

FIVE STEPS TO BUILDING COMMUNITY

Adapted by Jennifer Martin from Building Community in Youth Groups by Denny Rydberg

Step One: Bond Building

The first step in building community is to break down the cliques and barriers that exist, and to establish a trust relationship among the individuals. This is accomplished by giving the group members a problem solving task which requires them to work side by side with others in the group. As they discuss solutions and physically help one another accomplish the goal, bonds are built between people of diverse backgrounds. Cooperation is the main goal. As each person's input is accepted and welcomed by others, they begin to identify themselves as part of the group - part of the team.

Step Two: Opening Up

When an individual can share non-threatening areas of his or her life, an exciting step in group building has taken place. People like to talk about themselves. If a person perceives that another person is genuinely interested in her or him, then telling one's peers about oneself provides an opportunity for trust to develop in the group. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. If a person perceives that others don't care to listen, trust will not be built. The more empathetically a youth group listens, the more secure a person feels when sharing his or her personal struggles.

The exercises done in this step should be generic enough so that people can share to whatever degree they feel comfortable. Participants go away from these activities enthusiastic about the deepening friendships they are developing in their group. They realize that their personal imperfections are not unique. When people discover they are *normal* they are able to accept and deal with their problems in a much more constructive way.

Step Three: Affirming

Crucial to the growing process of a group is the act of encouraging each other through affirmation. When a young man hears his peers complementing him, he enjoys his participation in the group much more and is more likely to share deeper feelings. When a young woman is told by her friends that they appreciate her, her feeling of self-worth dramatically increases. Many reclusive youth become active members of the group when they realize others care about them. Participants who have been involved in affirming strategies leave the meeting feeling *warm and fuzzy* about the group and themselves. This feeling is especially crucial at this stage in the process of community building. After revealing their inner selves during the *Opening Up* stage, people need positive feedback to reassure them the other members of the group think they are still okay before they will consider sharing further. It is important to remember that adult leaders and advisors are an integral part of the community building process and need affirmation just like everyone else.

Step Four: Stretching

Group members facing struggles together must actively care for each other. Individuals can not merely say they care for each other in a stretching exercise; they must actively show it. With most groups, difficult situations naturally arise if the group is together long enough; i.e... divorce, extreme illness, division of the church, etc. However, since many youth groups are together for only a short period you may not want to wait for a stretching experience to surface on its own. It is sometimes necessary to initiate one.

Stretching experiences reap multi-faceted benefits. They create an atmosphere where people now feel comfortable enough to expose their imperfections to the group. For example, before the group travels to a hospital to visit terminally ill children, a popular member who appears to have his life together might admit his apprehensions about talking one on one with dying children. When he sees that the group still likes him, he realizes that his facade of perfection is unnecessary. And when the self-critical members of the group discover that even seemingly perfect people have struggles, they become free to love themselves.

Suddenly, through a simple stretching exercise, individuals realize they can achieve much more as a group than they could as a collection of individuals. They realize the importance of each member to the entire group.

Stretching experiences can be a tremendous catalyst for personal growth. Facing and overcoming programmed difficulties give young people the confidence that they can cope with the everyday problems they face. They learn that they can accomplish more than they thought possible. They believe in themselves.

Step Five: Deeper Sharing and Goal Setting

At this stage, individuals share deeply with one another and set goals. The youth group becomes the setting where young people can express their inner hurts, visions and struggles. People are not laughed at nor condemned for admitting they flunked a test, or that they dream of becoming a US senator, or that they have a drinking problem.

When a group member shares a problem, the rest of the group is empathetic and gives support and encouragement. The group helps the individual talk through possible solutions and set goals. The group holds the individual accountable while giving him or her the freedom to fail.

It is important to keep in mind that not all of a person's deep inner thoughts are appropriate to share in a group setting. Obviously, a person should be discouraged from telling the entire youth group the details of her or his struggles with a lover. Young people should be encouraged to share these struggles with one another or the advisor(s) on a one to one basis.

Action

Taking a group through the five steps is essential and growth-producing, but accomplishes only the beginning of the exercises' benefits. Once a sense of community is built, participants are ready to risk sharing with their peers in a non-programmed way. They are also ready to move ahead in a united way to accomplish other goals; goals which include outreach to others, that the group may have set for itself.