

Building a Community in a Condo

Feeling Connected Plays a Large Role In Our Happiness Levels



A documentary called Happy peaked my interest to better understand community. The movie discusses the key ingredients that are necessary to living a happier and more fulfilling life. According to the research, feeling connected to a community plays a large role in our happiness levels.

Condominiums are often referred to as communities. After learning about a clear link of belonging to a community to increased happiness, I asked myself is the condominium that I live in really a community?

Is there a culture, shared traditions, activities that keep me connected with the other people that I co-habitate with? Considering anyone's presence is rarely acknowledged in the elevators (everyone is fixed on their phones), I did not know a single person on my floor and the only people I knew were my fellow Board Members and select staff in the building, the answer was clear.

So, what does community mean in the

context of living in a condominium? It is unreasonable to expect everyone to be friends; however, there are many people sharing a very small space. In my opinion, community is a place where you do know some people, where everyone feels equal and welcome - as though a bit of their identity is tied to a larger collective - and where everyone can contribute towards something larger than themselves. Ultimately, being part of a condominium community is knowing that you belong - that you are known, respected and valued.

Who doesn't want to be happier? Like the people in the documentary who all identified as belonging to a close-knit society, I wanted to live in and belong to a community where I know my neighbours and feel connected to something greater than myself. The evidence also exists: a thriving community equals a stronger, better condominium.

I'm mindful of the fact that I live in a condominium that is occupied vastly by renters, some of whom have no vested interest

in staying with our building beyond the term of their lease and which happens to be located in the heart of downtown Toronto, where a more transient lifestyle exists. While it is possible for a community to be established in any condominium, I did not want to wait 20 years for my building to have a thriving community, nor was I interested in moving. So, I consciously set out on a new mission: to build a community in my condominium.

I served as a director in the first year of operation of my condo. The very long meetings were packed with critical decisions like deciding whether or not to sue the builder, addressing performance audit concerns, renegotiating contracts, budgeting and setting baseline policies and procedures to ensure a well-run condominium. While "Building a Stronger and Connected Community" was never explicitly included as an agenda item, it was clear to the Board that people are core and a lot of problems, including those related to misuse of common elements and security could be avoided if residents felt connected

ILLUSTRATION BY MAURICE VELLEKOOP

to something greater than themselves.

There is no blueprint for building a community in a brand-new condominium. As such, the first year was very much experimental. We rolled our community building efforts in a multi-phased approach:

Phase 1 - Get people out of their units and engaging with their neighbours in a friendly and welcoming environment

Phase 2 - Foster a greater sense of civic responsibility among the residents.

Phase 3 - Create a culture that transcends roles; where owners, tenants and staff all feel equally invested and part of the community.

To accomplish Phase 1, we tried many activities to see what resonated. With the help of volunteers, management, staff and the support of the rest of the Board, we hosted regular movie nights, board game nights, free yoga and salsa dance classes and weekly running club meet ups. We started a library with hundreds of books, welcoming parties - and other initiatives to better greet new members of our community - networking and mingle nights, a garden club and planned group outings outside the building.

Our greatest challenge was not in finding people to volunteer their time to organize these various community activities, but

rather to engage residents to come out to them. Many people are more comfortable keeping to themselves as they are shy or hesitant to engage with complete strangers in a public setting. While people read the notices, they still have their apprehensions and fears of coming out of the comfort of their individual units. Tackling this cultural shift takes time and requires creative solutions.

Perhaps equally challenging is figuring out how to properly evolve our organizational structure and team to roll out this unchartered and ambitious vision with everyone on the same page. Operating within the constraints of a condominium corporation, where decisions must be approved by the Board while simultaneously ensuring everyone responsible for implementing these decisions (staff, volunteers, community members) are continuously engaged and in alignment with a broad, rather intangible vision is not always straightforward. It is important to create a structure that provides clear direction and focus, while still leaving room for growth and adaptation to the changing needs of the community.

Results are not immediate. While anecdotally we received a lot of positive feedback, a lot of investment still needs to be made to accomplish a much longer term goal. Within 6 months, our efforts engaged approximately 20% of residents, at a net cost of \$0 to the corporation. Main-

taining this positive start, and sustaining these engagement levels will be a challenge. The impact of all these efforts is largely unquantifiable and intangible. How do you measure people's happiness levels and connectivity to the condo community that they belong to? It also takes time for a shared culture to get established among members. In the long run however, I believe the investments made will lead to a stronger, better maintained, safer and more enjoyable condominium community.

Lessons Learned and Advice

Determine what community means to you. It is important to establish a set of guiding principles that reminds everyone what they are working towards. Are you striving to create a building that is more livable for everyone? Would a long-term goal mean converting short-term renters into longer-term residents or owners, who are more vested in maintaining and respecting the building?

Establish who you wish to serve

Every building is comprised of a diverse population with varied interests. Be mindful of this diversity as you plan your activities. It is impossible to please everyone, and trying to do so will only fragment your efforts.

Encourage participation at all levels

Ultimately, community is driven by the people that make it up. It is important to create space for everyone to be able step

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up and share their interests with their neighbours. The scope will constantly evolve and expand, as new people enter and leave the community, therefore all must feel engaged and encouraged to introduce new ideas and to play an active role in maintaining a sense of community. Management, staff, committee members, volunteers, and board members all have a role to play and should all feel as though their contributions are equally valued and appreciated.

Alignment of goals

The goals and mandate should be centered around what is best for the building, and not driven by the individual interests of members. If the Board sets a clear mandate to begin with, volunteers can understand what is expected of them at the outset. As the vision continues to evolve, it is important to engage all those contributing their efforts to ensure that everyone continues to work in the same direction.

Set a clear governance structure

Some of the best communities are those which are self-organized without a specific overseeing authority. Others thrive

with structure. If you choose structure, it is important to create one that everyone will work within.

- 1) Establish what a committee will look like and how it will operate: set a clear process for assigning new members and removing non-contributing members; decision-making processes; structure and roles; expectations around communication, etc.
- 2) Set clear and transparent guidelines for the approval of new ideas, ensuring everyone feels as though they are being heard
- 3) Determine how much authority each individual member will have and make sure that they are aware of their boundaries

Check in with members and evolve structure when necessary.


Creating a clear structure makes it easy to manage turnover and creates guidelines that are fair and objective for all. This will allow everyone to focus their efforts and energies on participating and building community.

Don't expect perfection

If we knew all the answers, then there would be nothing new to create. With so many moving parts, it is completely reasonable to expect mistakes or for some activities to not succeed. Rather than scrutinize missteps under the microscope, it is important to create a culture that highlights and celebrates successes while creating room for open constructive dialogue on how things can be improved moving forward.

Have fun!

You may not see direct results - changing a culture of apathy and getting people out of their comfort zones is not easy. Investing your time and energy to serve the greater good can come with many silent rewards. Encouraging volunteers to share their interests and offering gestures to make them feel valued can make putting in the effort more enjoyable. The rest will come from within.

Building community need not be such a serious undertaking, after all it's all about connecting people and helping them feel happier. 



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