Creating Harmony Within Communities

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Creating Harmony Within Communities

As I think about creating harmony, I return to my days as a music major in college. I spent many hours by myself in small practice room working to nail down a difficult passage of clarinet music. I met with a clarinet professor to get instruction and assistance once a week. The wind ensemble, orchestra and various groups met once or twice a week where all the musicians would come together to create beautiful music in rehearsals. We would practice together for weeks before we were ready to perform for an audience. Then we would start the process over again.

We relied on each other to perform our part perfectly. Everyone had to show up to rehearsals and concerts ready to perform. We had a shared vision and a common purpose. We had a leader who served as the conductor and bought all of us together, and kept us together, as we performed harmonious music. We relished performing well as individuals and as an ensemble. “As a community, the organization came into being because there were enough people who cared about something to pursue it together” (Senge, 2010).

I had the opportunity to grow up being part of bands, wind ensembles, and orchestras. I was extremely fortunate to have this opportunity. I think about the teams or communities we are creating for our kids and young adults today. Are they getting the same experiences and are they learning the importance of community or being part of a team? How do they learn about accountability, connectedness, and interdependence? What are we doing to support a sense of belonging, trust and respect in our youth today? How does that translate into how community groups and work teams form and grow in today’s world? How successful have we been as leaders in creating the space where team members can rely on each other to work toward common goals?

I work from the perspective that teams or communities are made up of individuals who identify with or work for a common purpose or shared vision. Individuals bring skills and experience to the collective with a need to belong or be something larger than themselves. Our community or team leaders provide the environment that allows for relationships to build and emotional attachments to form.

Thinking back to the musical groups I’ve been a part of, the music teacher or conductors helped to frame the collective and guide the players to interdependence. How do we succeed in doing that in today’s corporate world or our local communities? Community leaders set the vision, build common purpose, and establish the tone that allows for the health, happiness, and productivity of those who commune within. Foundationally, “a community’s well-being simply [has] to do with the quality of the relationships” (Block, 2009).

As I leader, I have the responsibility and capability to create healthy sustainable communities within the teams, organizations or groups I participate in. As an individual, I and others benefit from belonging to a team with a shared vision and purpose. As a team and a community, we can create more than we could as individuals. Individuals can’t perform symphonic music on their own. Each of us brings skills, experiences, desires, complexities, issues, and possibilities to the table, which when expounded by the number of individuals in the community, can create opportunities and results that can’t be done alone.

The theme of harmony returns. How do I want to build harmony within the communities and teams that I am a part of? “How can we balance autonomy and the common good in our daily lives in the world?  How can we engage the world as instruments of healing, transformation, and love” (Tran, 2018)? Each of us are instruments within the communities we are part of. How we choose to show up and share our gifts will determine the outcomes of the community experience. Are we engaged as individuals seeking common collective meaning and purpose? Are we creating harmony with others that brings collective flourishing within communities that we are a part of?

“We seek to see understand and see whole systems functions at the global scale and understand the interrelatedness of parts to each other and to the whole, while comfortable with apparent paradox. Harmony is perceived as movement and tension within a spectrum of extremes or opposites. The concept of harmony applies to the inner life of the individual as well as to the external world. (Horsman, Chapter 4, n.d.)

There is a lot more to explore in this statement, yet on the surface I appreciated the tie back to harmony in terms of movement and tension as it relates to both the individual and the community (as well as musical scores).

The first part of this paper centers on my perceptions of monastic community, then transverses into my observations and understanding of community in general. The third section of the paper will discuss new possibilities for how I want to participate in and lead communities, primarily in the corporate world I live in. Throughout the document I will reflect on both the individual as well as the community in terms of how it takes both to create the harmony desired as we search for meaning and purpose in our lives.

For reference, here is a quick summary of the corporate teams I currently participate in or lead. I lead an organization of 40 software developers and leaders. I am a part of a 250-person IT organization focused on developing insurance policy products and administrative systems. We are geographically dispersed throughout the US. None of our teams are co-located at this time. This is definitely a challenge for building community. We have gone through significant leadership and organizational changes in the past two years and are starting another round of re-organization this spring, which will impact structure, relationships, and delivery again. I’ll spend more time in Part 3 of this paper discussing ways to improve the sense of community within the changing organizational environment.

# Vows and Humility

What compels someone to join a community or be part of a team? What difference does it make if you instigate the connection versus someone asking or building that connection for you? How does a community sustain itself or grow depending on their purpose? Meaning and purpose from an individual as well as a community perspective seems to be a key link in answering these questions.

Monks aren’t told by others to take monastic vows, they are called to become monks through their discernment of God’s will. They understand and accept the responsibility of living out God’s will through vows of stability, obedience and *conversatio*. They agree to seek authentic relationships and strive for purity of heart as they build community within the monastery they join. They walk the twelve steps of humility in daily living. I appreciated Tran and Carey’s description that ties the three vows together leading to collective flourishing (Tran, 2018).

“If stability sets up the preconditions necessary for relationship to flourish and community to exist, and obedience defines the attitude of openness that allows members of the community to mutually engage each other, then *conversatio* (continual dialogue) demands that this entire process go beyond occasional acts of friendship or collaboration to become a way of life. *Conversatio* is essential to complete what stability and obedience begin—the realization of mutual and respectful interdependence: through it, relationship and community become ways of *being*, rather than of *doing*” (Tran, 2018).

This understanding of *being* within a community frames a context that all communities can build off of. Tran and Carey (2018) later point out that “individual empowerment, collective collaboration, and community dialogue is the goal” (Tran, 2018).

Note that there is still room for difference, in fact communities are stronger when diversity of ideas, skills and experiences exist. Casey (2001) speaks of hearing an interview with Herbert von Karajan, a conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. He shared that he accepted new musicians into his orchestra community if they had two attributes; one, “the music was within them”, and two, “they must play in time with others” (Casey, 2001). Casey goes on to say that the same is true with monastic life. “We must be in contact with our own unique sources of inspiration, but simultaneously we need to trim the expressions of our own gifts so that there is no discord with others” (Casey, 2001, p. 155). This leads us to conversation on humility.

There are a number of references to the fact that musical groups or corporate teams work better together when they come together as equals, not soloists. Humility plays a large part of a group’s or community’s health, happiness and results. Chittister (2017) shares a great definition of humility that reads, “Humility is, then, the foundation of our relationship with God, our connectedness with others, our acceptance of ourselves, our way of using goods of the earth and even our way of walking in the world, without arrogance, without domination, without scorn, without put-downs, without disdain, with self-centeredness” (Chittister, 2017, p. 97 – 98).

The monks at St. Andrews Abbey exemplified these humility traits well. Though our conversations with them as well as watching their interactions, we all learned more about what it means to be humble. Each leveraged their gifts to the benefit of God and their community. They actively took care of each other and their guests as equals, with curiosity, and openness. My time at the Abbey helped me realize that “humility is grounded in the realization that without the acknowledgement and commitment to something greater than ourselves, we are not likely to rise above ourselves” (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 4). Humility attributes and characteristics, whether framed from a Benedictine or a corporate perspective, improve relationships and thus community while deepening interdependency possibilities and outcomes.

# Building Community

Building community is one of the 10 servant leader characteristics of a caring effective leader (Spears, 1995). As servant-leaders-in-training, we seek to build communities that serve both the individual and the collective. We do this with humility, a primary servant-leader principle that “embodies a spirit of compassion, generosity, gratitude and joy” (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 4). We know that greater results will be produced through community, yet our humility as individuals helps us stay present and enriches the clarity of our purpose (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 4).

So what drives people to be a part of communities? Humans yearn "for enhanced identity, meaning and purpose" through connectedness with others (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 5). Communities provide the opportunities for individuals to connect, to serve, and to leverage their gifts. The monks were called to serve God through monastic community and prayer. Others are called to teach; others choose to work in various professions based on their skills. All of us can also choose to be part of religious, political, non-profit, or other communities based on gifts, skills and experiences. Through the need for us to be connected, there is also a need for communities to engage individuals in their mission for purpose. Leaders building community “work to create situations where the individual gives life energy to the collective and the collective provides support and opportunity satisfying the needs of the individual members of the collective” (Horsman, n.d. Chapter 5).

In addition to this sense of mutually beneficial satisfying of needs, communities provide us a sense of belonging. Block (2008) shares that communities provide opportunities to build relationships and a “quality of aliveness” when communities are healthy, and individuals feel a sense of affinity and belonging. Individual and community growth is seen through the focus on “possibility, generosity and use of gifts, rather than one of fear, mistakes, and self-interest” (Block, 2009).

How do we as servant leaders create community? As mentioned above, a sense of belonging or affinity is important. Within a corporate setting, that may be seen as a shared vision or purpose that the team focuses on delivering. Leaders encourage the use of gifts and provide challenge to learn and develop new skills that build both the capability of the individual as well as the collective. "*Servant-leaders in training* acknowledge that the people they work with are vital to the flourishing of their organization. They strive to maintain, nurture, and generally promote community through their commitment to serving-first and their awareness of the interconnectedness of all people" (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 5).

There is so much we can gain from building strong, healthy communities. Horsman points out that well-developed communities provide space "where individuals can speak their truths in an environment of empathetic and generative listening, and where they can actively engage in generative meaningful and creative dialog (Horsman, n.d.). This also aligns with Palmer’s perspective in that “to teach [lead] is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (Palmer, 1993, p. 67). He also points out that “community begins to emerge as we seek our inward nature…[yet] it can only grow as our inward response finds an outward manifestation in relationships of dialogue and troth” (Palmer, 1993, p. 91). Communities that reach this pinnacle of engagement are likely to create the most benefit for the individuals as well as the broader community.

I really value the emphasis placed on the inward reflection and discernment in the previous statements. I know I will not be as effective as an individual or within the community without the time for silence, reflection, internal listening, and discernment. This time allows me to synthesize ideas and thoughts that may be later joined with others in community. As a servant-leader in training I recognize the importance of balance, support, encouragement, listening, and empathy when engaging with others or providing grace to myself.

Our literature review of various authors intersects with a focus on building community where meaning and purpose bring people together into relationships for the greater good. Greenleaf provides a good summary of this: "Interconnectedness with other people moves us to greater service, to a more profound understanding, appreciation, and tolerance of one another; to an honest self-examination of our own attitudes, and behavior; and to the building of community" (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 5). This statement should be framed on the walls where communities gather!

# Leading a Transformation

“All transformation is linguistic, which means that we can think of community as essentially a conversation. Then we act on the principle that if we want to change the community, all we have to do is change the conversation. The shift in conversation is from one of problems, fear, and retribution to one of possibility, generosity, and restoration” (Block, 2008).

Transformation can be difficult for any organization, yet I realize that we must remain optimistic and look for possibilities during time of significant change. My work community is undergoing a staged transformation to the agile delivery methodology while also going through major leadership and team reorganizations. We had two major layoffs in 2017 with two more planned this year, all of which were based on positions and roles, not performance or financial status. Communication from the higher leadership levels hasn’t provided a sense of purpose or solid strategic direction that everyone can buy into. Employee morale has decreased in the past two years, and the leaders themselves are frustrated, making it hard to lead others back into a good productive space.

I think about the various work teams that I lead and that I’m a part of. I’ve never really considered them communities, yet they are. The leaders reporting to me make up a community that I lead. The leaders who are my peers are a community. These and others organizational teams are structured communities based on organizational chart. Then we have communities that are based on affinities such as roles or interests. These types of communities are typically joined freely without coercion, yet at times someone is voluntold to join.

As mentioned earlier, building trusting harmonious communities or teams during significant organizational change is challenging especially when leaders like myself aren’t internally in harmony with current corporate goals or recent HR actions. The leadership team I’m on has many new leaders (over 60%), most of which have adopted a competitive leadership approach in order to attempt to preserve their position and display their worth to the organization. I’m trying to participate or belong to this team from a more collaborative, servant-leader perspective. As you might imagine, our styles don’t always complement each other well. My previous leadership team of peers worked together based on a sense of trust, mutual respect, collaboration, and possibility thinking. I really miss that environment and those relationships, so I continue to try to influence change. Block’s quote above provides hope in that I can always start with a conversation (Block, 2008).

My peer team is making progress. We are meeting more frequently, building common vision, and forging relationships where we can. We schedule full day video conference meetings twice a month in order to work together in real-time. We are a team of 12 who are geographically dispersed in Chicago, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Seattle. We are scheduling more off-sites together in order to provide more face-to-face time. I also schedule 1:1’s with my peers to work on relationship building.

My action items for this scenario are as follows:

1. Discuss the team dynamic with the community leader and brainstorm ways to improve engagement for all. Agree that improvements are possible. (Done)
2. Build stronger relationships with the individuals on the team. (In progress)
3. Offer to host a session on community building, humility, and servant leadership. (Scheduled for 5/15)
4. Continue to demonstrate the behaviors and values of servant leadership and humility. (On-going)
5. Have others see me “as calm, collected, and serene, and wonder about where [my] serenity comes from and how [I] got that way” (Sardello, 2008, p. 93). (On-going)

The leaders that report to me currently are also a community or an organizational team that have been working together for almost two years. I’ve been sharing insights and observations from my Gonzaga studies with them and we try to incorporate learnings where we can. With the transformation to the Agile delivery methodology, all leaders within the organization are working to adopt a servant-leadership mindset which is foundational to the Agile framework. We are promoting autonomy, mastery, and empowerment at the individual level. I feel the leaders reporting to me are having an easier transition and are able to demonstrate more of the behaviors given the environment our community has created for itself. We’ve worked to remove competition and increase collaboration. We are building trust and confidence in the community as we build relationships, establish a support system, and complete work together.

Yet we have a long journey in front of us. Culturally the organizational teams beyond ours are in different places on the journey creating dissonance, not harmony. The roles and responsibilities within our community aren’t always clear leaving ambiguity and confusion for team members. We haven’t hit our stride in terms a rhythm or routine yet; we seem to be playing things out as we go. This community wants to move forward together which is a positive.

Action items for this scenario include:

1. Share the monastery experience with the team and walk through the 12 steps PowerPoint deck. Discuss humility and what bring communities together and what tears the down. (Completed and it went well!)
2. Establish more ritual by setting up regularly scheduled community / team meetings. This is on me given our schedules aren’t very routine, yet this could be very helpful for the team. (New)
3. Continue to spend time learning and collaborating together. (Ongoing)
4. Ask for insight and perhaps a small group to work on clarifying roles and responsibilities. (New)
5. Look for ways for our community to bridge with other communities in order to find common vision and purpose in order to reduce dissonance and increase harmony. (Started)
6. Work with this community to frame up a shared vision, a common purpose, and a roadmap for our journey together. Yes, this should already be done. Hopefully we can complete this summer. (New)
7. Identify and share the values and gifts we each bring to the community. (New)
8. Assess the team’s feeling of belonging. (New)

I asked my team to share some thoughts with me after reflecting on my group’s 12-step presentation. The content resonated with a few of them especially as it related to the servant-leadership mindset. They recognize it will be harder to embrace change given our history and continually changing organization structure. One direct report pointed out “When fear and uncertainty are high it does not always bring these types of characteristics out in people, you often see many of the actions on the list that are detractors from building community”. When asked what we can do to promote and encourage the characteristics, I received the following great responses:

* Learn how we can better step into the uncomfortable situations with grace, optimism and patience,
* Practice/learn how to truly listen when someone is talking, step back so others can step up,
* Keep in mind the agile manifesto and its principles,
* Work to have reasonable expectations,
* Learn how to participate/work together,
* Be open to multiple views and ways/means to get something done.

In thinking through these two scenarios, action items and the results so far, I believe that I can influence and lead community building efforts that will make a difference in the lives of those I work with as well as others they engage with.

# Conclusion

Through this class and personal reflection, I better understand what I’m searching for, what I want to be a part of, and what I want to create. I’ve been able to identify a purpose that guides my servant-leadership journey. The "search for deep personal fulfillment and authentic self-actualization always leads to relationship and community. In the same way that the individual cannot find his or her true self except through relationship with others, the group cannot become productive except through meaning, dignity, and community" (Tran, 2018).

In thinking back to the earlier analogy of musical ensembles and orchestras, I remember the satisfaction I felt when teaming with fellow musicians to create music. From a work perspective, I enjoy being the catalyst where I can bring people, process and technology together in ways that benefits individuals, teams and the organization. I want to make a difference and add value in communities where I find meaning and purpose. I enjoy belonging to communities that are collaborative, respectful, inclusive, and appreciative of the diversity of gifts that each brings to the table.

It’s not just about me, so what can I create for others? As a leader, I see the possibilities for creating community and need to take an active part in developing it. Community doesn’t just happen, it’s created, nurtured, and constantly transformed to meet the needs of the individuals, the collective and greater good. Perhaps that’s what a good conductor does.

I have a better appreciation for humility and how powerful that trait is within communities. Open honest transparency and feedback are needed for the journey. “Who we are, our presence, our integrity, our virtues, our faith, and our shadow and darkness, communicates more than anything we can say in words—so this is what we must be attentive to in our selves”. (Horsman, n.d.,Chapter 4). So true when it comes to working through significant change.

This journey is one that takes life-long practice, study, and *conversatio*.  “Purity of heart does not arise from merely reading or reflection; it is awareness that evolves from personal reading, practice, experience reflection on experience, feedback from others, and more practice. It requires a personal experiential life journey that engages interior work; serving others, and modeling servant-leadership” (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 4). The routines of clarinet practice come to mind when I contemplate how best to establish the routines of interior work.

Engaging with others in a musical group where everyone might have a different part to person is in essence the belonging to community with a shared vision or purpose. Musicians who have closer relationships to each other perform better. The same is true with teams. "To state it more precisely, what gives power to communal possibility is the imagination and authorship of citizens led through a process of engagement. This is an organic and relational process. This is what creates a structure of belonging. This is more critical than the vision and the plan" (Block, 2009). Each of us brings gifts, experiences, essentially ourselves, to situations with others.

How might we engage with others in ways that creates harmony and greater good for all? “To promote congruence and harmony at the personal and organizational level requires that *Servant-leaders in training* nurture complex values such as compassion, generosity, gratitude and joy, as compliments to empathy, healing, forgiveness and humility. These are values that are often dismissed, as peripheral to current organizational purpose, efficiency, and success” (Horsman, n.d., Chapter 4).

The past few months have helped develop my servant-leader-in-training values and skills. As I leader, I can orchestrate or conduct players to create performances or results that align to the mission or purpose of the ensemble or organization. As a fellow musician, I can add the gift of harmony to the orchestra or team and together we’ll create purpose or meaning for ourselves and others in the broader community. The theories and ideas presented in this paper demonstrate the value that communities can provide. Outcomes are created that no individual can do alone. The sense of belonging and engaging around a common purpose is energizing.

I’m tempted to find a way to support young musicians nearby so they have formative opportunities like I did. My servant-leader-in-training journey continues!

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