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Guest Editorial: The Magic Pill to Success

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I have come to believe that there is a “magic pill” to success in our organizations. I have witnessed it in action only a few times, and wonder if those who have it even realize it. Do they know how they got it, or how it can be used to great benefit?

What is this antecedent? I offer that it is *community*. Not “community” in the where-I-live sense of the word. Rather, “community” typified by people bound in common purpose and values. People with an affinity for each other, who care for one another, who thrive - perhaps, survive - because they are together.

This concept first struck me when giving a class to those involved with land trusts. We were discussing persuasive writing - using our rhetoric to call people to action. Interestingly, one of the key concepts in rhetoric is “ethos”: the character or fundamental values peculiar to a specific person, people, culture or movement. Even more interesting is the original Greek meaning of the word: “accustomed place.” As the father of rhetoric, Aristotle contended that ethos is the most important element - or proof - required to persuade.

So back to my class: Probably five hours into the lessons came the most significant “aha!” I’ve ever witnessed. At a moment, virtually everyone in the room came to great clarity on why people involve themselves with a land trust. It was both striking and surprising to each of us: While land trust “types” love the land - beautiful vistas, working landscapes, wildlife and its habitat - this is not what ultimately motivates and inspires. What ties people to the work of the land trust is *other people*...connection with those who also care about the land. Being part of the community of like-intentioned sojourners.

When organizations effectively connect people with people - whether volunteers, donors, staffers, board members - they meet the exceedingly strong human desire for acceptance, and equally strong need to give to others. Doing this on a corporate level ultimately provides abundant resources for the organization and its mission. People engage their time, attention and money when they become part of the tribe (as today’s trendier agencies term the phenomenon).

It follows, then, that when this connectedness does not happen, the organization will endlessly struggle.

Community sometimes is built with intention, but more often without. We see how it has embraced us personally when we consider those we hold most dear:

- The ones with whom we spent our time at college, being too far from home to rely on lifelong supports, believing ourselves too old to call on our families, and experiencing too many new ideas and people to do anything but spend hours in discussion and inquiry.
- Those with whom we went to war, serving in the literal and figurative trenches against ideologies that we could not abide.
- Friends, family and even professionals who have stayed beside us through life’s most difficult times, providing comfort through disappointment, devastation, death.

The movies we watch, the stories we retell, the songs that make us cry are about a “community” of two or more, battered and yet furthered by life.

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All types of organizations can build this sort of community. I've seen it in churches, hospice organizations, community radio stations and, yes, land trusts. It seems easiest when a physical place invites people to gather in a welcoming and nurturing environment, but this likely isn't a prerequisite.

Strong communities can seem cliquish from the outside; this seems to go with the territory, whether we admit it or not. If you don't "fit in," these communities make you feel like you've been banished to the Island of Misfit Toys. On the contrary, some highly-successful communities are exactly that: A place for those who otherwise *are* misfits. But these misfits-who-fit will do virtually anything to ensure the success of the community, bringing the full power of their resources to benefit their found "home."

The strength of community is in its ability to secure a role for everyone, allowing us to "Grow where you are planted." Things aren't perfect but they are inner inclusive, providing opportunities for all members to give and to receive, to learn and to teach, to labor and to rest...as they cast away stones and gather stones together (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

You know a community when you feel it, and if you're fortunate enough to be a part of it then you are fed by its continuous replenishing. We can't manufacture it, as community organically emerges from its clear and meaningful ethos, pursued by those of sincerity and compassion. Both the whole and each of its parts are fed by this magic pill, providing enough strength to move beyond the community and impact the larger world in which it resides.

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