



Session Notes

The Case for Community

Humans are Community-Driven:

- Human beings are social animals. Behavioral economics and psychological research have taught us that we fundamentally crave a sense of connectedness, belonging, mission, and meaning.
- Within the last eighteen months, the loss of human connection; the inability to grow or nurture one's network; and the feelings of isolation have created the perfect conditions for communities to thrive.
- Satisfying the hunger to be safely connected to others who share our beliefs and values has become critical to human health. Our mental health and fortitude can be directly attributed to the degree to which we feel seen, heard, and supported by those around us.
- **Organizations that directly address and tailor their member experience to meet the demand for community put themselves at a significant competitive advantage.**

To Build & Differentiate:

- While there is no one way to build community, each organization or group is charged with defining, enhancing, and amplifying the attributes that make its community unique.
 - **Strategic Advantage:** Community is the one thing your competition can't easily copy. It's a key reason why members report choosing one space over another.

The Gift that Keeps on Giving:

- **Recruitment:** Enthusiastic community members are compelled to recruit like-minded individuals and evangelize (share their personal experiences with the world).
- **Shared Accountability:** Community members often challenge themselves to personally contribute to the vitality and energy of the group, and thus continually reinforce their personal sense of pride and ownership for the community itself.
- **Retention:** Once people feel truly connected to a community, they rarely abandon it. Finding a place in the world that makes you feel inspired and accepted is hard to find. If this can be created, member retention is a natural by-product.
- **Network Effects:** The more engaged the members are, the more dynamic the network becomes. As engagement grows, the community gets smarter, more globally available, and generates more value for all involved.

Barriers to Community Greatness

- Community is often taken for granted and misunderstood. Some people will assume that happy hours, member events, and amenities will be enough to create a sense of belonging and stickiness, but this is not always the case.
- What sets great communities apart are the intangibles. It's not the "place" but the "feeling". The experience members have when they enter a space; join a conversation; share their affiliation. The feeling is what leaves an indelible mark.
- The intangibles are reinforced on the one-on-one and micro level. The challenge is creating a culture that strives to create an "experience" for each person or member who enters the building.
- When a "community state of mind" is driven by the leadership, and the intent behind each interaction is to make everyone feel welcome, people will notice, they will remember, and they will want more.

Key Elements of Thriving Communities

- **Belonging:** When organizations inspire a sense of kinship, camaraderie, and connectedness, while also clarifying the specific role each member can play, they create an environment in which all parties feel they can bring their full selves to the table.
 - **The Parts are Inextricably Linked to the Whole:** Communities thrive when each of their members thrive. As Plato said, “The part cannot be well unless the whole is well.” Communities that pay attention to and understand the perspectives and insights of all of their members, especially the members carrying the greatest load in ensuring their communities’ success, are investing in the collective success of the group.
 - **Selflessness:** Building community comes down to a mentality of trying to benefit the greater good over advancing a personal agenda, seeking recognition, or attempting to gain status or influence. organizations that demonstrate and reinforce selflessness create spaces where members truly feel their effort and contributions serve the greater good on a daily basis.
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Reflection Questions:

- **What is the strongest community you have ever been a part of? What made it great? How can you personally incorporate these qualities into the Harvard Club of Boston?**
 - **What mechanisms can be put into place to ensure all voices of the HCB community can be heard and considered?**
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Empathy and Survey Data

As mentioned in Mini-Retreat #1, one of the core building blocks of a community is empathy. Based on feedback from folks who were in attendance, many people attributed the empathy issue to one particular incident, or series of events, associated with the marketing department.

To the contrary, it is exceedingly clear that the lack of empathy goes well beyond what transpired around marketing. Based on the results, over 50% of the respondents on the MFLA Preferences & Challenges survey expressed themes or explicitly cited examples of a lack of empathy within the HCB Leadership Team (BOG and Key Executive Staff, alike).

Because the survey questions did not ask for examples of empathy (or lack thereof), we felt it was important to make the entire group aware of both the frequency and widespread nature of such thoughts and/or experiences.

Here is a sample of such perspectives and themes:

- “I have absolutely had my perspectives brushed aside”
- “Bullying without being aware of it”
- Feeling Leadership does not “listen to each other and respect each other”
- Interrupted when speaking
- Certain sensitive issues, such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc. are not taken seriously
- Being told, rather than asked
- People making statements without considering how those statements might be received by the other party
- Feeling excluded and not appreciated
- I feel that other board members and staff respect my opinions. - Average Score: 3.9/5, which was one of the lowest average scores in the entire survey (18 people had completed the survey).

Where to go from here:

- Many HCB Leaders were curious and wondering more about specific instances of a lack of empathy. It is completely natural to want to know more,

given how important empathy is and the lack of awareness many had of the issue. It is critical to remember that the examples and themes presented were likely quick moments, subtle statements, or microaggressions that took place in perhaps one minute or less. They are examples of moments that can become less and less frequent as all members of this Leadership Team cultivate empathy within themselves.

- The key is to increase your personal awareness of how you practice and display empathy on a daily basis. Regardless of the situation or the parties involved, **empathy is practiced or not at the individual level.**
- You have the power to take personal responsibility for:
 - how you show up
 - the energy you bring into the room/zoom
 - how you engage other members of the HCB Leadership team
 - how you create space or shut down other people's thoughts and ideas
 - how you honor or disregard roles and responsibilities
 - how you acknowledge empathy fails or celebrate empathy in action
- **Key Point:** Displaying empathy does **NOT** mean avoiding difficult conversations, walking on eggshells, or sugar coating constructive feedback. In fact, navigating such circumstances is only made more effective when empathy is used. When humans feel they are being seen and heard, their capacity to engage in productive dialogue—even when it is more critical in nature—increases exponentially.
- Empathy is not a “feel good” destination, but it is the mechanism through which real conversations can unfold in a manner that leaves all parties feeling respected and heard, regardless of the outcome.

Reflection Questions

- In the last week, what is one example of a time when you displayed empathy?
 - ...what is one example of a time when you failed to display empathy?
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Empathy & High-Achievers

The Harvard Club of Boston's Leadership (Board of Governors and Executive Staff) is full of High-Achievers. Having a Leadership Team composed of people driven to be and do their best puts the organization in a fantastic position. Nevertheless, what makes High-Achievers successful can also create barriers to displaying empathy on a daily basis.

Here are a few reasons that High-Achievers do not consistently practice empathy:

Results Oriented:

High Achievers are very results-oriented and can view empathy and people issues more broadly as antithetical to high-performance. Taking the time to consistently understand where people are coming from can be perceived as opening the door for excuses and lowered accountability.

Lack of Awareness:

Most High-Achievers have perfected their capacity to get things done. Sometimes that mentality comes at the expense of cultivating self-awareness of how other people experience this pursuit of excellence. Many High-Achievers do not practice empathy on a regular basis, especially during high-stress/high-stakes moments. Many also lack awareness of the impact and importance of empathy.

Feelings are hard to Quantify:

Measuring empathy directly is hard to do, and many people do not attempt to do so. It is rare to look at empathy from a numbers standpoint, and High-Achievers are usually focused on driving results that can be quantified.

Competitive Mindset:

What sets High-Achievers apart is that they usually like to win and drive results. When it comes to community, however, a competitive mindset can compromise even the most earnest attempts to create inclusion and belonging. If the culture reinforces a "my opinion vs. yours" or "my idea vs. yours" mentality, it creates a feeling of internal competition. Internal competition breaks down community. Empathy and collaboration build community.

Consider this quote:

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

~Dr. Maya Angelou

- Think about a specific moment during your tenure as an HCB leader and/or member that left a strong impression on you. What was happening; who was involved; what was your role; and why do you think this moment occurred?
- When you reflect on this moment, what impact did the words and actions of the others involved have on how you feel about this moment today?
- What impact do you imagine your words and actions had on how the other people involved feel to this day?

Feel to be Real

- You and I have been conditioned to think showing emotions is a sign of weakness. We’ve mastered the “art of the bluff”, holding our feelings so close to the chest, sometimes even we can’t see them. But what happens when all hell breaks loose and the “*I’m okay playbook*” just doesn’t cut it?
- In extremely turbulent times like these, you have to remember only one thing: you are a human, not a bot.
- In fact, you are most human—the most real—when you feel. **It’s 100% normal for you to experience emotions—the good, the bad, and everything in between.**

Experience:

- Our feelings are with us, whether we’re aware of them or not. While many of us have conditioned ourselves to “power through”, heightening our awareness of our emotional state is a critical step to being empathetic. **If you don’t understand where you are and what you’re feeling, how can you**

extend this level of understanding to someone else? The key first step in increasing your awareness of your feelings is to experience them fully, without judgement. Extend yourself grace and understanding. Give yourself permission to experience every bit of what is coming up for you – the good, the bad, and the ugly. This will position you well to work with them in a productive way.

Acknowledge:

- Chances are you are really effective at disregarding your feelings and emotions. This can be intentional, but most times this happens subconsciously. It is important to acknowledge your feelings - name them explicitly (e.g., I feel excited; I feel sad; I am frustrated; etc.). When we neglect to acknowledge how we *actually* feel, we set ourselves up for a future where our decisions are dictated by feelings from the past that have yet to be resolved.

Process:

- Once feelings have been acknowledged, it is incumbent on the individual to process them. Much of our day is spent in our heads, and it can be easy to assume that we've come to terms with certain feelings. Nevertheless, it is fairly common to underestimate the impact these feelings have on us. To process your feelings, simply seek to understand them - why do you feel the way that you do? Reflect on what has happened and how the situation / person has impacted you. Sometimes journaling or talking to someone else can help you process your feelings.

Release:

- Once you have experienced, acknowledged, and processed your feelings, it is good to release them in a productive manner. Engaging in physical activity (such as walking, strength training, yoga, and dancing) is one major way that people release their feelings. Other tools that can help you release your feelings include: taking a bath; taking a nap; engaging in a hobby; doing breathing exercises; getting a massage; and meditating. If you do not release your feelings, you may find that they come back to the surface when you least expect it.

Reflection Question

- How often do you consider or recognize how you feel?
- What does the process of recognizing your feelings look like? How do you go about it?
- What impact does your awareness (or lack thereof) of your feelings have on the quality of your personal and professional relationships, as well as your own self-regard?
- How might your life change if you experienced, acknowledged, processed, and released your feelings on a consistent basis?