“The behavior of an individual is determined not by their background, but by the character of their ancestry and cultural environment”

Franz Boas

COMMUNITY, CULTURE and GATEKEEPERS

Community is a network of people who regularly come together for some common cause or celebrations. A community is not necessarily geographic, although geography can define certain communities. More to an understanding of community is to appreciate that community is really based on the relationships that form, not on the space. Indeed, space can be an abstract notion when it comes to understanding community. Think about the global community created by the Internet. These communities are not bound by geography, but are relationships forged in cyberspace.

The term community is the blending of the prefix, “com” which means “with” and the root word, “unity” which means togetherness and connectedness. The notion of being “with unity” is a good way to think about the concept of community. When people come together for the sake of a unified position or theme, you have community.

The term culture is analogous to community, but culture relates more to the behaviors manifested by the community. People bound together around a common cause create a community, but the minute they begin to establish behaviors around their common cause they become a culture. In a way, culture is the learned and shared way that communities do particular things.

To the heart of the matter, this basic definition of community and culture blend three key features. One is the fact that community is a network of people. Often these people may have great differences or even distances between them. They can be different in age, background, ethnicity, religion or many other ways, but it is a commonality or common cause that pulls them together. The similarity of the common cause or celebration is the second key feature of community and the glue that creates the network. Regardless of who the members of the network are as people, their common cause overrides whatever difference they may have and creates a powerful connection. Then, as the collection of people continues to meet and celebrate on a regular basis, the third key ingredient, they begin to frame behaviors and patterns and become a culture.
Again, these 3 key features are:

1. Diversity of membership
2. Commonality of celebration
3. Regularity of gathering

Think about the many communities with which you are involved. From your family, to your work team, to your church, to your clubs or associations, people who might be different from you in many ways surround you, but the commonality of the community tends to over-ride the differences you have and create a strong norm for connections.

Cultures and communities have many features, but one key ingredient is regularity. That is, for a community to be viable it must have some regular points of contact and connection. For a family community, this might be annual reunions or the celebrations of holidays together. For a religious community, this would be weekly services and holy days for celebration. For organizations this would be regular staff meetings or stakeholder gatherings. For clubs, groups or associations, the regular meetings or gatherings formalize the group as a community.

In any discussion of culture or community the most critical ingredient is that of the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper is defined as an indigenous member of the culture who has some formal or informal power or influence within the culture. Indigenous means that the person is already included and accepted in the culture. By powerful, we mean that the person has either official (elected or selected) leadership, or is unofficially (endorsed by colleagues) influential in the culture. Either way, the gatekeeper has authority and influence with the members.

In his book The Tipping Point (2000), Malcom Gladwell reflects on the kinds of people necessary to move something from one level to another. The movement of ideas, products or even people ultimately have a tipping point. Gladwell looked to understand how this might work. In his book he describes 3 types of people who move ideas, people or products into the mainstream. He calls these folks “connectors, mavens and salesman.”

- The “connectors” are the people with broad circles and can influence a lot of these people. These connectors are unique because their circles extend beyond the usual parochial boundaries.
- The “mavens” are people who have a deep level of information and are always looking to share this information with others. A key thing about the maven is that they get nothing for their information. They share important and useful things because they enjoy helping people.
• The “salesmen” are passionate purveyors of ideas, products or people. Salesmen may not necessarily have deep relationships, but they have opportunity to share things.

To me, a gatekeeper is a person with one, two or all three of these qualities. They are the key to cultural shifting by promoting or rejecting things that push the community to a new level. The way that they influence the culture can be either positive, where they support and endorse the new person, idea or product; or negative, where they oppose or work against the new person, idea or product.

Over the years Anthropologists have attempted to examine what type of people lead to social change and cultural shifting. As new things help to develop or enhance the existing culture the elements of positive gatekeepers become important to understand. Some of the things we do know about positive gatekeepers are:

• They tend to be positive people. They genuinely like people and look for the good in everyone they meet.
• They are social risk-takers. They reach out to the underdog and are willing to take cultural flack if need be.
• They reach out to new things, are curious and interested in why, how and why not.
• They tend to be younger people and not so caught up in dogma.
• More often than not they tend to be women. Men are usually more conservative and become more easily set in their ways.
• They are highly social and tend to be good mixers.
• They tend to have respected influence with their community.

Positive gatekeepers are absolutely essential for diffusion of new ideas, products or people to penetrate into an existing community. To this extent the positive gatekeeper is akin to the Innovators and Early Adopters that I mentioned earlier in this work. Without the positive gatekeeper stepping forward to introduce or to endorse something new is critical to cultural shifting.

The key to understanding communities is to appreciate how relationships develop and grow. Since all communities are dependent on relationships, the more we know about the human condition of relationship-building the closer we can get to helping the culture shift in ways that we are interested.

“Culture is not life in its entirety, but just the moment of security, strength and clarity”

Jose Ortega y Gasset