

This YMCA Serves No One: Thoughts On What It Means To Be A Membership Organization

by Larry M. Rosen



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This article was given to me a few years ago, photocopied from some pre-existent document, written by Larry M. Rosen who at the time was the President and CEO of the YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles. No date on it; maybe written in the late 80's or early 90's it is still a highly relevant manifesto, at least here in the Midwest YMCAs that I am familiar with these days. I'm republishing here so that it gets more attention again, so enjoy – and feel free to share, discuss with colleagues, and maybe make some changes to how your Y does membership. [reproduced here by Tim Hallman, Director of Christian Emphasis, YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne, Indiana]

A slogan as bold as "We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities" is a heavy weigh for an organization to carry around. On one hand, the statement is a compelling description of the YMCA's mission, a dramatic rendering of what the world can expect from the YMCA.

On the other hand, the statement compels the YMCA to deliver on its creed. It's not enough to say it; it must be observably so. Without a purposeful and rigorous commitment to the concept of membership, there is no real hope of building strong communities.

Membership Versus Service In Community Building

A compelling case can be made that a strong community cannot exist unless its members act as co-owners and co-producers of the thing to which they belong. The higher the levels of ownership and responsibility felt by the members of a community, the greater the likelihood that the community will fulfill the needs of tis members.

In this regard, the notions of membership and service are in opposition to one another. Members both enjoy privileges and accept responsibilities. When someone becomes a member of something, the act of joining is a statement of desired benefits and a willingness to be part of the process of making those benefits possible. It is not possible to be a member without the acceptance of some responsibility for the thing joined. People with privileges and without responsibilities are not called members, but customers.

- Customers are served. Members are involved.
- Customers get what they pay for. Members have a say and a hand in what they get.
- Customers are owed what they have coming to them. Members are part of the delivery system.
- Customers have not obligations beyond the requirement to pay for their goods and services. Members are responsible for the organization that makes the thing possible.

There is another way in which the ideas of service and membership are incongruent. In some instances, the term service is applied to work with those less fortunate: not customers who demand to be served, but others whose life condition calls for compassion and support. In such cases, the impulse to serve is the impulse to help.

It can be argued, however, that by responding to people's needs by rendering service, the recipients are diminished and communities are compromised, not built. Beyond the immediate relief of a physical need, those doing the helping always feel better about themselves than those being helped. By inviting those with special needs to be involved as members and to become co-producers of the thing they benefit from, a larger result can be achieved, from both personal and community perspectives.

What this suggests for a YMCA that aims to build strong communities is that it should undertake no work which cannot be accomplished by an act of partnership with its members. This impulse to serve might be properly channeled into a search for the solutions that memberships can provide.

How Communities Are Built

When it comes to building strong communities, there are many tools, methods and materials required to do the job. Some of these, such as the infrastructure of a strong economy, roads, sewers, public safety, public schools and the like are beyond the purview of organizations like the YMCA. At best, the YMCA's contributions to such infrastructure are peripheral.

What makes sense is to consider what elements of building a strong community is within the purview of the YMCA. Once these components are defined and understood, YMCAs that presume to lay claim to building strong communities, must set out to provide them with deliberation and intent. In this day of heightened accountability for nonprofit organizations, it is not good enough to suggest that the mere presence of one's facilities and programs will deliver the stated outcomes.

Strong and effective organizations in any realm – for profit, nonprofit, governmental or educational – are notable for the congruence between their stated goals and the way they deploy their resources in pursuit of those goals.

In the best examples, both the goals and the commitment of the organization to achieve them are obvious to all of the organization's internal and external constituencies. Saturn Motor Cars (in the early days), Microsoft (in the early days), Disney (for the most part), Habitat for Humanity, Starbucks, and the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (1984) are (or were, for a significant period of time) organizations in which the employees and the public had the same idea about what their goals were.

In the simplest terms, organizations being operated congruently with their stated goals are characterized by structures, systems, staffing patterns, products, communications and organizational priorities which have been conceived and tailored expressly for the purpose of achieving those goals. People within such organizations are always examining the elements within the organization for their applicability to the goals. People, structures and other things that do not contribute to the pursuit of the goals are not allowed to persist.

When it comes to the goal of building a strong community then, YMCAs are well advised to embrace the policies, organizational structures, programs and methods which contribute materially to the pursuit of that goal and to abandon those which do not. The simple question, "How does this policy (program, method, etc.) contribute to building a strong community?" should be applied commonly.

What Characterizes A Strong Community?

When Alvin Tofler wrote in *The Third Wave* about modern man's search in a technologically advanced age for "structure, meaning and community," he was referring to man's overpowering hunger for a sense of belonging and connection to others, without which the world would seem overwhelming.

Whatever its defined purposes in any given case, a strong community is a cooperative enterprise of its members. Strong communities are not composed of those who take and those who provide. Rather, a strong community is characterized by a sense of shared ownership in which all of its members recognize both their privileges and their responsibilities.

This is not to suggest that some may not help more than others, or that others may require more support than many. Instead, the description of a strong community embraces the ideal that all are invited to contribute as they are able to its sustenance and each is encouraged to partake fully of the benefits it provides. Throughout, there is the expectation that all will participate in some way to sustain the community for the benefit of all who are within it.

The sustenance of a community extends far beyond its physical requirements: its members need to be nourished spiritually, socially, emotionally, recreationally, and in many other ways. Communities provide the fabric of life, the weave that incorporates all the elements of the daily lives of their members. Communities provide the mechanisms and structures by which their members might support one another in these ways.

Finally, and most importantly, a community is not defined by geography.

A community can exist whenever and wherever people congregate around common goals or common interests. Within each such gathering are the seeds of a community and the opportunity to benefit by its creation. This is where the YMCA fits in the picture.

The Role of the YMCA in Building Strong Communities

The YMCA can promote community building by conceiving of each of its programs as a small community, in and of itself. Within each of these small communities, the YMCA can stimulate and nurture the processes of community formation. By doing so, the YMCA does two things: it create a structure capable of meeting a wider array of the needs of its members and it teaches the members the skills of community membership/leadership to be applied in other parts of their lives.

Imagine. The 6:30 AM Fitness Class as a community. So conceived, this class would attend to much more than its participants' desires to become physically fit. The members of the class would be encouraged in natural and simple ways to care for one another: they would know one another's names...some would assume various roles of leadership (teaching the class, helping teach the class, welcoming newcomers, participation in decisions to modify the curriculum)...social support (recognizing birthdays, marriages and other life events) would make classmates feel more connected to one another...those absent would receive calls of encouragement from other members...those going through illness or other rough times would receive calls of support and concern. The class would have an identity, a rhythm and rituals of its own. In ways large and small, the members of the class would be provided ways to enrich and sustain this little family, from bringing the lemonade to the end-of-the-month potluck to picking up the classmate whose car was in the shop.

Imagine. The Lincoln Avenue YMCA Child Care site as a community. Parents would be given roles to play in the governance of the site, including decisions about curriculum and scheduling. Families enrolled at the site would be provided opportunities to become friendly with one another, even to the point of helping one another out with the burdens of busy lives and child rearing. The site

community would serve as the catalyst for cooperative solutions among its members for the problems of baby-sitting, shopping, family recreation, school-related concerns and the like. The sick would be called and the troubled would be comforted; at the same time, birthdays would be celebrated and other joyful events would be acknowledged.

Imagine. The YMCA Youth Sports Team as a community.

Imagine. The Regulars in the Nautilus Room from 7-8 PM as a community.

Imagine. The Branch Board of Managers as a community.

In truth, any activity and any program of the YMCA can be organized to promote community building, teach the skills of community membership and leadership, and deliver the benefits of a community to those involved. It is no more than a matter of intention and design that this should happen.

At the heart of it all is the concept of membership. It is only in lasting and progressively deepening long-term relationships that the YMCA succeeds in its work. The power of the YMCA is not felt in short term associations. To know the truth of this, one has only to look at those who have risen to the top echelon of YMCA volunteer leadership.

There is a powerful correlation between the depth of the relationship over time and the value received by a YMCA member. It is also true that such members of long tenure also return proportionately more to the strength of the YMCA community. Commitment grows through involvement over time. The ideas of commitment and membership are inseparable. It is also true that the sub-atomic, irreducible particle of a community is the concept of membership.

It is central to community building that whatever is done, it is done with people, not for them. Any YMCA program that does not contain both the expectation and the opportunity for participants to become more than consumers of a service works at cross-purposes to the larger goal.

Sometimes the commitment to a congruency between the goals and methods will act to exclude the YMCA from taking on something that might be considered socially worthy, as in a government or foundation funded grant for a special population requiring certain services. In other cases, the YMCA might have to take a pass on a potentially lucrative marketplace opportunity that requires it to think of its constituents as customers, rather than as members.

At the end of the day, however, the YMCA's unique place as an organization that aspires to build strong kids, strong families and strong communities is a function of its commitment to the concept of membership, not service. The YMCA is not, and should not become another "social services agency" or another business.

To be optimally effective in its mission, the YMCA is challenged to apply the tool of membership to build the capacities needed in every community for those communities to thrive. People from every corner of every neighborhood must be included as members in every larger numbers for this mission to be realized.

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