

**Common Fire's Top Ten Hard-Earned
Tips for Community Success**
Draft – 11-2015

The Common Fire Foundation was established in the early 2000s to support the development of intentional communities strongly committed to social justice and environmental sustainability. It was involved in the establishment of a housing co-op in Tivoli, NY (shuttered in 2013) and a co-housing community in Beacon, NY, and was deeply involved in a community that did a lot of great organizing work over several years but never acquired land in California's Bay Area. More info, including Common Fire's vision document and video which have been deeply inspiring to many people, are available at www.commonfire.org

There are many critical ingredients to nurturing a successful community. Diana Leafe Christian's book, *Creating a Life Together* is an invaluable resource and does a great job covering them. We created the following list to add to or tweak some of what she and others offer, or to highlight some of the ones we think are so important (or easy to take for granted, misinterpret, etc.) that even if you think you've got them covered you should give them another round of consideration.

They come from our own sometimes triumphant, sometimes traumatic experiences in community. Some represent things we really did well and are grateful for. Most are things we didn't do well and we paid a heavy price for it. We offer them in the hope that they may help community-minded people tip the scale towards ever more triumph and ever less trauma.

1 - Set a High Bar for Selecting People, and Stick With It

Diana Leafe Christian's chapter on "Selecting People to Join You" is fabulous and you should take her advice very seriously. If you have misgivings about anyone joining your founding group or community, or just have a gut concern, no matter how wonderful they may seem in other ways, you should simply say no, or at least hold off on accepting them. And if you think you're already setting a high bar, set it just a little higher. And that includes being sure that you're selecting people who are themselves enthusiastic about setting a high bar for people joining!

Think especially about how people seem to handle conflict, and how successful they seem to be in long-term relationships. Do they have experience in group living situations?

People have compared joining a community to marrying someone. Not quite, but it's an important idea to consider. The interweaving of lives on such an intimate scale and the

interplay of such powerful, complex, and triggering elements as money, family, home and place, as well as power and decisionmaking – all of these mean that we become very interdependent and have a huge impact on each others' lives in ways that are very personal and deeply affecting. Which can be a good thing – it is exactly why many of us are drawn to community – but, like so many bad marriages, it can be deeply draining and traumatic. We need to be very thoughtful in who bind to our lives in this way.

As hard as it may feel to say no to someone, take those feelings of regret, shame, sadness, resentment, distrust, etc., and imagine them being blown up a thousand times over, and imagine being tied to that person. That and more is what you are quite possibly inviting into your life and the lives of everyone else in the community, including this person, by having to deal with someone who is not right for your community *after* they've been accepted rather than before. Life in general, and community-building specifically, are going to present you with enough big challenges. Do yourself a favor and don't go looking for more.

2 - Deal with Conflict and Conflictual People Immediately

Conflict is inevitable. Depending on how we approach it, it can be a path to self-discovery and stronger connections within the community or it can block all forward movement in the community and make people want to run for the hills. Addressing conflict in a positive way means dealing with it *as quickly as possible* for both the small and big things that come up. The small things add up to big things fast, and they set the tone for how easily and effectively people deal with the big things. A seemingly minor conflict that is not addressed can be toxic. It can undermine morale and culture of the community, which has brought many communities to their end.

The same thing goes with someone who is very conflictual or unhealthy in dealing with conflict. Set some clear boundaries for them and stick with them, including requiring them to leave if necessary, or you will pay a *much* higher cost down the road.

This will not be easy. Most people are conflict-averse. Many are VERY conflict-averse. One thing we did in one of our communities that was *very* helpful was at our night a week together we had a specific time for "Elephants in the room." By having a specific space for people to name anything little or small that was bothering them and really making it clear that people had a responsibility to not let anything sit beyond that weekly gathering, we helped normalize discussing concerns and problems, people got more comfortable and skilled at it, we were there to support each other, and people didn't have to take the initiative and find time during the rest of the busy week.

(The time for Elephants in the Room was capped at 30 minutes unless the whole group agreed that extending was more important than moving on to the other things on the agenda.)

3 – Adopt Some Clear Norms and Processes Around Good Communication and Conflict Resolution

We were very successful in creating spaces that invited people to share deeply with each other, to invite the fullness of who we each are and what we are experiencing in our lives into our community lives and awareness, and to really go deep when problems arose to try to get at the fundamental issues within ourselves that were being triggered or stimulated. This was primarily thanks to our use of the Be Present Empowerment Model and trainings from Be Present, Inc., which are incredible resources. (brepresent.org.)

This allowed our communities to be very rich and connected, and it promoted a huge degree of personal growth. More than once this was named as essential to the Beacon community having survived some challenging times, and it was cited by all three communities as the glue that held them together and what made the whole thing worth it.

This level of seeing and knowing each other went a long way to helping prevent conflict in the first place, and to easing moving through conflict when it did come up.

At the same time, what we did not generally do well was have something more immediate and solution-oriented for our groups to use when conflict came up. It is super valuable to have a model in place that promotes deep exploration of what is really going on for people at a deeper level and that supports them moving through that, but it has important limitations. People are not always able to rise to the occasion of trying to process at a deeper level, of being that vulnerable and introspective. That kind of processing also often requires an investment of a good amount of time. When people are pressed for time, due to work or family or major community projects or issues, or when many things start coming up for a lot of people, people's issues and conflict can overwhelm even a group that feels a strong commitment to using a deeper model.

There needs to be something in place to provide some immediate relief and clarity, to help the group get through those times, and to provide some accountability and clear next steps around particular issues or individuals.

Having these norms and processes in place early on is critical, because trying to introduce them when something really big has already come up can be very tricky, and you miss the opportunity of practicing and getting everyone more comfortable with conflict by working on smaller issues.

*** We highly recommend taking advantage of a draft document we created on the topic of "Empowered Relationships and Conflict Transformation," that goes into all of this in more detail.

4 – Do Not Set a High Bar When It Comes to a Process to Remove Someone from the Community

We used consensus decisionmaking in all three of our communities and were generally happy with it. The Beacon group had an important exception to consensus, requiring only a 50% majority to remove someone from the community (the decisionmaking body and/or the physical community). The idea was that if more than 50% of the community believes that someone really needs to go without any more processing or trying to work things out, then the community will be much better off just getting on with it than investing the vast amount of time and energy it would take to get to consensus minus one.

Also, our experience is that there are some people who are so uncomfortable with the idea of kicking someone out that they cannot ever bring themselves to do it, short of that person perhaps actually being a physical threat to other community members. It was difficult to actually exercise this 50% option when the time came because we had developed such a strong norm around consensus. So we spent a huge amount of time trying to get a final person on board with a decision to kick another person, which was deeply damaging to the group. So when we did actually use the 50% rule we were deeply grateful we had it to turn to.

Whatever decisionmaking process your group adopts, we recommend giving some serious consideration to not making it very hard to remove someone, recognizing that most people will set a pretty high bar for themselves around this kind of decision already.

5 – Some Brief Offerings on Decisionmaking

All three groups came away with appreciation for the benefits of modified consensus but many people in the Beacon community in particular came away with serious concerns about it as well, feeling that the benefits simply were not worth the vast amounts of time it required. We did not ever get to the point of exploring other options, but the idea of supermajority voting was named as attractive to some because of the idea that “most people getting most of what they want most of the time” while spending so much less time on decisionmaking. Also attractive to some was the idea of sociocracy.

The Tivoli co-op very happily used a modified form of Formal Consensus as described by CT Butler and Amy Rothstein in "On Conflict and Consensus." (www.consensus.net/ocaccontents.html) Our most significant departure was that we allowed a lot more time for processing emotions than that process generally allows because we were a small enough group and we saw that as a key part of how we learned and grew as a community, even though it compromised some efficiency.

6 – Hold a Balance of Connection Time and Logistics Time

In California the time for checking in, connecting with each other, and learning more about each other often took up most or all of the monthly meeting time, leaving little room for any forward movement on the logistics front. The group did powerful work creating a rich human community, but after several years they had not been able to move forward much in terms of a physical sight. For some in the group who had long been dissatisfied with the group spending so much time on connecting, this was highly demoralizing. And this really undermined some people's faith in the group's ability to move forward and was a critical factor in the group stalling out.

In Beacon, there came a point where the emphasis shifted so significantly to the logistics side of things that almost no time was given to the connection time for a number of months. This was understandable: most people felt a strong need to take a step back from the emotional processing of the group for a little while because things had been so emotionally taxing leading up to and during people's move-in, and there were so many logistical things to take care of. But for months issues festered, people became disconnected, and some of the divisions in the group deepened and contributed to the fracturing of the group.

Both pieces are necessary for the group to not only thrive but even survive as a human community and a group of people striving to accomplish some very real logistical goals as well.

7 - Be Detailed in Your Visioning

Again, Diana Leafe Christian's chapters on "Community Vision" and "Creating Vision Documents" are right on the spot. Yes, start with a very small group; yes, make the visioning one of the very first things you do; yes, write it all down, etc. The idea of community can be deeply seductive. And it can indeed be truly rewarding and purposeful. But a bunch of people banding together to pursue the seduction without getting really clear on just what that means for each of them is going to come back and bite you all hard down the line. It has in many situations brought communities to their knees and forced them to disband. Meaning they ended up with as much of a community as they had before they set out, just with a number of years and emotional energy up in smoke. (To be clear, we all learned a lot, and most are grateful for it, regardless of whether we ended up living in community. But there are also a few people who clearly feel that what was collectively gained was not worth what they gave.)

What we did not have the insight to do well was to make our visions sufficiently detailed. Make sure you have someone with experience living in community provide support around what kinds of guiding questions to use. Folks who don't have experience in community may not identify up front some of the topics that will be central to the community experience down the road. For example, in one situation someone felt deeply betrayed by the community when some of us had hesitations about loaning her \$300 a month for 6 months while she transitioned to a new job.

("How can you call *that* community?") In another situation someone was disappointed and scornful that the rest of the community didn't hang out more outside of scheduled time together. ("I thought this was a community?") In another situation, we experienced a conflict in which someone was deeply hurt and angry that the community didn't agree to add a training on race issues to our schedule. This person felt that a training on race should be a top priority, others felt it was not so important as to bump the other trainings scheduled or to add onto the existing schedule. ("What kind of community won't add a training around something one of the members is really struggling with?")

Yes, you want to support each other in times of need, but are there limits to that in terms of time or money and how it balances with other commitments? Yes, you want to live sustainably, but are there limits to what you should expect of each other in your daily lives? Yes, you want to be kid-friendly, but what should be expected in terms of community members being available to look after other people's kids? And so on.

You don't have to agree on all the details, but you want to go in with as good a sense as possible about how flexible you all might have to be based on how different and significant people's sensibilities are.

*** We drafted a guide for groups to use in discussing this topic entitled "Why Community?" It is very rough but we are sharing it in case it is helpful.

8 - Strive to Balance Autonomy and Community, and When in Doubt Go With Autonomy

In seeking to create a community, we are all seeking a greater degree of closeness and interrelation than we already have with each other and with most other people. And yet, the more we weave our lives together:

- the more room there is for conflict to emerge, which requires additional time and energy to process;
- the more each of our lives can be disrupted by what's going on in other people's lives, as well as by each other's baggage;
- the more decisions that will have to be made collectively rather than individually or as families, stealing power from those people and requiring more time;
- and the more complex and challenging it can be to create and maintain the essential functions of the community.

All of this in turn means that the more we weave our lives together, the more time that will be needed from each person – which itself can be a stressor that in turn further increases the disruption, complexity, and time requirements.

Through a detailed visioning process we want to establish some real confidence about the ways we definitely do want to be in each others lives more. The rest we want to

allow people to do separately from the community – through collectives, businesses, workshops, etc. At least at first – they can be added in later if we want.

Think about what it takes to launch even a single project or a non-profit or a business. Anywhere from 50-80% of businesses fail within the first few years. Diana Leafe Christian has estimated that 90% of communities never get off the ground. The more pieces we try to hold collectively

The community can offer certain kinds of support for the different ventures the members take on, like reduced costs, some amount of time from other members, whatever you think is appropriate, but there should be some kind of buffer between the entire community and each venture to allow each of them to experience their own challenges, slow-downs, speed-ups, shifts in members, etc.

*** That same guide, “Why Community?” is helpful with this.

9 - Sequence the Big Things So They Come at You One at a Time and Stagger When and How They Affect People

The Beacon community purchased a small apartment building one October. Which means the months leading up to October were intensely stressful, dealing with money and legalities, selecting apartments for members, etc. There were some renovations that were important to us to do before we moved in. So those began immediately after acquiring the building. And while those were going on, people were paying rent on their new apartment while also living (and paying) for the place they were still really living. Then we all had to move, which involves time and money and relationships, and also affects us deeply in terms of our connection with place and people and things familiar to us. There was no time for us to process the issues and triggers that came up for people, right at a time when lots of issues and triggers were inclined to come up.

By January most of us had moved in, but not before some of our relationships were irreversibly damaged and we were deeply wounded as a group.

What if we had bought the building and then filled most of it with short-term tenants, perhaps with a mix of 3-month to 12-month leases? We could have spread out the stress of finances, decision-making, the time needed for renovations, and moving all of our stuff and families. Some of us would have been in the flurry of all of that while others could be there as resources and anchors for them. The logistical challenges were not what directly poisoned our relationships, but those stressors brought out everyone’s personal stuff around money, time, relationships, trust, support, etc., and that stuff requires some real time and attention – exactly the resources we least had available.

10 - It Takes a Lot of Time to Create Community

It’s just that simple. It takes a lot of time. So people need to be ready and able to commit to carving out a good chunk of their lives to make this real. Some people can’t

do that, and that's fine. Have them be consultants. Invite them to join later. But make sure you have a critical mass of 3-10 people who are committed and can make the time. Otherwise you'll spend all your time trying to just corral people to meetings and there will be little forward progress – a disappointment to you and to the people who were gung ho and only later realized they can't really make that commitment.

At some point in all the communities that we know of, one or more people made the switch to working for the community at least part-time if not full-time. This is especially critical at certain junctures (like when you're purchasing property). But it's important to have someone who can help keep things moving forward and to help guide the group in setting agendas, etc, at all times.

There will be certain tensions around power and vision as the people with more time move things forward for the group, but you just have to work with that as best you can, forward movement is critical to keeping people invested and inspired.