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How To Build Community And Why It Matters So Much

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I write about happiness, work-life fulfillment and the future of work.

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Community is critical to our health and wellbeing. GETTY

You're feeling the effects of the pandemic, quarantines and social isolation acutely. You're missing your people, your network and your community. Sure, you've stayed in touch with those with

whom you're closest, but your more distant ties are diminishing, disappearing or declining.

Community is critical to our overall wellbeing and the decline of our connectedness is coming at the same time mental health issues are on the rise. In a [study](#) by Queen's University, 27% of people said they were suffering from loneliness, and [research](#) from Washington State University found all ages suffer from social anxiety and FOMO (fear of missing out) which are correlated with low self-esteem and low self-compassion. In addition, a newly-published [study](#) by the University of Houston showed the mental health effects of the pandemic will be both long lasting and potentially devastating.

We are social animals and our instinct is to find strength in numbers. We appreciate a small circle of people, but need larger circles as well. Our health and happiness are inextricably linked with our connections.

Yet despite the sweeping effects of the pandemic, we can strengthen and sustain community. You can have impact as an individual, and as a leader.

Purpose

Strong communities have a significant sense of purpose. People's roles have meaning in the bigger picture of the community and each member of the group understands how their work connects to others' and adds value to the whole. As members of community, people don't just want to lay bricks, they want to build a cathedral.

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Build your community by [keeping your purpose in mind](#) and reminding yourself of how your contribution matters. You're a great parent, aunt or uncle, and you're having a meaningful impact on children's learning. Or you're participating on a key project which will affect the user experience for your company's customers. Or you're processing payments at a university where students will get their start toward their life goals. Even everyday contributions matter to the community as a whole.

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As a leader, provide people with vision and line of sight so they are crystal clear about the [broader purpose of the organization](#) and how their work fits into the whole. Also give them a sense of business literacy so they understand context and know how they can be proactive and make an impact. Taking these actions will give individuals a better experience, and also strengthen the overall community.

Belonging

When we are part of a thriving community, we feel a sense of kinship, camaraderie and connectedness. There is a place and a role for each person, and group members feel they can bring all of themselves to their work and their team. There are high levels of [trust and psychological safety](#) in which people know others will have their backs and will give them not only the benefit of the doubt, but the space to apply their talents and develop new ones. Within a strong community, people feel valued and all work has dignity. In addition, the needs of each member and the needs of the whole organization are fully met. As Plato said, “The part cannot be well unless the whole is well.” Communities take care of their members and vice versa—because they are invested in the collective success of the group.

The strength of our bonds matters too. A just-published [study](#) by Ohio State University found people feel more supported when their networks are more tightly knit. In other words, when your own connections know each other, you’re more likely to feel supported.

Build your community by staying in touch with people—even if you have to accomplish it virtually. Invest time and energy in maintaining your bonds. Send a quick note to someone you haven’t seen in a while or call a more distant acquaintance. While making a phone call may seem very yesterday, a new [study](#) by the University of Texas Austin found voice calls can create stronger bonds than text messages.

Also, demonstrate compassion and [help others feel a sense of belonging](#). New [findings](#) published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* found people made better decisions when they considered others. After yoga, invite a new attendee to have a physically-distanced coffee with your core group, or ask for input from a colleague on

your project. People appreciate being welcomed and valued. The sense of belonging you extend strengthens the whole.

As a leader, hold **regular one-on-ones** with your staff members. Have frequent meetings with your team so you can coordinate tasks and ensure people are making meaningful connections. Encourage team members to pull each other in, obtain feedback and work through tough challenges together. Encourage people to build their social capital—their relationship ties (think: webbing) across organizations. Social capital is positive for people because it provides the opportunity for growth, learning and advice. And it is good for organizations because social capital helps people get work done more effectively and efficiently.

Resilience

Strong communities are always evolving. They aren't immune from tough circumstances, instead they adapt and become stronger as they cope together. The most effective communities support members who take risks, try new things and go out on limbs to create and innovate. Effective communities also embrace conflict and diversity—working through differences of opinion and making space for civil discourse and the learning that occurs from appreciating multiple points of view.

New **research** published in *The Economic Journal* found the most novel, disruptive innovations, and those which linked technologies across and between fields were most likely to arise within cities. This was because the networks in cities were denser—with more people exchanging ideas and testing new thinking across social and professional groups.

Build your community by seeking new learning and stretching your own skills. When people within communities are continually

developing, the communities themselves progress as well. Help members of your group who are struggling by encouraging plenty of expression, especially from those with fresh or novel opinions. Innovation often comes from the edges— previously untested, untried or unpopular ideas.

As a leader, encourage career growth and support people if they try something new and fail. Don't let perfection get in the way of progress. If you're not seeing some mistakes or missteps, your team may not be reaching high enough. When work is stellar, recognize it. Also hold people accountable for performance, while also making room for team members to stretch.

We are craving community and cannot live our best lives without it. Our mental health and our physical health literally depend on being part of strong and capable communities. Remind yourself how much you matter, and take action to strengthen and sustain your community.

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