

Networking in Community Building

'It's not what you know, but who.'

Including people in the life of the community is one of the most important tasks for anyone concerned with people with learning disabilities whether as family members or service workers. We need to make introductions and support relationships as they grow. In doing these things we are discovering community for ourselves as well as building networks for those who rely on us.

Community building is about finding and linking people. A co-ordinator's network is an essential resource so you must build it actively, nurture and use it. Here are some tips on how to do it.

Setting Goals

Include networking in your monthly goal setting. Set dates and numbers, e.g. "in the next three months I will establish a relationship with two new informants who each have membership in at least six community associations". These are the people who know a lot of other people. Approach networking actively; don't expect it just to happen.

Organise Your Current Network

Look at your phone index, address book and correspondence files. Organise the information which you already have, in one place. Keep it flexible and expandable. The 'Rolodex' type index is useful.

Get Yourself Out There

Go to events where you will meet people who know other people. In one community there is a monthly luncheon club attended by key people from all the local community associations. It is their way of networking. The church's ecumenical movement has led to various events and forums at which key people from all the local churches keep in touch. Check them out and take part in the ones which look helpful for your networking needs.

Raise Your Visibility

Advertise yourself by letting people know of your interest. Give talks, write articles for local papers or newsletters of community organisations. Get yourself interviewed. Do your own newsletter. Have handout leaflets which explain aspects of your concern.

Make the First Contact

Introduce yourself to people. Make it your business to find out about the other person and you will probably

find an interested response. People like to talk about themselves. Remember, this is no time to be shy. Introduce your own interests straight away.

Link Others

When you meet someone with a need, offer to share a contact. This extends the links in your network and strengthens it.

Ask

Asking questions is the activator in networking. "Who do you know that could?", "Where could I find?". It is said that you can get information on any subject in five calls or less. Remember that when you are faced with a hard, new problem and you don't know where to start.

Keep In Touch

Write a letter or postcard. Send articles of interest. Make a phone call. Have lunch or coffee. Whichever you choose, keep it short, chatty and frequent. People don't remember how long your contact was - just that you made it. A note is as good as a letter.

Celebrate People's Special Days

Remember birthdays, anniversaries and big events with a card, flowers or whatever. Keep a note in your diary or on a calendar to remind you.

Say Thanks

Take the time to thank the people who help you. Drop a quick note of thanks. This will encourage them to think of you in the future.

Encourage Networking in Others

Your network is stronger if the people in it have active networks of their own. Explain how you go about networking and why. By promoting a community of listening, caring and helping, everyone benefits.

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