, crime goes up. So we stay inside to stay safe, leading to less cohesion. In fact, criminologists have shown that crime rates go down in communities where neighbors know each other well.

STRONG COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS SUPPORT LOCAL ECONOMIES

Not only do strong communities support residents by connecting them with one another and with their local government, strong communities can have an entrepreneurial impact as well. Local communities are the natural birthplace of small business, one of our largest sources of new jobs. More than one quarter of job seekers currently get information from relatives, friends and neighbors regarding job openings.

Just think about how communities can help in the nurturing of small businesses—small business development centers offer advice to help those with a vision put their business plans together; chambers of commerce add connections and resources; local banks and venture capitalists lend support; and friends and neighbors with expertise add counsel and maybe even a little sweat equity. Networking abounds and soon local residents become part- and full-time employees, word-of-mouth advertising gets the word out, and locals add the buying power as they purchase their neighbor's goods and services.

A ‘MAGIC’ KEY TO SUCCESS

A year ago, I had the privilege of listening to former NBA pro and Michigan native Ervin “Magic” Johnson addressing the “Saginaw Promise” community on issues of education. ▶

How did this small community attract a superstar like Magic? Magic grew up attending Lansing schools and his parents are acquaintances of Saginaw's superintendent of schools. That personal connection helped in reaching out to an athlete and business superstar who could attract hundreds of people to this important initiative.

During a question-and-answer period, a young man asked Magic for one piece of advice when it came to being successful. Magic's answer? "Don't lose touch with your roots, your community." He shared the value of community with this young man when it comes to networking, helping to start new ventures and finding the best people with whom to work. Magic challenged him by asking who was more likely to financially support a new venture—one who knew him or knew of him and his capability, or a stranger? Sound advice from a kid from Lansing who took us from the playground through March Madness and the NBA to a well-respected entrepreneur and investor.

THE STRUCTURE OF BELONGING

When residents take ownership in their communities, they will build and nurture the place they call home. Local governments provide the support via infrastructure, public safety, libraries, roads, water, sewer, parks and housing that sustain jobs, education, health care and recreation. Involvement from residents is critical to help establish a sense of ownership

for their communities and allow them to be accountable for growing and sustaining community efforts.

Townships can assist in building this connection by bridging the gaps between fragmented sectors of the community: businesses, schools, social service organizations, recreation, spirituality, health care and government. To merge these groups, townships must establish a forum that is welcoming and hospitable, and invite the various perspectives from each of these diverse groups. Nothing is more powerful than the collective will of a community, all pulling in the same direction to improve quality of life for everyone.

START SMALL—AND MAKE IT FUN!

Small groups can be an impetus for relationships and energy. Town hall meetings have always been a great starting point because they got people interested in issues. Large groups invariably can lend themselves to griping and negativity, and can be more the tool of problem-solving than vision-setting. In small gatherings, it is easier to lay ground rules for proactivity, to redirect negativity toward the positive, and to welcome any conflict as a means of helping the best ideas come forward. Given the comfort of a small gathering, people may be more willing to ask questions, speak up, innovate and push boundaries, confident that they can voice their opinions in an open, inviting environment.

Additional tools for increasing community involvement

Annual reports—A written document that provides an overview of the entirety of a township's activities. Citizens can use these reports to judge if their township is delivering what it promised.

Board-community dialogues—An interactive meeting between the township board and residents where the board frames issues for, and receives feedback from, the participants.

Brochures—A pamphlet featuring overviews and summaries of township-related information in clear and easy-to-understand language, using visual elements such as graphs and photos to showcase township efforts.

Charette—A meeting held within a specified time limit where participants work intensely together to reach a resolution. The township sets the goals and time limit—and announces both ahead of time. A leader's responsibility is to bring out all points of view from concerned residents and other participants.

Citizen panels (*advisory committees*)—These panels are composed of a representative sample of citizens with the aim of ensuring broad representation and providing a forum for ongoing consultation.

Community forums—A meeting where local residents express their views to decision-makers on priorities for the township and provide feedback on the performance of implementation strategies.

Consensus conference—A group of 10 to 15 citizens randomly selected to question experts on a policy issue, after which they discuss the issue among themselves. At the end, they publicly present the conclusions they share.

Direct mail—Delivery of written information directly to citizens' doorsteps. This is a very broad and relatively expensive tool to inform citizens.

E-news—Electronic newsletters published and distributed by the

township to residents who subscribe by submitting their e-mail addresses.

Electronic bulletin board—An area of a website where users can post messages for other users to read and respond.

Focus groups—A gathering of a group of residents in one place for a period of a day or less, who receive information and are interviewed individually and together about their views and reactions.

Information center—A designated space at the township that is accessible to citizens and provides information about township programs and services.

Listserv—An automatic online mailing list server sponsored by the township. Residents subscribe to a given discussion, and the conversations are distributed to the entire subscriber base via e-mail.

Media relations—Building relationships with journalists to increase awareness and coverage of your township's activities and services.

Know in advance the focus of any discussion. There will be very different outcomes if the discussion is focused around a narrower goal of improving the community versus improving the entire state! When seeking a healthy, competent community that is engaged in its own success, carefully consider the purpose. The need for diverse viewpoints and demographics—people who are well respected as well as those who are marginalized—is critical. Pay close attention to the numbers of each group so you don't encounter "agenda pushing."

"World Café," an approach to engaging people in conversations that matter, includes placing diverse participants in a warm and inviting atmosphere where as people talk, others write down—or even draw—the ideas worth retaining. Paper tablecloths can serve as idea boards. Butcher paper, flipchart paper, post-it notes or colored markers can be used. Ideas are preserved in a large format that everyone can see. Links are drawn and are similar to connections made in information mapping. Conversation rotates among tables, with one person staying with their "home" table, to explain what's been discussed thus far—while others circulate and build on others' perspectives.

A key to success? Comfort. People who are physically comfortable, mentally open, and emotionally safe to ask compelling questions and express themselves openly and creatively make all the difference.

SET THE STAGE FOR DISCUSSION

Small groups can help us focus on the collective wisdom of the group, rather than engaging in expensive studies and consultants. If unsure of how to start, ask "What question, if answered, could make the greatest difference to the future of the situation we're exploring here? What do we value in our community?"

Make sure to use quality questions. Consider questions that are:

- *Ambiguous*, with no one right answer
- *Personal*, bringing out people's perceptions
- *Evocative*, allowing people to recognize the need for change

Once you're headed into discussion, ask people to speak about the issue(s) with a bias toward the future. Discourage time spent talking about the past, criticizing previous work done or name calling. If local officials work to change the conversation, they can help to change their community—for the better. Set ground rules where participants are to focus forward, set visions for the future, contribute from their minds and hearts persuasively, not abrasively, speak of opportunities and challenges, welcome others' differing ideas respectfully, and share stories that "pave the way" toward change. ▶

Newsletter—An effective way to convey important information to busy residents and stakeholders about township activities. Regardless of budget, newsletters can be as simple or complex as your township would like, as long as it reflects and speaks to the character of your community. Newsletters can also be emailed to residents and posted on the township's website.

Office hours—This tool offers citizens regular opportunities to meet and talk to township officials and personnel.

Open houses—An event hosted by the township, for example at the township hall or fire station, to showcase township buildings and services.

Public hearings—Public hearings are required in certain decision-making processes (budgets and special assessments, for example). Chaired by the township board or another appointed commission, they are open to all who wish to attend.

Public opinion polls—Established instruments for portraying opinions held by a population on a given issue at a certain moment in time. To deliver statistically valid results, public opinion polls follow a strict methodology, involving random samples, trained interviewers and pre-tested questionnaires.

Social media—Online social media sites, including blogs, Facebook and Twitter, allow townships to quickly convey information about events and services, and offers residents an opportunity to respond and provide feedback and opinions.

Suggestion box—A container located in the township hall, which allows for the collection of suggestions and complaints.

Survey—A structured series of questions presented to citizens. The responses of a representative sample are collected and analyzed. Questions can be either closed (choice of several pre-defined answers) or open (answer freely).

Website—An invaluable way of reaching residents, offering contact information, meeting schedules, ordinances, community information, and an array of other township details.

Welcome packets—A small packet of information that describes the township and services provided to all new residents when they contact the township for water/sewer service, register to vote or file a property transfer.

Working with youth—The promotion of local government is important to help develop a level of understanding and involvement by young residents in township government. Start a youth advisory council or hold a mock township election.



Involvement from residents is critical to help establish a sense of ownership for their communities and allow them to be accountable for growing and sustaining community efforts.

Be prepared to “prime the pump” with ideas for focusing on the gifts and talents that individuals bring to your community or the township’s assets and resources rather than deficiencies. In addition, remind participants that oftentimes the vision for the future arises out of good questions being asked, not just good answers being delivered. Finally, a small group approach is designed to make people feel comfortable. So lighten up, enjoy the conversation, and encourage everyone to have fun!

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY? BACK TO LANGUAGE

“Stuck” communities broadcast all the reasons we will fail. Their stories are full of accusations, injustices and wrongdoing, told as if they were truths that forecast our future. What often comes from this language is a widespread cynicism and a focus on the past, rather than a vision toward the future. Labeling— young people on the corner as “at risk youth” or immigrants as “illegals”—can also box us in, and quickly become negative.

Use of the word “but” depletes the energy from the group. As you move from one conversation to the next, watch what happens to the number of diverse ideas being shared when others use the word “but.” “I think that’s a great idea, Joy, but how do you think we’d ever come up with funds for that?” “Great partnership idea, Nathan, but how many private companies have you ever seen willing to free their employees up to work on that?” Buzz-killer in just one word: BUT.

CONNECT PATTERNS AND THEMES

As citizens rotate tables, adding more and more ideas, listen for connections in patterns and themes being made from person to person, table to table. Once rotations are completed, invite all to silently walk among the tables, reading themes, looking at pictures, and be prepared to share commonalities that emerge. Large group conversation at the conclusion focuses not on differences, but on where there is agreement. Stop those who choose to divide the group or discussion—resulting in a drain of energy and enthusiasm. Instead, focus on the positives that will give your discussion high energy and momentum and take things to the next level.

WHO TO ENGAGE NEXT

In the book, “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference,” author Malcolm Gladwell provided a recipe for success by involving three kinds of people to influence sweeping change. Align the names of people and/or groups in your community with the following descriptors and ensure that the township includes them in civic engagement processes going forward:

Connectors. Connectors are networking hubs—they know large numbers of people, and happily and routinely make introductions to others outside their typical circle. Where connectors are particularly helpful in building community is by their array of social, cultural, professional and economic circles, which they cross routinely.

Mavens. Mavens help love to solve problems and make change happen through knowledge and ideas—and openly share those with others.

Salespeople. Salespeople are persuasive—they can take an idea, sell it to the greater community and rally support behind it.

Townships provide community support through infrastructure as well as direction in the process of “building community,” while partnering with community members to effect positive change and improvements at the local level. Citizens take ownership

For example ...

Making a difference toward a healthy state

There is rarely a day we don’t hear about Michigan’s problems with poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. Conversations occur routinely throughout the state—in communities, in businesses, in schools and in homes—as we deal with the social and financial costs of poor health. Pure Michigan Fit, a state initiative run by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, with a focus on the gifts and talents of non-government partners, sought out an expanded community through partners like Spartan Stores, Michigan Fitness Foundation, Michigan Osteopathic Association, YMCAs and other private partners to work together to provide resources for families and kids to get healthier through nutrition and physical activity.

This disparate group of businesses, government and non-profits are all making inroads toward healthy living for Michigan residents by tying into each other’s initiatives and leveraging resources to make a more meaningful impact. These organizations extended their communities. They started with a conversation. They focused on gifts. They held true to their vision. And they’re making a difference.

and commit to action, especially because they've been involved in efforts from the initial ideation to the realization of dreams. Connectors help diverse teams of people get in touch. Mavens help blast through barriers. Respected salespeople keep the vision within reach. Good things happen.

START SMALL, DREAM BIG

Townships can make efforts to fostering a more active citizenry by being visionary and inviting others to share that vision in effecting local change. Start small and dream big. Be the model of change you dream for building your community. Ask yourself: "What will our community do today to make a difference in the lives of our citizens tomorrow?" ■

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See page 18 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.



Continuing Education Self-Assessment

Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), MTA's credentialing program, may obtain 2.0 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. *(To receive credit, this quiz must be completed by June 1, 2017.)* To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a minimum passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "The dynamics of building community," beginning on page 12. There is no charge

for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit. Completed quizzes should be faxed to (517) 321-8908 or mailed to: MTA, 512 Westshire Dr., Lansing, MI 48917. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz.

IMPORTANT: Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder. For information about TGA, call (517) 321-6467 or visit www.michigantownships.org/members/tga.asp on the members-only section of MTA's website.

TGA Continuing Education—June 2013 The dynamics of building community

NAME: _____ TOWNSHIP & COUNTY: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

1. **Evidence shows that communities where citizens don't have a sense of belonging:**
 - a. may experience an increase in property values due to home upgrades
 - b. may experience an increase in support for infrastructure upgrades
 - c. may experience declining schools and fear of crime
 - d. may experience a decrease in resident relocation
2. **When residents are engaged in their communities:**
 - a. they become indifferent to volunteer opportunities
 - b. they develop a sense of connectedness and pride
 - c. local events lack participation
 - d. the foundation of even a vibrant community is weakened
3. **According to the article, many farmers' markets today:**
 - a. are unable to provide foods grown within or nearby the community
 - b. are unable to compete with big box stores
 - c. are catering to the low-income population
 - d. are catering to students at local universities
4. **According to the author of "Bowling Alone" about the revival of the American community:**
 - a. Crime rates go down in communities where neighbors know each other well
 - b. Crime rates go up in communities where neighbors know each other well
 - c. Neighbors stay inside for safety so crime rates don't change
 - d. Neighbors experience an increase in the quality of relationships given the increase in crime rates
5. **Which of the following does NOT describe how strong community connections support local economies:**
 - a. Job seekers get information from relatives, friends and neighbors
 - b. Banks and venture capitalists lend support
 - c. Locals purchase neighbor's goods and services
 - d. Friends and neighbors with expertise add counsel and sweat equity
6. **Townships can assist in bridging gaps between fragmented sectors of the community by:**
 - a. connecting schools, businesses and social service organizations to establish a forum
 - b. connecting schools with the business community to foster entrepreneurship
 - c. establishing a forum of community leaders that share the same perspective
 - d. establishing a welcoming forum with perspectives from diverse groups
7. **According to the article, small groups:**
 - a. invariably lend themselves to griping and negativity
 - b. tend to hinder relationships and energy
 - c. stimulate both relationships and energy
 - d. can be more a tool of problem-solving rather than vision-setting
8. **"World Café," is an approach to:**
 - a. focusing conversation on a global versus regional level
 - b. focusing conversation on an individual community verses an entire state
 - c. engaging in expensive studies and consultants
 - d. engaging people in conversations that matter
9. **Which of the following is key when attempting to drive discussion with a bias toward the future:**
 - a. respectful reception of diverse ideas on opportunities and challenges
 - b. respectful discussion of what's been done in the past
 - c. respectful criticism of previous work done
 - d. respectful use of the word "but"
10. **Which of the following personality types, described in the article, keep the vision within reach?**
 - a. connectors
 - b. mavens
 - c. salespeople
 - d. all of the above