

Five Community Building Lessons from CATs

Community Ambassadors (CATs) are volunteers from rural Oregon and Siskiyou County, Calif., who assisted with the coordination and training of the Ford Institute Leadership Program from 2003 through 2016. They are passionate, wise and committed individuals with a wide range of skills and experiences. At the CAT Reunion in October 2018, more than 100 CATs gathered, among other things, to

share community building stories and lessons learned. The group identified 212 different lessons learned. After the reunion, a crack team of seven CATs distilled the learnings into the five you see below and to share them with the greater Ford Institute community. We hope you enjoy reflecting on them, sharing them with others and finding inspiration in them on your community building journey.



Go TEAM

In community building endeavors, it's all about TEAM: Together, Everyone Achieves More. Every successful community builder values and nurtures relationships and partnerships. Our key TEAM takeaways are:

- All it takes to turn dreams into reality are inspired community members working together towards a common vision.
- You can't do it alone. Channeling the energy and securing the resources needed to complete a project requires community-level collaborations.
- Don't let tasks override relationships. Make sure everyone is informed and on board before moving forward, even if doing so slows down progress.



A lot of flowers make a bouquet

All communities have an untapped resource: people with time, treasure and talent, and a willingness to share what they have. The most successful community builders seek out this resource to strengthen the process and unite their community.

- Diversity is the art of thinking independently, together. Seek input and involvement from all corners of your community, economic levels and age groups.
- Although not everyone will have equal input or decision making in the process, everyone is equally seated and should be equally — and respectfully — heard.
- Needed skill sets are available; you just have to find the right person or people. Spread the word and explore outside your network, if necessary.



Ask not what your community can do for you

... ask what you can do for your community. Successful community builders are first and foremost thoughtful listeners and life-long learners, reaching out to the community to understand issues and seek solutions.

- Leadership is not about being in charge. It's about influence, inspiration and impact: spreading the passion you feel for your community, inspiring those around you and getting results.
- Don't deny others their opportunity to give. Sharing responsibilities empowers people to succeed.
- Be confident in your strengths but know your weaknesses. Reach out to others for help and training for yourself and your team if you need it.



See a need, fill a need

You have a vision. You have a team. You're now ready to roll up your sleeves and get to work. Effective community builders employ these tried-and-true methods to bring ideas to reality:

- Have a plan with goals, strategies, timelines and deliverables. But remember: You'll learn a lot along the way, so always be willing to change your plan, your direction and your assumptions as you go.
- Not everyone wants to be engaged in everything all the time, so match roles to people's interest, skills and level of involvement.
- Processes and processing take time. Key to long-term success is being patient with people and the decision-making process.



Are we there yet?

The initial excitement that starts a community building adventure can quickly fade when a group hits bumps, road blocks, detours and slowdowns. Here are some tips to help your group keep on truckin'.

- Commit to the course but be willing to give yourself and others space to refresh and renew. Nothing gets accomplished if people feel overloaded or burned out.
- Never underestimate the value of sharing food and having fun. If you're not having fun, you need to change what you're doing or change your outlook.
- Celebrating success — and each other — will keep people motivated to stay the course to the end.



Things you can do with these lessons

1. Comment or share lessons learned. Send thoughts to Yvette Rhodes (yrhodes@tfff.org) to include in upcoming editions of our monthly e-newsletter and/or post them to the Ford Institute's Facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/ruralcommunitiesnw).
2. Share this with groups you are working with to spark conversation and provide inspiration.
3. Consider how these lessons might deepen your community-building work.

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Questions or comments?

Max Gimbel (mgimbel@tfff.org)
(541) 957-2567