

Theory of Change and Strategy for a Connect Coalition

Belonging is measurable as both a cause and an experience

- a. Cause: frequency of interaction, Positive affect of interactions, stability
- b. Experience: confirmed identity of each individual, recognized value of each individual, shared social capital - needs of each individual are met by the group, common mission



Belonging is *the* fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It's presence increases mental, emotional, behavioral, and physical health. It's absence increases illness (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010). A lack of belonging is the underlying cause of mental, emotional, behavioral, and physical illness. This leads to the symptoms that are our society's problems: drug abuse, violence, suicide, inequity, homelessness, bullying, tribalism, broken dialogue, etc. Therefore, increasing the quality and spread of the experience of belonging for individuals, families, neighborhoods, organizations, institutions, and communities will be the underlying cause of health.

Belonging should be understood as a clearly definable and measurable experience comprised of identity, value, and needs (Miller, 2019).

As the experience of belonging increases within human systems, it reveals the distribution of "gifts" or "capacities." This is true regardless of the size or diversity of the system.

Belonging can be discovered when space for it is created through the sharing of personal stories in stable small groups. Small groups are best suited to promoting belonging when they occur regularly, are marked by affective concern among members, and have an expectation of permanence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Small groups are organic rather than hierarchical gatherings. They are designed and implemented by the group participants who are accountable for each other. This agreed-upon stance of shared accountability rather than a sense of entitlement is what creates a safe space for sharing. For the purposes of this hypothesis, stories are defined as a recounting of events based on emotional experience from a perspective. (Kurtz, 2014).

Belonging is an emergent property of storytelling in a small group context because stories reveal the nature of characters, the adversity that has shaped them, and the influence of events and relationships. These three elements, which can be referred to as character, crucible, and community, allow both storytellers and story listeners to understand the identity, value, and needs of the storyteller. As stories are contributed by group members, a shared narrative is created. It is within the context of this shared narrative that three important things occur.

1. Commonality and potential identity of the small group - just as each member has an identity, value, and needs within their community, the group will have a unique identity,

value, and needs as well. The group will have a purpose for its existence which, when undertaken, continues to shape the narrative and reveal the identity, value, and needs of the group members.

2. Trustworthy authority of members grows as shared stories reveal commonality and the humanity that appears within vulnerability.
3. Encouragement - group members use the trust and authority they have gained to identify and strengthen positive characteristics and decrease impact of shame. This is a unique capacity of the group that cannot be achieved by an individual.

Existing **social networks** within human systems can be utilized to purposefully spread the experience of belonging for the purpose of increasing the health of the system.

1. The individuals within small groups of storytellers who learn the practice of storytelling and experience the resulting belonging can be utilized to share the experience within their existing relational connections.
2. There is a naturally occurring influence that expands up to three degrees away from each person. This influence has been shown to alter beliefs, emotions, language, behavior, health, and relationships (Christakis and Fowler, 2011).

A Connect Coalition is a strategy for utilizing small group storytelling and social networks to increase mental, emotional, behavioral, and physical health in organizations and communities.

The development of a Connect Coalition begins with a **Core Team** of influencers who are central members in their networks with high transitivity. Team members represent differing sectors, perspectives, and capacities within the organization or community. This team functions as a microcosm of their system. Their collective task will be to engineer a contagion of belonging within the social network of the community or organization. They will also be responsible for accounting for input from coalition members.

1. **Belonging through Storytelling (Contagion Level 1)** - They begin by creating space to discover belonging and the unique identity of their group by sharing stories from their own lives. Belonging is made up of identity, value, resources, and shared mission.
2. **Inspiring Imagined Future (IIF)** - Once this experience and the identity of the group becomes definable and measurable, they begin to identify possibilities for positive change within their system. This group, as representatives, establishes the kernel of an Inspiring Imagined Future. It is important to note that this group is not focused on solving problems but rather on discovering and investing in possibilities.
3. **Gatekeepers** - There are often key influencers in the community or organization who are capable of speeding up or slowing down change. The Core Team should identify these people and ensure that they are supportive of the potential efforts of the coalition.

4. **Measurement** - the Core Team decides what data should be collected and tracked in order to measure the success of the coalition. All coalitions will collect demographic data and use the Sense of Community Index II to measure belonging. In addition, coalitions will want to select measures of mental, emotional, behavioral, and physical health that are relevant to their community or organization. Some of this data may be collected from existing processes from the education and health sectors. In addition, as the coalition determines its IIF and its strategy, there will likely be a set of measurements pertaining to their particular purpose.
5. **Data Collection** - data is collected using the Connect App, an internet-based tool that is introduced to new members at each meeting after the launch of the Core Team. It is best utilized in a one-on-one or small group gathering. It works like a typical survey but downloads the information into a spreadsheet that populates a social network map. This map is the **visual measurement** of the health and growth of the coalition toward the IIF.
6. **Contagion Level 2** - The members of the core team identify the existing relationships that make up their circle of influence in the core team's social network. They then initiate meetings with these people where they share the storytelling experience, the purpose of the coalition, and the possibilities related to the IIF. The individuals they share with are invited and challenged to find their role in the effort. The storytelling process shared with the core team member will have begun the discovery of their identity, value, and needs. This contributes to their understanding of their role and the foundation from which they share with their connections.
 - a. The first contribution from participants is input on possibilities and the IIF.
 - b. The second action is to identify their connections and begin meeting to share belonging and collect input on possibilities and the IIF.
7. **Emergence** - As input from the members of the growing coalition is collected and evaluated by the Core Team and their research partners, the emergent properties of the coalition become evident. This is where the identity, value, and needs of the coalition are identified and its purpose in the broader community is uncovered.

Retreat - once the core team member's influence reaches the three-degree limit, there should be enough connections from which to select key influencers for a retreat. These people are invited and challenged to participate in the retreat in order to strengthen the launch of the coalition. Over the course of two or three days, several things will happen.

Retreat attendees will:

1. Participate in small group storytelling over shared meals in order to increase their experience of definable, measurable belonging.
2. Explore the human need for belonging, learn about the structure of stories and gain understanding of how belonging has been thwarted in our culture.
3. Play games and participate in activities to increase relational connections and break down relational barriers
4. Learn about trauma and resilience through the lens of brain science and epigenetics
5. Participate in an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process in which they will Discover, Dream, Design, and Deploy.

- a. Discover and share existing possibilities, strengths, resources, initiatives, and programs in the community
- b. Dream together regarding an Inspiring Imagined Future (IIF)
- c. Design a strategy, values, and measurement that will bring about the reality of the IIF
- d. Commit to implementing the strategies, values, and measurements that will bring about the possibilities for change they identify

Reunion Initiatives - The actions that are launched out of the AI process at the retreat will result in seven teams (art/displays/installations, audio/visual, presentations, social media, events/activities, media/marketing, measurement) that collaborate to design and implement Reunion Initiatives. These are campaigns that work to bring people together for connection and action to implement the strategies developed at the retreat.

Contagion Level 3 - After the retreat, attendees will reach out to those in their existing networks to share the experience of belonging through storytelling. They encourage their contacts to continue the spread of belonging by sharing with theirs. They extend an invitation to a gathering in the near future (within a month) that will offer an opportunity for the newly connected community network to receive direction from their core team and contribute further to the IIF and the coalition's strategy to spread belonging. Initial coalition members continue the same work within their networks.

1. **Contagion Phase One** - Initially, the focus will be on existing relationships. The spread of belonging and the development of small groups should be fairly rapid during this phase as these are connections that were present at the onset of the coalition's efforts. These are primarily an effort to intentionalize and deepen relationships for the sake of belonging and a change in the communal narrative.
2. **Contagion Phase Two** - In every social network, there are truly disconnected people, isolates, and people on the periphery of the network. We often refer to these as marginalized people. They may be sick, elderly, segregated due to race, religion, or sexual orientation, anti-social, struggling with mental illness, working odd hours, or disconnected for many other reasons. Similar to this group, are people who are connected but the whole network within which they are connected is marginalized. This is often a group that is on the socio-economic fringe and may result from reduced access to social capital and community resources. As the coalition begins to experience the spread of belonging throughout the social network of those who were already connected to some degree, it will need to begin putting attention toward building connections with both kinds of marginalized populations. This is also done using the opportunity provided by natural connections.
 - a. Coalition participants look for naturally occurring opportunities to connect with isolates, peripherals, and marginalized members.
 - b. This is not a "helping" approach but a recognition that, until all members of the community are included, it is incomplete and will not be fully functional or healthy

in its identity. Reaching out to marginalized members is driven out of respect rather than pity.

Gathering Rhythm - This gathering is intended to be the first in an ongoing rhythm of regular gatherings where coalition members connect to strengthen relationships, share stories and resources, maintain communication, and celebrate success as they experience the spread of belonging and recognize the resultant measured increase in health. It is often a shared meal that happens once per quarter.

Trainings - Ongoing workshops will be offered in the community or organization(s) to share concepts and practices with new coalition members.

Integration Projects - Out of the IIF and the work done at the retreat there will be particular efforts undertaken by the coalition. These may be things like extending radical hospitality, increasing resources for youth aging out of foster care, neighborhood livability, intergenerational connection, and educational success. Whatever the goal is for the community, the integration projects begin to open pathways through which community health can spread in practical ways.

Collective Impact - For community-based Connect Coalitions, a Collective Impact framework is helpful in providing a structure to facilitate the collaborative work of the coalition. A Collective Impact framework consists of five specific elements.

1. A common agenda
2. Shared measurement
3. Mutually reinforcing activities
4. Continuous communication
5. A backbone organization

The Core Team can serve as the initial board of directors of the backbone organization. It is key that this organization is neutral and does not operate through any of the other sector frameworks. For this reason, a non-profit with a 501(c)3 status would be developed and staff would be employed or sought through volunteering to work together in coordinating for the coalition the following seven activities:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities
3. Establish shared measuring practices
4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding
7. Facilitate communication

That's the gist of it!

