

Contributed by Mike Green | ABCD Institute Faculty

“To Get The Right Ducks; You Need The Right Duck Call ”

Mike Green

My daughter Annie is now 22 years old. When Annie was about 11 years old she was a student in a school in Aurora, Colorado. Annie had been a pioneer in Inclusion in her school. At this particular time Annie was being teased daily on her bus ride to school by some kids who called Annie a “retard”, “dumbo” and other very painful names. Annie was very unhappy about this—and did not know what to do. I was both very sad and very angry—and did not know what to do. We tried various things which did not work.

I had recently started working with John McKnight and the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute on community development. John was visiting us staying overnight at our home in Denver. At that time I imagined that John knew the answer to any community problem as “an expert” on community development. So I hounded John to solve Annie’s problem all evening long—and he did not know what to do about the problem. Finally in frustration John started up the stairs to escape my questions. Standing on the stair steps John turned to me and pointed out at our street lined with houses. He said almost shouting, “You can’t solve this problem. Furthermore Annie can’t solve this problem. The problem is that people don’t know that they need Annie. If you want to do something-- then work on this question. How do you organize community life so that people know there is no one that we don’t need.” John then went upstairs to bed. I have considered that moment a mission statement for me since that evening. How do you “get them to do it”?

This summer I had the opportunity to attend the Portland Inclusion Institute in July to present the ABCD community building approach as a workshop. I remembered John McKnight many years ago on my stairs in Denver-- challenging me about the people of everyday life. In Portland this year I heard several people at my workshop describe the challenge of, “How do we get beyond the ‘special world’ of people with disabilities, their families, and their service providers? How do we build a bridge into everyday life?” John’s challenge to activate everyday life seems all the more the right question today.

A great success of the Inclusion movement has been to develop inspiration and practices for community building such as circles, PATH, MAP. Much powerful work has focused on people labeled disabled, their groups, families, schools, and supporting agencies. This work has helped many people cross the bridge from the edge of the community to the center. Inclusion work has helped many support organizations and schools develop strategies that truly build community.

What is still needed is that everyday community life be organized on the other side of the bridge. This is the challenge ahead for us all.

How does this work happen? This kind of community work does not focus on the person labeled disabled. The key question is how to activate the wider community to recognize that all people are needed as participants and then act to create avenues for participation for labeled people. This is work to engage local community organizations (associations, congregations, businesses, non profits, and government agencies) to include people labeled disabled and to act for community development.

To me the fundamental dilemma in successfully engaging everyday life is "how do you get the right group of people together to build this bridge?" If you want to involve people outside the special world of people labeled, their families, and providers, then these 'other' people must be at the center of the 'community organizing group'. You need the right ducks. Hunters (or photographers) say that you need the right 'duck call' to get the 'right duck'. If you want mallards you need a Mallard call. Pintails, Bluefins, Oregon ducks each need the right call to be involved. The 'duck call' that works is built of relationship, listening, and asking. From my ABCD experience there are twelve guiding principles to form an organizing group that can call the right ducks:



TWELVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ABCD IN ACTION

Most communities address social and economic problems with only a small amount of their total capacity. Much community capacity is not used and is needed! This is the challenge and opportunity of community engagement. Everyone in a community has something to offer. There is no one we don't need.

- 1) **EVERYONE HAS GIFTS.** With rare exception people can contribute and want to contribute. Gifts must be discovered. Gift giving opportunities must be offered. Strong communities know they need everyone. There is unrecognized capacity and assets in every community. Find it.
- 2) **RELATIONSHIPS BUILD A COMMUNITY.** See them, make them, and utilize them. An intentional effort to build and nourish relationships is the core of ABCD and of all community building.
- 3) **PEOPLE AT THE CENTER** can engage the wider community. People in leadership in everyday life (associations, congregations, neighborhoods, and local business) must be at the center of community initiatives rather than just helping agency leaders. It is essential to engage the wider community as actors (community members) not just as recipients of services (clients).
- 4) **LEADERS INVOLVE OTHERS AS ACTIVE MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY.** Leaders from the wider community of voluntary associations, congregations, neighborhoods, local business, can engage others from their sector. Community building leaders always need to have a constituency of people to involve. This "following" is based on trust, influence, and relationship. Strong community leaders invite a growing circle of people to act.
- 5) **PEOPLE CARE ABOUT SOMETHING.** Agencies and neighborhood groups often complain about apathy. Apathy is a sign of bad listening. People in communities are motivated to act. The challenge is to discover their motivation to act.
- 6) **MOTIVATION TO ACT** must be identified. People who are not paid as staff will only act when it is very important. People will act on certain themes strongly felt; concerns to address, dreams to realize, and personal talents to contribute. Every community is filled with invisible "motivation for action". Listen for it.

- 7) LISTENING CONVERSATION In 1:1 dialogue or in small group conversations is how to discover motivation and invite participation. Forms, surveys and asset maps can be useful to guide intentional listening and relationship building. Mapping is not a substitute for listening and talking face to face.
- 8) ASK, ASK, ASK .Once a person's possible 'gifts to give' and 'motivations to act' are recognized; an opportunity to act must be offered. Asking and inviting are key community building actions. "Join us. We need you." This is the song of community. Judith Snow is right!
- 9) QUESTIONS RATHER THAN ANSWERS INVITE STRONGER ACTION. People in communities are usually asked to volunteer for outside expert answer to community problems. Agencies usually ask community members to help with the agency answer. A more powerful way to engage people is to invite communities to address 'questions' finding their own answer-- with agencies following to help.
- 10) A PEOPLE-CENTERED "inside-out" ORGANIZATION IS THE KEY TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. A "People centered" organization is one where local people control the organization and set the organization's agenda. Community engagement initiatives rarely succeed without residents as leaders organized to do intentional relationship building. It takes an organization of people to organize a community. It is also very valuable to have a staff person to assist relationship building as a 'community organizer' following the community member leaders' agenda.
- 11) INSTITUTIONS HAVE REACHED THEIR LIMITS IN PROBLEM-SOLVING. All institutions such as government, non profits, and businesses are stretched thin in their ability to solve community problems. They can not be successful without engaging the rest of the community in solutions. We need to be more skillful in wider engagement. Everyone must do their part.
- 12) INSTITUTIONS AS SERVANTS—People better than programs engage the wider community. Institutions of government, non profits, and business can be of invaluable help supporting the work of peoples' initiatives to engage their fellow community members. Ask people what they need and offer help. Follow the lead of local community members.