

**ABSEL AS HOME COMMUNITY:  
AN INTERACTIVE EXPLORATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

This session asks participants to reflect on why they attend the ABSEL conference and then presents a model of home community. The data and model are explored by small groups and implications for building a stronger ABSEL home community are elicited. The results will be presented to the ABSEL Board for review.

**INTRODUCTION**

What is “home community” and why is it important for today’s organizations? A home community (HC) combines people, place, and process to provide a supportive, caring, collaborative environment (like an ideal home and healthy family) in which members with similar values interact and learn from each other (purpose). In a home community, members feel free to take risks, learn from mistakes, give and receive feedback to each other and celebrate each other’s successes (again, like the ideal home and family we wish we had).<sup>1</sup> Essentially, a home community is a task-oriented place/collection of people with whom we can be our authentic selves and work towards individual and common goals joyfully, collaboratively, and with humor (process).

In today’s “permanent white water” (Vaill, 1989) environment of global competition, rapidly-changing technology, downsizing and flattening of organizations, and growth in temporary work relationships, people need a “home,” perhaps more than one, in which to refresh and re-new themselves and to enjoy recreation that enables them to approach their jobs with replenished energy. Home communities have a restorative value for many individuals. The resurgence of community and spirit (Fox, 1994) as foci of many books, movements, and popular press articles supports the need for home community. The universal needs for interdependence, community, and being valued (Slater, 1970) are met through home community. Schutz’s (1967) model of interpersonal needs in-group development (inclusion, control, and affection) also applies to the evolution of HC. For organizations to embrace change, their members need something to hold on to, from which to gain support and strength. And, for the growing number of workers without work, HC’s can provide a sense of value and validation.

Most individuals find their HC’s outside of the workplace although some high performing teams (Hackman, 1990; Hensey, 1992), departments, task forces, or other task-related groupings of people may provide HC for their members.<sup>2</sup> Social groups and sports teams, both work and non-work related, may also be HC’S

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<sup>1</sup> One must also keep in mind the “dark side” of family, e.g., co-dependence, abuse, game-playing, authoritarianism. However, the focus of HC is unabashedly positive, although HC members often seek HC to solve a problem (e.g., alcoholism) or to fill a gap in their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, for some, work is the central life focus and value. These may or may not be “workaholics; they also may not view their work as HC.

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for their members. Informal surveys identified a sample of groups that function as HC's for some of their members. A compilation of these groups appears in Table 1. These HC's are difficult to categorize because their purposes overlap. While all of them have a task or tasks to accomplish, some are more formal and permanent (e.g., church, fraternity) than others (e.g., camp, support group). Professional association conferences are a primary provider of HC for academics and other professionals. In this interactive session, I introduce the home community concept, identify HC norms and characteristics of ABSEL, and facilitate discussion of the value and potential use of the HC concept, especially for improvement and growth of both ABSEL as an organization and for its members.

**TABLE 1**  
**A SAMPLING OF HOME COMMUNITIES**

music camp or group  
church or religious organization task force or team  
conference or professional association workshop, T-group, or retreat  
fraternity/sorority/club support group  
sports teams or activity political campaign neighborhood  
college dorm or apartment  
vacation location (e.g., "the beach") opera workshop  
sports camp  
college or family reunion

As there are a wide variety of HC's, their characteristics vary. Home communities may be stand-alone groups outside an individual's workplace (e.g., musical organization, college reunion, professional organization); they may

exist as a subset of the workplace (e.g., department, task force, team); or the entire workplace might be a HC (e.g., some small entrepreneurial companies, a political campaign organization, a professional sports team). It is unusual to find many workplaces that function as HC for all their members; however, there would be significant advantage to employees if they felt "at home" at work.

While these three types of HC's do differ in some ways, their primary norms and characteristics are similar. In order to specify the minimal characteristics of a home community, Column A in Table 2 provides the essential, pivotal norms and characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Column B adds peripheral norms and characteristics that may also appear as part of the HC's culture, but are not critical to the HC concept. The lists are not exhaustive because home community has not been explored fully. For example, we might hypothesize a relationship between size of group and "HC-ness." However, size is omitted from specification until further study validates a relationship. The author is aware of both very large (e.g., StarTrek groupies, MENSA) and very small (e.g. task forces of 5-6 members) HC's that share the pivotal norms and characteristics. HC seems to exist more in the **mind** of the member it validates than in concrete, quantifiable specifications. In that way, HC also is a "new, self-organizing" structure, appropriate and adaptive for current challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> This list displays a striking similarity to French and Bells (1995) description of the values underlying organization development. It also duplicates the basic tenets of the human potential movement and Rogerian client-centered therapy (1961).

TABLE 2  
HC NORMS & CHARACTERISTICS

**A: PIVOTAL**

voluntary\* support  
common values  
interdependence  
collaboration  
common goals  
time is viewed relative to periodic gatherings  
caring  
face-to-face\*\* open, honest communication  
everyone is valued, respected  
acceptance of differences

**B: PERIPHERAL**

welcoming to others who share goals, values  
flexible and evolving processes  
heroes and traditions  
unique jargon  
intense  
playful  
no status differentials  
administrative and leadership roles rotated  
members miss those who are absent  
special symbols (e.g., T-shirts, pins, bags)

\* The author has not experienced non-voluntary HC's, but does not rule them out.

\*\* It may be possible to create HC using an electronic medium.

**Professional Associations as Home Community**

For individuals who seek home community related to their work, professional associations may provide HC. Comments from professional association members support the contention that their organizations are HC's to them. For example, ABSEL (Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning) past presidents and board members being surveyed for strategic planning purposes saw their organization as a place/group that is

*"friendly, informal, inclusive, supportive, helpful"*

*"more collegial than other organizations"*

*"..we need to talk to each other about our successes and failures in the classroom"*

*U democratic process"* and *"open nominating and voting for officers"*

*"we get together to help each other, not to impress each other with our knowledge"*

*"safe haven"*

*"work hard/play hard"* and *"full of humor"*

*"honesty in words and action--no double talk: we are who we say we are; we do what we say we do."*

At the closing evaluation session of the 1994 LANES (League for the Advancement of New England Storytelling) conference, attendees shared their learnings/observations:

*"[it was] coming back to what's basic, honest, real--back to my language family"*

*"social affirmation"*

*"a feeling of family"*

*"how unique I am but how connected we all are."*

*"an assembly of great kindness"*

*"warmth"*

*"friendly to stranger"* [i.e., first time attendees]

*"feel very accepted"* (first timer)

*"my mind was exploding"*

*"a community that really reinforces you for being the authentic you"*

When asked to describe the Organization Behavior Teaching Society's annual conference, OBTC, attendees saw it as

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“coming home after a hard day at the office”<sup>4</sup> ‘a family coming together for a reunion’  
“professional family”  
“playful”

“a reminder of my deeper and larger self family, caring, relatively safe, struggling to embrace difference”

“doing work at a Sunday afternoon picnic”

“unexpectedly discovering an extended family”

“sharing and connections”

“camaraderie”

### SESSION FORMAT

**Time required:** 1 1/4 hour

**Room requirements:** moveable chairs, easel

1. Brief introduction of format--why begin with data. (3 minutes)

2. Participants complete handout specifying why they come to ABSEL in terms of:

-Purpose

-People

-Process

-Place (location, atmosphere) Handout will provide specific questions, such as “What ABSEL norms and processes are important to you?” and “Complete the following with a metaphor or other description of the ABSEL spirit (ambiance, culture):

“ABSEL is “ (10 minutes)

3. Small groups share their data, perhaps telling a story about an experience related to ABSEL, (15 minutes)

4. Home community conceptual material including Tables 1 and 2 and handout for use in classroom to explore and develop HC. (10 minutes)

5. Small groups discuss the value and potential use of the HC concept at ABSEL (or in their classrooms). An option here would be to break groups up around focal points that emerged in earlier sharing. (20 minutes) Some of these might be:

- continuing the ABSEL connection during the year
- personal growth
- why we don't get the same HC feelings about our university
- bringing the HC spirit into the classroom
- creating our own home communities-- what we have already done and can do
- other associations that provide HC—what can ABSEL learn from them?
- how is HC different from organizational culture or the learning organization?
- are there rituals needed (or needed to be formalized) at ABSEL to increase HC?
- does everyone want HC: if not, why not? If so, why?

6. Large group sharing and closure. (15 minutes)

Option: Create a process for people to write their data and then post in a set of categories on the walls--sort of a wall-based mind-map of ABSEL as home community. Perhaps one item per 3x5 post-it--then participants group them logically and add categories later.

### REFERENCES

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<sup>4</sup> John Miller, organizer of the 1993 OBTC began his remarks at the celebratory dinner with, “Welcome home!” which was received by a thunderous round of applause.

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