The Relationship between Community Building Antecedents and Followers' Perceptions of Community

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The focus of this paper is to report findings from research conducted that illustrates the relationship between community building antecedents and followers' perceptions of the level of community experienced. The research provides evidence that the types of community building antecedents and the perceived factors that both prevent and contribute to community relates to the levels of perceived community among followers. The study reflects responses from 282 participants and utilizes community building antecedents categories, factors which prevent community, and perceptions on how to best build community. The results demonstrate that certain community building antecedents are positively correlated to followers' perceptions of levels of community experienced. In light of the research findings, the author will (a) highlight the relationship between community levels experienced and community building antecedents (including meaningful relationships, shared experiences, and strong ethical behavior), (b) highlight the relationship between community levels experienced and factors which prevent the development of community (including time, personality, and stereotypes), and (c) highlight the relationship between levels of community experienced and followers' perceived factors that contribute to building community. Based on these findings, the author intends to provide an argument for how leaders can best build community and suggest the importance of building community as emerging leaders attend to this dimension of their own leadership practice.

INTRODUCTION

A review of the literature on leadership and building community returns many theorists mentioning that leaders build community, but very little on how this is actually accomplished. A thorough exploration of the leadership literature yields seemingly no study on the dimensions of community building or practical ways to develop community. Greenleaf (1970) is the first to argue that servant leaders build community. He posits that all that is required to rebuild community in a given institution are enough servant leaders to model the way (Greenleaf, 2002). This building of community does not come in mass movements, but by each individual servant leader demonstrating certain attributes to a specific group (Greenleaf, 2002). However, these attributes or liabilities are not operationalized. The literature almost suggests that community building is simply a bi-product of certain types of leadership. Spears (1999) suggests that servant leaders are aware of a void of community and thereby seek to identify methods to rebuild community among those they lead. He posits that community has become extremely diminished due to a shift in what shapes peoples' lives, which has changed from local communities to large institutions (Spears, 1999).

According to Greenleaf (1970), the loss of community within our modern institutions is "the lost knowledge of these times" (p. 28). He questioned the ability of institutions to meet basic human needs and posited that community only exists when the various individuals of a group are liable to each other and to the group as a whole (Greenleaf, 1970). The question then in the literature is, how can we operationalize building community? Are there specific antecedents that assist in the building of community? If so, can community building be taught to future leaders? By looking at these questions specifically, this study will argue that a relationship exists between higher perceived levels of community and certain community building antecedents such as meaningful relationships, shared experiences, and strong ethical behavior. The study will also posit that there is a relationship between lower levels of perceived community and factors that prevent community building such as time, personality, and stereotypes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Almost all of the leadership research on building community has centered on servant leadership theory. Russell and Stone (2002) offered a review of servant leadership attributes in their attempt to develop a practical model. While they list building community as one of twenty-one attributes in the literature, they offer no literature review of building community or empirical findings in the literature. Thus, they leave out building community in their proposed models. In "Practicing Servant Leadership", Spears and Lawrence (2004) offer a practical look at building community. He argues that the leader should show appreciation to subordinates by using practical tools such as a handwritten thank you note or a verbal thank you for routine work that is often under-valued. However, the literature would suggest that these are simply motivational tools under organizational behavior theory. The use of verbal or written affirmation is a way to reward an employee. While motivation is definitely linked to effective leadership, studies do not demonstrate any correlation between this type of motivation and followers' perceptions of community. However, Matteson and Irving (2006) do list building community as a behavioral dimension of leadership.

In his essay, "The Ethic of Strength", Greenleaf (1996) posits that emerging leaders must nurture various things within themselves; of great significance is the need for the leader to ask herself, "Am I connected?" Connectedness is defined as the ability to be both visionary and grounded in the moment by people and events (Greenleaf, 1996). According to Greenleaf (1996), in order for community to exist, there could not be much self-interest nor "provide much in the way of shelter from real relationships with real people in real situations" (p. 242). In "Reflections on Leadership" Spears (1995), offers four stages of community; pseudo-community, chaos, emptiness, and true community. While each of these stages is well-defined, the author does not articulate actions, behaviors, or experiences that would assist a leader in walking through these stages with followers. However, the author does close with a practical list which includes the following: share your story, look for the good in each person, create spaces that allow people to bloom perform professionally, listen for the "faint fluttering of wings", and practice hospitality.

While the literature affirms that effective leaders build community, it lacks empirical evidence on how exactly leaders build this community. This study aims to provide a starting point in collecting empirical evidence that might begin the process of understanding both the antecedents to building community and also the factors that prevent or block community formation.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a convenience sample of 294 participants provided responses to a series of questions focused on building community. Participants qualified for the study if they were an adult, defined as over the age of 18. Participants provided responses to relevant demographic questions and an assessment survey of factors relating to building community. Participants had an average age of 34.61 and were 64% female and 36% male. The average household income was $66,383. Participants represented the following living environment sectors: (a) 50% rural, (b) 40.8% suburban, and (c) 9.2% inner-city.

In addition to demographic questions, participants were asked to identify which antecedents that they believed increased the level of community within their work environment. These antecedents were selected from initial interviews with several of the participants. The alpha coefficient for the community building antecedents, focused on measuring the contribution of certain factors to the community building process. The subscale alpha coefficients were: (a) .679 for shared experiences, (b) .728 for meaningful relationships, (c) .644 for strong moral behavior, (d) .769 for forced interaction, (e) .739 for environment where needs are met, (f) .377 for moral development training, (g) .349 for closer proximity, and (h) .940 for establishing customs.

Participants were also asked to assess which factors they believed hindered community building efforts. The subscale alpha coefficients were: (a) .478 for personality differences, (b) .378 for stereotypes, (c) .586 for time, (d) .652 for fear of rejection/trust issues, and (e) .685 for no desire to have community.

FINDINGS

When analyzing the data for a relationship between community building antecedents and the other factors, several statistically significant findings were identified. Utilizing guidelines offered by Guilford (1956) and Kerlinger and Lee (2000), a Pearson r correlation value of $\geq .20$ was set as a minimum level for rejecting the null hypothesis and a significance level of .01 (2-tailed) was set for establishing statistical significance. As noted in Table 1, the Pearson r correlation for the relationship between community building antecedents and followers' perceptions of levels of community is noted. The Pearson r scores are shown for those antecedents that showed significance in determining levels of community based on followers' perceptions.

TABLE 1
KEY CORRELATIONS WITH LEVEL OF COMMUNITY AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

Key Correlations Independent Variable	Pearson r	Significance
Shared Experiences	$r = .596$	$p = .000$
Meaningful Relationships	$r = .622$	$p = .000$
Strong Moral Behavior	$r = .533$	$p = .000$

Beyond these preliminary findings, the results showed there wasn't a significant correlation between the following antecedents and the level of community perceived by followers. In order, (a) forced interaction [$r = -.329$; $p = .000$], (b) environment where needs are met [$r = -.298$; $p = .000$], (c) moral development training [$r = -.183$; $p = .002$], (d) closer proximity [$r = -.493$; $p = .000$] and (e) establishing customs [$r = -.346$; $p = .000$]. The following table provides an overview of factors that hinder the building of community as it relates to the level of community perceived by followers (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
KEY CORRELATIONS WITH LEVELL OF COMMUNITY AND FACTORS THAT HINDER BUILDING COMMUNITY

Key Correlations Independent Variable	Pearson r	Significance
Personality Differences	$r = .392$	$p = .000$
Stereotypes	$r = .299$	$p = .000$
Time	$r =.590$	$p = .000$
Fear of Rejection	$r =.503$	$p = .000$
No Desire for Community	$r =.555$	$p = .000$

DISCUSSION

In looking at the results, several determinations can be made from the study. The findings demonstrate that a relationship exists between certain community building antecedents and levels of perceived community by followers. While certain antecedents showed a clear level of significance (shared experiences, meaningful relationships, and strong moral behavior), others did not rise to the accepted levels of significance and therefore are questionable on whether they contribute to the level of perceived community among followers. These included; forced interaction, environment where needs are met, moral development training, closer proximity, and establishing customs. Out of these antecedents, it is of particular interest that closer proximity does not equate into higher perceived levels of community. Given the integration of technology into the workplace, this would elude to the fact that leaders can still build effective community without being in the same physical location. In addition, the findings give leaders a clearer roadmap for how to raise levels of community with their followers by demonstrating strong moral behavior, developing meaningful relationships with them, and engaging in deliberate shared experiences. Kouzes and Posner (2006) argued that when trust is the foundation of a leader-follower relationship, people take risks, make changes, and keep community alive. Trust seems to be a common component for all three of these antecedents that help a leader build higher levels of community.

Secondly, the findings demonstrate that a relationship exists between factors that prevent the building of community and levels of perceived community by followers. All of the factors showed a clear level of significance with varying degrees of correlation. Perhaps, the factors that hinder community building were more intuitive than those that help build community. Additionally, the results might simply point to a broader reality that it is much easier to hinder community building and decrease perception levels of community among followers than the reverse.

A final area of discussion focuses on the lack of a relationship between perceived factors that build community and actual perceived levels of community experienced by followers. While this lack of relationship might appear to contradict the prior relationships, it actually illustrates the author's assertion that specific dimensions of community building are vague and have not been operationalized. While several variables may contribute to building community, there doesn't exist an understanding of how these variable interact in ways that might increase or decrease followers' perception levels of community experienced.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of the study provide several recommendations for future research. First, the findings identified specific antecedents having a significant relationship with perceived levels of community experienced by followers. Often the literature discusses the importance of meaningful relationships, but fails to give a clear picture on how these are formed. Therefore one recommendation would be to further explore the specific actions or behaviors that most contribute to followers' perceived levels of a meaningful relationship with a leader.

Second, the findings demonstrated that all identified factors that prevent or hinder community building have a significant relationship with perceived levels of community experienced by followers. While this might be the case, a future study could include additional factors and attempt to identify how these factors interact with one another to effect levels of community experienced.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researcher has provided a literature review of community building and leadership. Based upon the literature, the study illustrated community building antecedents, providing a report of the research with 294 participants. Statistically significant relationships were identified between perceived levels of community experienced by followers and the following independent variables: (a) shared experiences, (b) meaningful relationships, and (c) strong moral behavior. Additionally, statistically

significant relationships were identified between perceived levels of community experienced by followers and the following independent variables: (a) personality differences, (b) stereotypes, (c) time, (d) fear of rejection, and (e) no desire for community. Combined the research demonstrates variables that both aid in the creation of community and hinder community building efforts of leaders. In light of the importance of community building and trust within an organizational setting, the study shed light into potential predictors for community development. The researcher hopes this study will encourage future work in this area.

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