

Accelerating Engagement Starts with Our Invitation

One of the questions that comes up repeatedly in our conversations about preventing MRSA is:

“How do I engage more staff in MRSA prevention?”

This question reminds me of a time, many summers ago, when my husband Bob and I decided to invite the staff of a small organization he worked with over for a casual picnic – we love entertaining, Bob’s a bang-up cook and this was a group that he felt would benefit from socializing together.

A date was chosen, invitations were e-mailed, and we went into high gear. We talked about the menu and whether to play croquet or bocce ball – we got responses from several of the invitees indicating they intended to come – we cleaned the house and mowed the grass.

The chosen day arrived, the weather was perfect, we arranged the table with care, we turned on the music and waited.....

And waited.....

And waited.....

Finally, one person arrived.

Now, we had a wonderful time sitting on the porch with (lots of!) good food and lively conversation.....still.....it wasn’t what we had intended, and we were disappointed.

Based on that, and other experiences in organizations, I’ve come to believe that ***HOW*** we invite people to join us – that is, how we evoke true, sustainable engagement always starts with our invitations.

Peter Block, a well-known organizational change consultant, often says: “All we have to offer is our invitation.” By this, I think he means that we can fool ourselves into believing that we can cajole, or even coerce, people into becoming engaged. But really, only sincere, attractive invitations actually result in real engagement. And, we’re all smart enough to know that only what we create *with* others is sustainable.

So, what *does* make an invitation to become involved and engaged irresistible?

Invitations offer authentic hospitality – great invitations let people know that they will be treated with generous and cordial consideration. Their needs will be attended to and their contributions will be valued.

Great invitations are personal – aren't we all flattered when someone we respect and like asks us to join them for a fun and important event?

The invitation is attractive – invitations don't necessarily have to be for "fun," but tempting invitations do have to appeal to the interests and needs of potential guests.

Tempting invitations make it easy for people to say Yes – we'll have more success engaging people when we invite people for shorter rather than longer durations and when we ask them to join us in a convenient location (which often means that we go to them instead of asking them to come to us!).

The focus of the invitation is not about solving problems! The invitation is about building a better future – Habitat for Humanity recruits thousands and thousands of volunteers to come create a better future for people who need housing. Notice that Habitat does not invite volunteers to come and get tired, hot and dirty hammering nails. The result? Habitat has built more than 250,000 houses around the world, providing more than 1 million people in more than 3,000 communities with safe, decent, affordable shelter.

Appealing invitations are specific – about why the person is being invited, what they can contribute and when the event will start and end and where it will be.

There's a promise of both the familiar and something exciting – it's hard to get people excited about the same old/same old and it's hard to get people to adventure into the completely unknown.....good invitations offer just enough familiarity to feel safe with a big enough dollop of novelty to be enticing and entertaining.

And, great invitations establish a clear expectation about rhythm – groups and communities naturally ebb and flow. Good invitations take this natural cycle into consideration and create liveliness and momentum by creating a strong and predictable rhythm.

Many of you have asked how you can create more staff engagement, so, my question back to you is:

“How could you make your invitations even more irresistible?”

And, in case you were wondering.....Bob and I learned some big lessons as a result of our poorly attended picnic and our next party was SRO (standing room only).

Other Resources:

Here's one good definition of community engagement: “.....Loosely defined, community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people

affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.” This is from Fawcett SB, Paine-Andrews A, Francisco VT, Schultz JA, Richter KP, Lewis RK, Williams EL, Harris KJ, Berkley JY, Fisher JL, Lopez CM. Using empowerment theory in collaborative partnership for community health and development. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 1995;23(5):677-697.

To understand how e-mail can actually prevent emergent engagement see:
<http://www.leadingvirtually.com/?p=75>

To refresh your memory about *exactly HOW* Mark Twain describes Tom Sawyer’s adventure in engaging other kids to help him whitewash Aunt Polly’s fence – and the surprising results of his efforts, see:
http://www.pbs.org/marktwain/learnmore/writings_tom.html

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