

# LEARNING FROM COMMUNITIES: A CONVERSATION WITH CORMAC RUSSELL

The study of communities and community-building activities can provide important insights into collaboration within and between organisations. Over the last 21 years **Cormac Russell** has worked in 35 countries, with communities, agencies, non-governmental organisations and governments. This article is an edited transcript of a conversation between Cormac Russell and **Steven Shorrock**, about learning from communities.

## KEY POINTS

1. **Healthy communities have permeable boundaries to allow people in, and to create space for people who are inside to be able to get out.**
2. **Communities have 'connectors' at the edge, who connect people and help create community. Connectors are trusted and gift-oriented.**
3. **People can be seen in terms of their gifts, skills and passions. Discovering these and connecting them between people is at the heart of asset based community development.**
4. **Professions have become more siloed, and the effect can be to 'other' those people who are not in the silo.**
5. **Organisations can help to understand interdependence via small group conversations.**



**Steven Shorrock (SS):** *Cormac Russell, thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could just spend a moment to introduce yourself, a little bit about who you are and what you do.*



**Cormac Russell (CR):** I suppose the space that I hold dearest is just this love of community, and an interest in how to grow community. My formal credentials around that are that I am an ABCD Institute faculty member, and ABCD stands for 'asset based community development'.

**SS:** *So you talk about community there. What in your mind makes community a community?*

**CR:** Yes, it's a great question. I regularly hear people refer to groupings of people as communities and when you enquire into the reality, you find that there are a lot of things that are excluded. Personally when I think about community, I would think about culture. I think about economy. I think about environment, the place, if you like – built and natural. I think about the associational life of the community but also the capacity of the community to welcome others that are not currently in the community into that space.

**SS:** *So related to that, in your book, which is called 'Looking Back To Look Forward', you interview a pioneer in community development, Professor John*

*McKnight. And he related to you a story about a group that he once belonged to:*

*"I once belonged to the Cook County Labrador Retriever Owner Association because we just loved our lab. We'd all go out once a month and meet in a park and bring our dogs. We'd talk together about how wonderful our dogs were and the dogs sniffed each other. That was it – the joy of association. And then one day out of the woods into the parking lot came what I think must have been a woman with a wonderful German Shepherd dog, and all of a sudden the question is whether we want to let her in? What holds us together is the belief that we have the best breed of dog in the world."*

**CR:** He was trying to relate this idea that every community, every peer group, every affinity group, has this invisible boundary that says to the world, "these are the people who are 'in', and these are the folks who are 'out'". So his challenge to us, I think, was to figure out how we could blur, or how we could create permeability around those boundaries. And to an extent that's the challenge of community. It's not to be able to grow a closed hermetically sealed circle.

**SS:** *He was saying, what holds us together is the belief that we have the best breed of dog. And maybe as professions,*

professions of all sorts, we think that we are the best breed of profession and we have to have a boundary around our profession. The question then is, is that boundary always a good thing and when do we need to create that permeability in the boundary in order that air traffic controllers can interact with others that they need to interact with in order to create safety both in the short term and in the long term?

**CR:** It's interesting. It isn't just allowing people in, I think, it's also about creating space for people who are inside to be able to get out on to do other things. How do we free some folks up inside those groups, who are probably more pro-social, who are probably more at the edge anyway, and can just operate in the interface? I think that there are always a number of people at the edge of any group, who are loosely called 'connectors', who move quite fluidly. I think about them as multicultural in a sense, in that they can move in between and across any grouping really. They have that competency and capability.

And then I think there are people who are good brokers. They may not necessarily be people who are good relationship builders, but they are good 'askers'. So maybe they have an authority or they have a leadership position, that says, "you know what, I'd like to have different conversation and I'd like different people in it".

**SS:** So you use this word 'connectors'. What is it that connectors actually do?



Well what I find helpful to think about in this regard is how a 'connector' is different to a 'leader' and a 'networker'. I feel that leaders are really, really good at crystallising issues that people can get around, so they can grow a followership. Not necessarily around themselves, but around a vision or an issue, and they can hold some stewardship around that. They are the good ones [Leaders]. So we need leaders and I think networkers tend, to my mind, to be – and I don't mean this at all negatively – but they tend to be quite opportunistic in the way that they bring people together. So they kind of sense the network being about a job of work or about very intentional exchanges. So I think entrepreneurs are really good networkers. But there is a lot of thought going into who owes who a favour. There is a lot of transaction.

### Connectors, I think, are gifted-oriented

Connectors, I think, are gifted-oriented. So, I see them being able to see in me something that I can contribute to somebody else. They then know that they've got to connect two gifts, so two unconnected gifts is reprehensible to a connector. They want to see them connected, so they will make those connections. And they will often – not always – say something

or do something that suggests that you both act in some way together. They will suggest that you mobilise.

**SS:** So they will put a seed in your mind.

**CR:** Exactly. And they then lead by stepping back. They disconnect. This isn't what a networker does. The networker stays close up to the network because they need something back from the network. Whereas I find the connector will disconnect. If we go back to our conundrum of earlier on around the boundary circle that hasn't got enough permeability, then one of the ways of creating permeability is to find the connectors within each of those circles and help them relate to each other across the various siloed groups.



*I've certainly met several connectors who are often in professional associations, and so they often act in a voluntary capacity. But what they do is, as I experience those people, is they reach out between professions, between sites. And also even between organisations. So is that the kind of person that you're thinking about?*

### In the community context what we will try to do, is we would try to find some kind of way of revealing those connectors, and getting them connected together

**CR:** Absolutely. And in the community context what we will try to do, is we would try to find some kind of way of revealing those connectors, and getting them connected together. So it is beginning to say, okay, well they are there anyhow, so is the culture currently nurturing what they do naturally anyway, or is it stifling it? And if it is stifling it, how might we disrupt that constructively and innovatively? And that's where community building and community organising comes in, I think.

**SS:** Another thing that comes to mind here is that those connectors, when I think about one thing that they may have in common, is that they are trusted and that can be, I think, something that differentiates them from leaders or from networkers, who may or may not be trusted.





Yes, Absolutely. I think it's really striking isn't in life generally that when you are in relationship with somebody that isn't trying to get you to be interested in them but is genuinely interested in you and has an interest in other people, that is kind of uncommon. And therefore you'll find that trust builds very, very quickly with people who behave like that. And what is interesting about them is that even though they're trusted, they are not in any particular rush. So they are going at speed of trust.

**SS:** *Something that you mentioned earlier was that people with this connecting capacity are 'gift-oriented'. I am wondering if you can say a little bit more about what you mean by people's gifts and how that is relevant to this whole thing about connecting different groups and even connecting people within the same group.*

**CR:** If you think about a person in terms of their capacities, I think about people as having gifts, and what I mean by that is stuff that they are just born with, they do naturally. So they didn't learn necessarily, it's just a part of their make-up. Skills are things that we've

world, who have gifts that they don't know they have. Now the interesting thing is that connectors are really good at helping them see those.

**There are lots of people in organisations who have gifts that they don't know they have**

A passion is by definition different because a passion is something somebody is taking action around. They might not be particularly good at it, but they feel passionately.

Somebody can have those three capacities and a lot of our work is about people helping people discover their capacities and then contributing those to other people. That's how you build community. You show up and you make that contribution.



*Thinking about the issue of the interfaces between the various professional groups, locations of work, or organisations, it strikes me that those passions are a critical bridge that*

*could be built to connect up disparate groups in the aviation world that live in silos. So I am guessing a way forward is to look for, "what do you as professionals in these different groups care about enough to join together and take action on it, for safety or for any other thing that you care about"?*

**CR:** That is certainly one way in. I think there are other entry points and to an extent it might be a scattergun approach. In the institutional world we demark. We elementalise. And the specialism becomes a big part of my identity. So one of the ways might be, "Well what are some of the areas of common ground where we need each other? What are the things we can do together that we can't do apart?" So in a



acquired, and things that perhaps we've refined enough to either feel that we have learned them, and we can therefore find a way of expressing them to the world. So we often talk about skills that are head-based skills; things that I know and I could teach somebody else. And skills of the hands, so crafts.

The third thing I think about in terms of capacity is passion. And the way I would make the distinction between a gift, a skill and passion is, I think you can have a gift and even the skill and never express it. I can be very gifted at something I don't even know. And I think there are lots of people in organisations and in life generally outside of the organisational

sense that's an invitation to go right to the very edge of your specialism and be honest about the limits of what you can do. The only way you can have that conversation is to talk about what you can't do. And that demands a certain humility. Let's have a mature adult conversation about what we can't do, because I think at that moment you can really invite other people into that interface space. Institutionally, it is saying: "You have a gift that we don't have. We need it. We can't do without you. Come in." That's the great siren call of community. "You have a wonderful singing voice. We have a choir. I don't know if you've heard it. It's pretty awful. We need your voice. Come in."

**SS:** *It reminds me of some of my professional experience with these*

*fault lines. I'm wondering what would be practical ways, then, for professional groups to begin to address some of those fault lines? I'm thinking maybe of both formal ways or structured, systemic ways but also informal ways.*

**CR:** I think of my father working in Shannon airport for 41 years. He was ground manager in Shannon airport in Ireland (for an airline), and the way he interfaced and the way he brought people together was very much through fun and food and celebration and conviviality. So that was something I learned from him by watching him.

He just instinctively understood that if you connect people by discipline they tend to go deeper into their silos but if you connect them by human affinity and by care and compassion and passion and things like that they find ways of building relationships that make them more inclined to challenge their silos. Because you are humanising. You are humanising the folk that are 'the other'. And that's the problem, you know, when we are in our silos we 'other' the people who aren't in our silos. And we deify the people who are, and ourselves included. And so a lot of that attempt to just give people the opportunity to be in relationship with the 'other' is, I think, absolutely gold dust.

Now interestingly today, if you look at the way that groups of professional people organise, compared to 20 years ago, I would say that they have become more siloed. If you look at how people thought about their job of being a police officer, for example. 20 years ago they would've talked a lot about their beat, where they policed, the place, the people, the neighbourhood, the town, the village. Most police officers I know today talk about their role in relationship to other police officers or to first responders. They talk about their discipline. And so that's a silo within a silo, in that sense.

**SS:** *But in fact the work that anyone in any profession, in any silo does is only meaningful in its interactions with all of the other people that are involved in that. So the work of air traffic controllers means absolutely nothing except in the context of their interactions and interdependency with pilots, with*

*engineers, with meteorological specialists, with aeronautical information specialists, with safety, quality, and all of the other groups that you can imagine that form the aviation system. So in a sense the group on its own is only special in relation to all of these other groups of people that they are interdependent with, right?*



Absolutely. That is something that people need to feel in their bones because the initial impulse is to think that we are conceding, or we're giving something away, and it's only when people feel that actually there's something really valuable, and something to be gained, in fact something quite natural about working this way, and thinking this way. I think that that's where the intentional community building comes in.

**You can continue to hold your intimate small group connections, while at the same time getting the benefits of the wider relationships**

The trick is to be able to say to people, "you can continue to hold your intimate small group connections, while at the same time getting the benefits of the wider relationships and we are going to figure out how to do that in a way that gives you both ends". Giving people the opportunity to really understand "what's going on here?", and being able

to say "Ah, alright now, your concern is, you're going to be giving up something. Let's find a way of making sure and that you're not at a loss". And I think that hardly ever gets teased out.

And being able to have lots of small group conversations that intentionally permeate to allow people to move between those conversations. So there is something, I think, about being able to facilitate those kinds of conversations and welcome the dissenting voices, but inviting people to take their complaints and turn them into requests, and inviting people to articulate what they want as well as what they are prepared to offer.

So we need to have that social contract conversation. What are your wants, what are your offers? And I think that begins to open things up. And the fluid way of doing that is to create more associational life. Like in the informal spaces as well. Your organisation can show up in very intentional ways to help those things find expression and get connected up as well. The animating aspect is important. And in those points of interface you can begin to seed some really interesting conversations and maybe even practices around having conversations. So beginning to have sessions that start with appreciative inquiry or encourage groups talk about their wants and their offers. All of that will open up new spaces. **S**



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Steven Shorrock works in the EUROCONTROL Network Manager Safety Unit, where he leads the European safety culture programme and is Editor in Chief of HindSight. He is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Ergonomist & Human Factors Specialist with experience in various safety-critical industries. Steven is Adjunct Associate Professor at The University of the Sunshine Coast, Centre for Human Factors & Sociotechnical Systems. He recently co-edited Human Factors & Ergonomics in Practice.

## Resources

Listen to the whole podcast at <http://bit.ly/EFTE1>.

The full transcript is on SKYbrary for HindSight 26 under 'Online Supplement'.

Watch Cormac Russell at TEDx talk on 'Sustainable community development: from what's wrong to what's strong' at <http://bit.ly/RussellTEDx>.