

Listening to Community Voices

As we rebuild our communities, let's ensure all voices are heard.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Building Community: 12 Principles for a Healthy Future.

By James S. Gruber. 337 pages. Softcover. New Society Publishers (newsociety.com).

The events of 2020 are exposing just how interconnected we all are. This year's disruptive events will leave us with a great opportunity to start anew: We needn't return to a "normal" that disconnects and disenfranchises many of us.

Repairing the damage that's been done will take time (after all, it took a long time to get here). We can no longer afford to isolate people, including ourselves. It takes all participants, not just those we call leaders, to create a regenerative community.

In this splendid, readable book, James Gruber explains how to strengthen community by:

- **inventorying** untapped community assets
- **developing** inclusive participation
- **being flexible** through authentic and transparent communication.

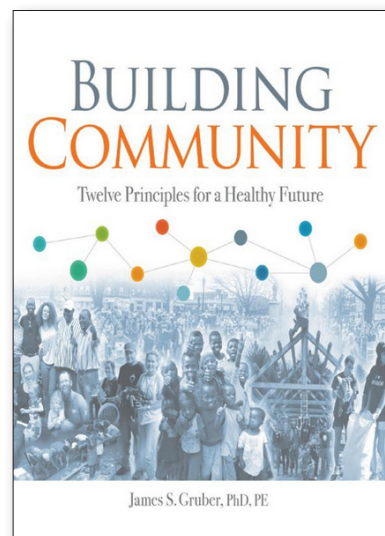
He explores ways to encourage, not compel, participation through 12 community-building principles. Here are a few:

Involve everyone. The people of the community are the best source of planning and creating positive change. When making decisions, include everyone who will be affected, and be sure you heed the voices of underrepresented populations.

Work together. Don't push an idea without support from others. Instead, start slowly, and build a following of supporters as you go. Don't move too quickly in creating collaborations; these need to grow naturally as you work together and trust develops.

Protect resources and promote fairness. Managing natural resources and distributing benefits fairly requires planning with a longer time frame than is typical. It's critical to address equity, realizing that while some have more resources than they need, others don't have enough. Environmental justice is an imperative that includes recognizing local values.

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Support research.


“Thorough and ongoing research presented as accessible and shared information is integral to the success of any community-based initiative,” says Gruber.

When gathering data, it's vital to include indigenous local knowledge. Information from many diverse sources is needed to inform community-wide decisions.

Anticipate conflict and work toward resolution and cooperation. “The best way to resolve conflicts,” Gruber says, “is to prevent them from forming.” If you practice the other 11 principles, you'll have far fewer conflicts. Conditions are ripe for conflict if people don't believe their voices are heard. When people are upset, there are often underlying issues that need to be acknowledged. Active listening and recording what people say are good steps toward showing respect, building trust, and reducing conflict.

These principles are guidelines, not rigid formulas. The intent is to patiently empower people and organizations to achieve mutual goals. Gruber presents plenty (yet not an overabundance) of examples where he has seen this happen, relating how different communities were able to successfully employ inclusion and empowerment.

A focus on mission is essential. It's when we put our values into action that we're most likely to create meaningful equity, purpose, and trust.

Building inclusive communities is crucial to regenerate failing ecosystems and economies. Using the principles in this book can help us and our organizations develop our own responsive communities. 

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