



# Circles and Marketplaces

## Spaces for Transforming Community Life

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New kinds of community moments for connection and exchange are helping communities build diverse networks of aspirational people to repopulate the civic landscape.

At the local level, positive civic engagement cannot be untangled from productive economic engagement. Making communities functional and competitive—to tackle tough challenges, plan for an uncertain future, and cultivate quality of life—requires residents to develop the personal capacity and bandwidth needed to form mutually beneficial relationships with one another.

Unfortunately, in many communities today, there are few opportunities for people to connect across differences such as class and race. The civic landscape is failing to cultivate interconnect- edness and can be an indifferent, even hostile, environment for otherwise aspirational people who want to be involved in civic life.

## Not as Apathetic as You Think

The hallmark of a successful community is sustained and collective resilience. Things change, we change, but we can find a way to remake ourselves and to go on together. Communities are complex ecosystems, and the capacity for reinvention and resilience can happen only when thousands of people start interacting in new ways, taking risks, building new relationships, asking better questions, contributing their time and resources, and ultimately, having enough fun and seeing enough progress to stay in the game.

Over a decade ago in Lawrence, Massachusetts, activists started an initiative called Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW). They

could shape and sustain enough community rooms that could do that, it could mobilize the energy, talent, and time commitments that the city needed.

Through *community rooms* such as NeighborCircles (in which neighbors host a series of dinners on their block), LCW's network of almost 5,000 residents has driven change in the civic environment, influencing zoning and budget reforms, garnering nearly \$100 million in new development, and more. Although still facing challenges, Lawrence has a different spirit, thanks to diverse networks of individuals doing thousands of things every week to move the city forward. An ever widening circle of resident facilitators



Community-building circles allow participants to discover commonalities.

began by spending countless hours knocking on doors, talking to residents, attending community meetings and City Hall hearings, and meeting with public- and private-sector leaders. In knocking on doors, they discovered scores of ambitious, friendly, aspirational—and, yes, struggling—families anxious to improve their lives and their community. In contrast, community and private-sector leaders were mostly pessimistic and engaged in boring, aimless bickering, unproductive practices, and complaints about residents' "apathy."

How do you build a community when current approaches erode trust, douse entrepreneurial energy, dismiss individuals' gifts, and derail positive change? You cannot. People are, by and large, not apathetic. They are discerning. And thousands of Lawrence residents were discerning that the kinds of community engagement available then were not worth their time.

LCW realized that to have an impact, they had to create community moments explicitly designed for people to bring their best selves and their aspirations to each other and into civic life—while having fun, connecting, exchanging, and driving change. If LCW

leading NeighborCircles has emerged, as have community-education circles that bring teachers, parents, and children together to build fruitful relationships.

## More Community Rooms

A growing number of organizations are pioneering positive community moments—moments that level power dynamics, invite a wider range of people to behave differently in community life, and build networks. Among them are Impact Silver Spring in Maryland, Network Center for Community Change in Louisville, Kentucky, and Neighborhood Connections in Cleveland. Their community rooms are designed to optimize the creative capacity that people are always willing to contribute to the civic environment under the right conditions. The new rooms, called *circles* and *marketplaces*, help to do the following:

- **steward** productive networks that break barriers, cross boundaries, and unleash resources;



- **shape and share** stories that connect, inspire, move, and mobilize people;
- **stimulate** entrepreneurial spirit, action, and self-organization;
- **establish** new marketplaces that unleash hidden resources; and
- **model and cultivate** better habits of engagement.

## Circles

Circles are conducted in small, intimate rooms. People learn about them through both word of mouth and concerted door-knocking and street-conversation campaigns. Putting aside the daily distractions of screen time and virtual connections, participants embrace safe, productive face time with others—who often turn out to have similar traits, interests, or aspirations.

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Consider Silver Spring, Maryland, a community with stark disparities. It sits in one of the wealthiest counties on the East Coast, just outside Washington, DC, but it has significant pockets of poverty. In the early 2000s, a group called Impact Silver Spring, using small circles of mutual support, began to build networks to bridge diverse communities and support the aspirations of immigrant residents and others who were in danger of being left behind. The gatherings were largely self-organized, having only a modicum of support from community organizers. (One of the larger circles continued meeting for two years every week without any significant intervention from Impact staff.) There was a clear intention to include middle- and upper-middle-class homeowners, to emphasize that the circles were not just about needs and to forge neighbor-to-neighbor connections across class and race.

The resulting *mutual support circles* and *neighbors exchanges* are examples of ways that diverse groups can come together to support each other, take action, and exchange advice, favors, and most anything participants need. When obstacles get in the way of participants' ability to follow through on something they care about—getting their high school equivalency certificate, saving for a new home, going to community college, or even sticking with an exercise regimen—the circles help them stay in the game. Sometimes a circle sparks ideas that beget other circles. For instance, two weeks after a tragic incident of youth violence in the newly developed downtown, a small group of youth, parents, police, and community partners came together in a circle to talk about creating a commercial area that was safe, welcoming, and comfortable to all. That circle sparked three more diverse action circles to pursue concrete initiatives. The regular gatherings served as support and accountability mechanisms to ensure that ideas were implemented, without the need for complex leadership structures. Once ideas were implemented, circle members moved on.

## Marketplaces

Marketplaces are designed to be open gatherings that invite people to mix across differences, exchange ideas, advice, and needed items, and to take entrepreneurial action.

The authors were once asked to design a process for a foundation to connect with and support a distressed Boston community. We designed a weekly gathering of neighbors, foundation staff, and other stakeholders that we called the “Q Marketplace” (Q signifying quality of life). We wanted gatherings to be a space where people could leave professional and other identities behind, come together, and talk about what is happening now. The Q Marketplace occurred for 10 weeks and drew overall more than 400 residents and other stakeholders. Sessions were hosted by a revolving group of trained facilitators working in pairs, with careful attention to creating a positive feeling and an energetic pace. The design ensured that four simple things happened each week—always the same way and always for precisely 90 minutes total:

- time to mix, connect, and eat good food together;
- time to share what was new and good in people's personal lives;
- time to have conversations on specified topics (the group would break into four to five tables to discuss subjects that people were willing to host that night, such as a walking club, a summer program for kids, job-search help, holiday ideas, and loss and trauma); and
- time to exchange (we made offers and requests for things like advice on applying for the Earned Income Tax Credit, rides to the grocery store, help moving a couch, support for a teen in crisis, finding a good insurance plan).

Outcomes from table conversations and the offers and requests were tracked, and successful matches between residents were announced and celebrated at subsequent marketplaces.

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Today, some form of a monthly marketplace is taking place in schools, apartment communities, and neighborhoods in Birmingham, Cleveland, Akron, Chicago, Lawrence, Norfolk, Washington, DC, and beyond.

These circles and marketplaces are consistently effective in bringing people together on a level playing field. They are designed to be easy to organize, inexpensive to maintain, and easily replicated in a wide range of settings. They can help shape a new local ecosystem to make the process of engaging in civic life more human and to energize all members of a community. The emphasis is always on fairness and building trust across differences.

But as easy as circles and marketplaces are to do and as organic as they feel when done well, they do not happen on their own. They need to be intentional and resourced in order to have an impact. Because they are designed to be simple and inexpensive, they can, as in the case of Lawrence and Silver Spring, develop new habits of community life. Communities that do this work are effectively cultivating and tilling new soil for genuine, inclusive, and robust civic engagement to take root.

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