

The Community Empowerment Model

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The Community Empowerment Model is a map for mobilizing community initiatives. The model begins with teaching ourselves to think differently, since *changing the way we see things changes our perception of those things we see. This changes the meaning of those things, their application, and potential!* As we open participant perceptions it allows them to “see” the community in a “different light” or with “new eyes.” Seeing the community differently is a very difficult undertaking since many of us are trained to see problems. In our experience problem identification is viewed as beneficial since it produces need, which results in increased potential for grant funds. The more problematic our communities, the more money we stand to potentially reap. While this produces an immediate benefit for increased funding, the long term deficit is that we produce a negative mental image, which defines the way we think about our communities and ourselves. Through a more positive appreciative approach, we begin by asking questions about what type of community the participants want to create. We involve them in developing a highly specific description of what they want so they begin to conceptually “move into” this community before they even leave the first session. We want them to begin seeing, feeling and hearing what they want, with such detail that they leave the first session changed. This process leads the client directly into discovering what the community “holds” for them by creating the community they want in which to live.

In much of our traditional training we are taught to be deficit focused. Grants are based on levels of need. The worse off we are, the more money we stand to get. The more needy, the more we justify our need for assistance with funding as the perceived vehicle to end our predicament. The problem with this view is, after years of looking at ourselves as deficient, we tend to believe it, thinking of ourselves as deficient. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy since we become what we think. Altering our view allows reassessment of the community with less bias. Traditional models present a disincentive to improvement, since the healthier, better or more capable we become, the greater the potential to lose funding and other external resources.

Rather than create new “coalitions,” this model utilizes existing systems and infrastructures to develop a comprehensive approach. This model continues with the development of effective coordination, alignment of community organizational structures, and the capacity to create communities we want to live in.

Once training has taken place to alter the way we perceive the community and the language used to frame our experiences, we undertake a “community discovery” to rediscover what the community holds as possible resources. Discovering removes the traditional bias of a needs or resource assessment and puts this effort in a neutral frame. This encourages those involved to see what exists. Discovery is exactly what is needed since every problem is actually recognition of a lack of functionality within the community. What may be seen as a deficit to one person may be seen as a value to others. It is vitally important to record all that we discover from different perspectives (including individuals, informal groups of individuals, formal groups, organizations, businesses or institutions).

Discovering our community with all its strengths and weaknesses, allows us to see what we have so we can move to prioritizing what we want to create and consequently, the items of concern for the community. Without honoring community concerns, moving ahead is much more difficult. It is important to motivate the community by picking items of community concern, as well and mediating them. Paying attention to issues most frequently voiced or those most often discussed in the community often addresses this. These issues are often the first place to start, since they may be more likely to gain rapid community support and already have inertia. Creating the ideal community you've identified requires identifying the resources in the community to support this effort.

Once problem areas are discovered, existing untapped resources may be identified which have the potential to positively or negatively impact selected issues. Opportunities for training on developing effective coalitions and organizational development are undertaken. Unidentified systems may have been present and available to respond which were never initiated. Are there individuals, groups (both informal and formal), or systems within your community who have been overlooked or underutilized which could now provide valuable resources? Are there untapped resources within the community with talents, resources or abilities are who are willing to offer them to the community? These existing resources form the infrastructure for development of a balanced approach to empower your community.

Traditionally, communities maintain professional services as the central focus of response to need in our communities. Social, psychological, and physical treatment organizations are often located within the community forming the community's center. While they are centrally located to meet the needs of the people in the community, they can potentially disempowering community members when they are perceived, as by *being* the central focus of the community.

People are the community, and they **experience** problems. They are not problems to be solved. Instead, people are the central resource of the community and the hub of all internal efforts. People are our communities. People are resources with capabilities, talents, abilities, and problems, together making up our social structure. People of diverse backgrounds, and even more diverse ideas reside in the homes, work in the businesses, join clubs, teams, churches and organizations, which enhance and enrich our communities. When individuals and existing organizational structures are effectively developed to utilize their existing capabilities, supported by professional services, everyone has the potential for improvement. Social services are in place to provide what they are intended to provide; short-term or long term support services to assist in cases of disasters and catastrophic events. When our communities were formed in colonial times, they aided in protecting and supporting the individuals within them. They were not there to meet every need, but to supply larger, common safety requirements. We may have lost touch with our neighbors who fail to recognize the need to rekindle interpersonal relationships and benefit by learning from the past. Rather than building new coalitions we encourage the functional development collaboration amongst existing organizations and group structures within the community. Through learning and self-examination, the community begins to effectively build infrastructures to meet their own needs and move away from programmatic dependency. When we look at maximizing the potential of the individuals in the community, we begin to focus our energy, which otherwise lies dormant.

Existing systems begin taking responsibility for the people that make them up. By developing coordinated approaches using programs as support, rather than looking for a “program” to address the problem, we move away from over simplifying the solution. Often we settle for “the answer” found through the most simplistic, expedient answers to complex and difficult problems. Seeking and settling for the easiest or quickest response often causes shortcuts within the process resulting in the best and most appropriate solutions being undiscovered. The first, easiest, and quickest answer is often just that, fast, quick and easy; it is not usually the best or most appropriate solution or solutions

Approaches are developed to maximize the capabilities of existing resources within the community and minimize over-reliance and overburdening of any one entity. By putting the approach in the midst of the community, everyone has access to the process, yet no one controls it. This promotes and encourages communication amongst community members and fosters interactions in the context of an open process. Utilizing various resources within the community allows for a more comprehensive and diverse plan to be developed. This allows for greater role clarification and provides opportunities for increased leveraging of existing resources. Often external professional services are invited when someone within the community could provide the same service and would share in the benefit of enhanced community interactions.

As networks evolve, additional organizations within the system are identified and brought into the mix. The more organizations are brought in, the greater opportunity to make substantive change. This process expands to form a net for the residents of the community, creating community empowerment and greater opportunity for residents and organizations to participate within their community.

By linking community partnerships, we begin to empower individuals to make changes for their community and begin to move away from the dependency on professional services. The community never takes the place of professional services since there are always those individuals, families and systems, which have extensive need. There is never a time when this level of need is gone, so professionals should never be worried about being displaced.

This process is not a quick fix, but the establishment of a long term, sustained effort to create the community we want to live in. Multiple tools and strategies are taught throughout the process to expand member perception and increase consistency. It is a method for using existing groups, organizations, and services in a coordinated manner to address social issues. As envisioned, the need for additional resources would be minimal since no one entity is responsible for carrying the burden of this effort. By truly empowering existing resources, the basic infrastructure is strengthened to the point it becomes self-supporting. Thus resulting in greater self-reliance and less social dependency. By elevating the capabilities of community members and their already existing “communities” we guide more people toward addressing their own issues and aid them in helping themselves and therefore their community.

Training on organizational planning, team building, functional behavior of groups, and the use of organizational coaching greatly assists in developing cohesive teams within the community. With many of the organizations we have worked with this step has been often overlooked or undervalued. Since you can’t give away what you don’t own, organizations need to become functional groups before they attempt community change. Dysfunctional groups have a hard time modeling functional behavior, particularly for a dysfunctional community. We believe an organization must become functional *before* it can model functional behavior. Once your organization has awakened its greatness, it can better assist your community in unlocking the potential it already holds.