

# At the Beginning: Philosophy of the Community Perspective

A community is a **complex social entity** with numerous members and subgroups. These feel connected to each other in the long term through a higher purpose, a mission, an ideal, common values, activities and experiences and **identify with** the community.

A community is larger than individual groups or teams. In contrast to a community, groups or teams are focused on a clearly defined common goal or a specific work task. The affiliation to groups or teams is clear, whereas in communities it is more complex and characterised by different proximity and distance relationships as well as stronger and weaker commitment. Groups or teams can be part of a community.

A new community can also emerge from groups, teams and entire organisations if they open up to their environment and involve other actors in an overarching mission that creates a new common identification for all. A pure group affiliation, such as being part of a group of students, women or senior citizens, is not sufficient on its own for the formation of a community, since members of these groups can be oriented towards very different goals and values and thus feel little belonging to one another.

In terms of complexity and scope, the community is comparable to a network or the entire stakeholders of an organisation. Unlike the community, however, the **network** is more arbitrary and defined by looser connections and not necessarily aligned social dynamics. The concept of an organisation's **stakeholders, unlike the community**, highlights differences in interests and demarcations between various relevant groups of actors. Stakeholder management is therefore about moderating and balancing competing interests.

The community approach is based on a different **view of people** than the stakeholder or network approach, in that it emphasises identification, connection, belonging, and cooperation between community members. Through community development, relationships within the community are fostered in a targeted and continuous process, since affiliation and identification have to be created again and again. Community development is also responsible for the growth of the community and the establishment of relationships with potential members.

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## ACCESS

*In the context of ACCESS, the community is made up of all groups of actors who are currently or potentially involved in increasing the employability of students and graduates of African universities and in opening up attractive career prospects for them on local labour markets. This purpose is the core idea that defines the connectedness and cooperation of the community. Whether all relevant actors already identify with the core idea must be questioned as part of community development and, if necessary, strengthened, also in order to implement the core idea as effectively as possible with as many forces as possible.*

The concept of community does justice to the increasingly diffuse and decentralised character of social communities, which are no longer necessarily characterised by geographical proximity, but also by virtual links across wide areas. In the meantime, many communities even emerge online first, before possibly gathering geographically and manifesting themselves through personal contact. Community processes should therefore always be thought of and designed as an off- and online continuum.

The need for the community approach is growing as organisations and their communities become increasingly flexible, virtualised, and decentralised due to a variety of influencing factors. People generally psychologically seek to **balance autonomy and attachment needs**. As contemporary organisational environments more strongly satisfy autonomy needs, it becomes an urgent organisational task to systematically work on counterbalancing them, also in the long-term interest of the organisation. The basic needs of home, belonging and connectedness also want to be answered, which can also be incorporated into the value proposition of the organisation. Community development is to be understood as a bundling term for these counter-strategies, which counteract organisational centrifugal forces, balance out imbalances and, last but not least, also promote the health of the organisation's members.

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## ACCESS

*This need naturally also applies strongly to the ACCESS context. This is because the different groups of actors are distributed internationally and, moreover, due to the Corona pandemic, are more dependent on virtual cooperation than ever before. For students, the goal is anyway to ensure a dynamic educational career with a smooth transition into attractive employment. This means that, overall, it is a decentralised, highly dynamic context with ever-changing personnel constellations, which fosters autonomy rather than bonding needs. In this respect, it is particularly fruitful here to work with the community development approach in order to ensure and constantly re-establish belonging and identification with the overarching mission. Long-term ties can also be built up with members of the central groups of actors, such as students and lecturers, who remain as community members after leaving the narrower context, for example by continuing to support the ACCESS mission as mentors.*

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Another distinction can be made to the focus of classical business administration on the individual, which is primarily oriented towards individual value-adding relationships with customers and other market participants. Community development, on the other hand, focuses more on the relationship of the organisation to groups and on the potential of intra-group and intra-community relationships, which can also be harnessed for value creation.

Community development thus enables a change of perspective, which, however, presupposes the willingness to view and develop the organisation systemically in its environment. The approach is applicable to a variety of contexts and can be used for profit, non-profit and, of course, educational organisations, social, political and religious movements, and for urban development tasks.

Community development is to be understood as **a mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches**. Strategic impulses for community development can come both from the management level and from the various groups of actors in the organisational community. The decisive factor is that these impulses are taken up by other groups of actors and that a continuous process of participation and communication develops within the community, which in turn is advocated and promoted "from above". The goal of community development is, at best, to activate the power of the entire community in such a way that community development becomes a self-perpetuating process and is thus potentiated from the "bottom up". In this successful community dynamic, the role of the management level as a source of impulses is diminished; leadership proves itself through moderation and coordination of the long-term process of community development.

**Nine central building blocks of community development are explained on the following pages. These building blocks can initially be worked on individually and one after the other, but should generally be thought about and dealt with iteratively and in parallel.**

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