MEANWHILE . . .

BACK AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD

By

Ivan H. Scheier
Meanwhile . . .

Back At The Neighborhood

By Ivan Scheier

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This guidebook talks about how we can deliberately reinforce and increase the level of everyday decency where we live, learn, work, and worship; how we can recognize, release, and encourage more grass-roots friendly assistance between people; and how we can catalyze the kindly without contaminating it with control or over-formality.

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“We too often underestimate the power to achieve that we possess not only as individuals but as a neighborhood. Let me suggest your Good Neighbor Power rating is a great source of untapped power to create… to create the kind of neighborliness we all want… and to create the kind of city we can all be proud of.”

- Tim Cochran, President, Independence (Mo.) Neighborhood Councils, in Neighbors Magazine.

*With thanks for neighborly suggestions from Ginny Bulger, Put Barber, Jane Bate, Kathy Dryovage, Ann Hamilton, Ray Judd, Mary Ann Lawson, Kathy Livingston, Gwen Meister, John Rexford, Dorothy Rozga, Ernie Shelley, and David Tobin. Final overall reviews were contributed by Jennifer Reynolds and Susan Dryovage. Manuscript preparation and editing were in the capable hands of Miriam Gingras, and the artwork and cover design were contributed by Henry Dryovage.
DEFINITIONS AND DEVIATIONS

Belonging


If the question is puzzling, it's because “neighborhood” is one of those words everybody knows the meaning of, but practically nobody can define. I am no exception. In a real sense, this entire publication is an attempt to deepen and refine the understanding of what a neighborhood is and what it could be.

But we have to start somewhere:

A neighborhood is an area in which a feeling of belongingness and common interest exists among people.

The reasons for this feeling of belongingness may be any or all of the following:

(a) There is a similarity in ethnic, racial, religious, socio-economic, age, or other background.

(b) The area is organized as a unit for delivery of major services, in zoning regulations (e.g., all residential) and/or for other governmental or political purposes.

(c) The area is set off by physical boundaries; for example, a residential district enclosed by major highway arteries, downtown high-rises, and a large park.

Coming Home Again

Why is it important to know what and where one's neighborhood is, and who is in it? The reason is that, more and more today, people are seeing the point of tackling social problems at the local and neighborhood level. To a large extent there is no alternative to such decentralization; the philanthropic capital, government or private, needed to finance massive intervention attempts from the outside has shrunk drastically. It is not expected to recover in the foreseeable future. Even were that not so, the pendulum has swung decisively against social experimentation or intervention directed from a distant centralized source such as Washington D.C., the state capital, or the headquarters of a private sector organization.

It is currently fashionable to denounce centralized proprietorship of social programs, forgetting the positive principles they often stood for. Generally, federal programs promoted the concept of including more people in decision-making. Somewhere in there, centralized sources nurtured decentralized alternatives, and these included the neighborhood movement. Ironically, it may have been such centrally directed programs which eventually helped us realize that local people understand their own problems and potentials better than any distant institution, with its national standardization and relative inefficiency. The recent surge in the neighborhood movement reflects the growing power of this perspective in dealing with social problems.
Several Different Agendas
A key unit in the neighborhood movement is the neighborhood association. These associations tend to be advocacy- or issue-oriented on matters affecting their neighborhood such as public transportation, housing codes, crime prevention, rent control, energy conservation, trash removal, etc. Where adequate services are not being offered, the approach is more likely to be persuading local government to provide them, rather than doing so within the community, neighbor-to-neighbor. Generally, today’s neighborhood association still seems to view its role largely as leveraging out of local or other power sources what it sees as a fair share of resources and services. This is distinct from seeing how much genuine self-reliance is possible in providing these services on a do-it-yourself basis within the neighborhood.

This people-to-people self-reliance in providing services is an emphasis of this guidebook. I believe this do-it-yourself approach to services supplements rather than supplants typical roles and responsibilities of neighborhood associations today; in any case, there is significant precedent for this approach today in neighborhoods. Thus the Council of Neighborhood Associations in Grand Rapids, Michigan has developed a low cost-no cost energy conservation project, a skill exchange program, and day-care cooperatives, all of which depend on intensive people participation from within neighborhoods. This guidebook simply wants to encourage much more of the same, and in greater variety.

Another distinct orientation of this publication is a view of services not just in terms of more formal “professional” help provided to lay people from the outside, by mental health centers, schools, social services, etc. Here, the notion of “services” is broadened to include the ground level of everyday decency. Here, services are understood as how well or poorly people treat each other every minute of the day. Take a deep breath, think of “good deeds”, and don’t stop reading.

This leads us into a realm broader than that of the neighborhood association - or at least different. So does a new definition of neighborhood, discussed later in this guidebook.
Chapter 2

PRECEDENT FOR THE PROPOSAL:

WHAT’S HAPPENING NOW?

Some Risk Taking
The plan to be presented is composed of a number of distinct tactics or strategies. Virtually every one of these tactics has been tried out in real life with at least modestly encouraging results. But I have never been able to acquire reports or other evidence of the entire package—or even most of it—being applied. To the extent this whole may be greater than the sum of its parts—or lesser, or simply different—this guidebook is frankly a format in search of validation. On the other hand, nothing prevents concentration on those individual strategies which have been tested to some significant degree.

Now let us develop the case for what will be called neighborhood enabling. The purpose should not be lost sight of in all this development: to get more people more involved helping and supporting one another for the common good.

The Council believes that the future of Grand Rapids depends on healthy, vibrant neighborhoods. And the future of Grand Rapids’ neighborhoods depends on people. People making the fundamental decision that the house they live in, the street it sits on, the people living next door and down the block are important for their present happiness and for their future. But their future also depends on their actions. Healthy, vibrant neighborhoods have people aware of the threats to their neighborhoods, who are compelled to identify those threats, and who will organize their neighbors to stem them.

(Statement by The Council of Neighborhood Associations, Grand Rapids, Michigan)

A Common Ground of Caring
In the quest for community and the search for alternatives to alienation, we sometimes neglect the heartening part of daily life. Consider the acts of everyday kindness seen, done, or benefited from daily: doors held open; hitchhikers picked up; smiles bestowed; directions given on a busy street; pigeons fed in the park; good service given beyond the strict call of duty and shown appreciation for by customers above and beyond the duty of tipping; good natured humor making a day easier. In one southern city, a retired gentleman regularly waits outside the door of a supermarket to help people carrying packages. (He does seem to favor attractive widows.) I’ve observed scores of such natural decent doings, in airports and other life settings. (“Exploring Volunteering Space: The Recruiting of a Nation, by Ivan Scheier, Volunteer Readership, Boulder, Colorado, 1980. Chapter 12.) I’m sure you have too.

All this is informal grass-roots volunteering outside an agency or organizational setting. Though the word “volunteer” is rarely used to describe what happens, this is voluntary help-intending work not obviously or directly done for money, or for any closely calculated expectation of equal or greater “favors” in return. Probably the vast majority of kindness occurs in this “daily” way, apparently spontaneously. We are likely thinking of a consistently high level of such friendly assistance when we say we live in a good neighborhood or work in a nice office. It might even occur to us that this kind of natural and sincere helping is a large part of what we mean by quality of life.
We expect our clergy to support from the pulpit this ambience of everyday helping and maybe we should also begin expecting clergy and congregation to implement more of it on the other side of the stained-glass windows. Perhaps this guidebook will encourage more application of Judeo-Christian teachings in everyday life.* (Beautifully concentrated on this challenge is David Lewis’ The Neighboring Notebook: Ten Exercises for Working With Volunteers. 125 pages, 1979, $15.00. IDEA, East Aurora, N.Y.)

In any case, we ordinarily appreciate the people who contribute to quality of life in this way, if we happen to think about it at all, and if they’re not too bleeding-heart pious about it. We may even occasionally feel some obligation to pitch in ourselves and “do our part”.

But generally, we do not believe we can decisively intervene to improve or enrich this level of informal volunteering. We’re more likely to move out of a “bad neighborhood” than try personally to change it; we’ll stop patronizing a cold unfriendly place of business before we put pressure on the proprietor to improve the situation. In sum, we usually accept the level of informal helping interaction as a given in a human-occupied space, gratefully when it’s good, sadly or irritably when it’s bad.

**Cultivating the Common Ground**

I believe we can deliberately increase the level of everyday decency where we live, learn, work, and worship. We can recognize, release, and encourage more grass-roots friendly assistance. We can catalyze the kindly without contaminating it with control or formality. In fact, I do not see how we can afford not to try. If — as I believe — caring is the core of healing in a society, we cannot abide cold indifference, or look on neighborly concern as a miracle beyond our control. The people who would facilitate these gentle interventions — more like catalyzing or releasing help than directing it — will be called neighborhood enablers. This is simply a convenient shorthand for the functions we’ll be describing in more detail as this guidebook proceeds. In other words, the definition of neighborhood enabling will accumulate in these pages, hopefully becoming clearer even as it becomes larger.

Other names would do as well as neighborhood enabler: neighborer, help connector, friendly facilitator, or whatever name makes sense to you once you’ve read this guidebook.

Under whatever name, the idea of actually facilitating daily decencies may seem remote from the warmth of “spontaneous” helping. If so, I can only suggest that the neighborhood enabler should function from a sound basis in ethical conviction, much as fundraisers for charitable causes can be most effective when they truly care about the cause. As for technique, I believe neighborhood enabling will draw upon skills and sensitivities similar to those of today’s Director-Coordinator of Volunteers. The main difference is that this mainly informal kind of volunteering is not usually in an agency or program setting and has large elements of self-help mixed with help of others. But a crucial common denominator remains: how to motivate people to help one another without using money.

Earlier we gave some examples of (apparently) naturally occurring help. Let’s move one step further, now, to examples of grass roots volunteering which are clearly stimulated or enabled. My first experience occurred during the 1979 Christmas season — appropriately enough, because what we’re really talking about is encouragement of the Christmas or Hanukkah spirit all year round. [Might a church call their enabler a “Christmaser”?]  

Every year my parents sent me a care package of fresh Florida fruit. In 1979, the pink package-pick-up slip arrived just ten days before Christmas. I decided to brave the post office line rather than risk unfresh fruit on December 26. While I was still an estimated forty minutes away from the window, an alert clerk, though very busy, noticed the pink pick-up slip in my hand, and
shouted over the din to this effect: “Sir, there’s a special window for package delivery around the corner. The line is probably shorter there.” I hesitated. Having already invested twenty minutes in this line, I was paranoid about giving up my place for another possibly longer line I couldn’t see. Enter the scene, a young man carrying packages, right behind me in line. This young man offered to check the parcel pick-up line, if I’d hold his place in this line. I agreed, thanked him, and as he left, noticed him transferring packages to a young lady he was with. She virtually disappeared under the additional load since she was already carrying parcels. Naturally, I then offered to hold some of the packages for her until her young man returned; so did the man in front of us in line. She thanked us and agreed. Her young man returned with a favorable report on the package pick-up line. I wished the couple a Merry Christmas, shouted thanks to the clerk, picked up my fresh fruit in two minutes flat, and left glowing. I shouldn’t have done that. I should have returned to the long line bearing oranges, to complete the other-plus-self-helping scenario.

Or are such sequences ever really complete? With appropriate encouragement they might go on forever. In this instance, my parents’ kindness, combined with their holiday wish, set the scene. The clerk’s extra concern and effort triggered the helping sequence; it gave the young man behind me in line an opportunity for a helping initiative which also triggered some helping from the man ahead in line and from me. If we begin with the clerk’s friendly facilitation (consistent with efficiency, too, and that’s fine) we see that a relatively small “levering” effort can release much larger quantities of helping energy.

The scenario can move in more than one dimension. A reviewer points out that my telling this story may “create ripples in another pond”.

A second example: mealtime on an airplane, and hungry. The cabin attendant advises to my surprise that I have one of the 54 varieties of tickets which don’t get me fed. Can I buy a meal then? No, sorry. I could buy a drink, but the associated peanuts hardly seemed worth it. Just as I had resigned myself to a fast, the man across the aisle who’d overheard the exchange said he qualified for a meal, didn’t want it, and would give it to me. I resisted feebly, but soon accepted gratefully. Later on the flight, I tried to buy him a drink. He declined with a “Thanks, no. JUST PASS IT ALONG.” Beautiful. I tried to pass it along the rest of the day; to begin with I scarcely trampled anyone on exodus from the plane.

Here the situation, including the man being within overhearing distance, triggered the happy sequence. In both examples, note that the helping interactions are informal, and usually, not always, tend to be win-win in nature, mixing other-help with self-help, a healthy mixture, in my view. In all cases, we’re talking about quality of life events in natural settings, and the examples indicate these events can be facilitated, triggered. So why don’t we deliberately try to pass it along? The possible kinds of personal payoffs have been indicated previously here; benefits at the organizational, neighborhood, and community level will be traced more clearly from now on, and summarized in Chapter Seven.

**Some Precedents For The Neighborhood Enabler Role**

Neighborhood enablers will encourage informal voluntary helping by catalyzing not controlling it. They identify, link, reinforce, mediate, facilitate, in all the ways we will describe. The distinction between facilitating and directing will be emphasized throughout; so will the crucial difference between releasing vs. doing good.

The role is plural. It takes many people to fill the role. That is, while there would often be one overall coordinating enabler, (probably paid because working long hours continuously) s/he would likely have only token impact without massive assistance from associated volunteer enablers. The program will attempt to reach all people, not just a client elite.
Let’s move a step further towards specificity by looking at some analogous roles, to get the feel of neighborhood enabling and establish some precedent for its practical potential. Something like the neighborhood enabler in function are:

- The good host or hostess at a party skillfully encouraging friendly interactions between people
- The social chairperson of a club or event
- The social director at a resort
- Matchmakers, who try to trigger mutually satisfying relationships between people (Dating Bureaus do it for money)
- The street worker, youth worker, neighborhood worker, who cannot really help individuals without also facilitating supportive relations between individuals
- The social worker in a “patch” or neighborhood
- The Pastor’s wife in New England history, and in some cases, the Pastor’s wife’s husband
- Circus clowns, court jesters, and their everyday counterparts
- The organizer of carpools, babysitting pools, and other networks
- The organizer of mutual interest or common concern groups
- An effective parent

The above roles resemble the neighborhood enabler in the attempt to facilitate helpful interactions between people. The differences are that these roles tend to emphasize special problems or functions (dating, carpooling) on special occasions, for special people (troubled youth, church members). Ordinarily, the neighborhood enabler role is more generically targeted, and continuous.

Several other roles deserve somewhat more detailed attention, either as contrast to the neighborhood enabler role, precedent for it, or elements of both.

1) Graduating at the top of the class in charm school or the college of how-to-sell-yourself doesn’t make you an enabler. Though your skills may aid you in impressing other people more, you’ll know more about getting ahead yourself, than helping other people get along with each other.

2) In the political sphere, the precinct or ward worker might be cousin to the enabler. In his or her more modern clothing as “the mayor’s neighborhood representative,” the likeness seems closer. The difference, roughly speaking, is that the precinct worker tends to connect people “upward” for the kinds of resources commanded by city hall, e.g., getting a city job or more frequent police patrols. The enabler would be more concerned with connecting people “horizontally”, as peers, for more informal helping interactions. Moreover, the enabler’s assistance would be more disinterested. The expected return would more likely be the occurrence of the help itself, rather than affiliation with a party, votes, or money. Indeed, the people who give and receive help might often be unaware of the enabler’s good offices.

3) Like the enabler, a community or neighborhood organizer works at ground level, trying to get people to do things which help one another. The differences, at least in emphasis, appear to be community organizers’ greater concentration on special people, the exploited or unadvantaged; the phrasing of helping strategy in terms of collective action rather than individuals; and a focus on matters which are often adversarial or controversial. The enabler role would be more open-ended in capitalizing on opportunities for good-doing, wherever and whenever they may occur, including the “spontaneous”. Moreover, I see the enabler as working primarily within a generally accepted range of non-controversial goodness, more oriented to services than to advocacy.
This assertion has produced a great deal of “hot” commentary to this effect: how can you really expect to help people if you avoid battle on issues that make a difference to them and are therefore emotional, upsetting. On the other hand, some of these same commentators recognized the danger of assuming that only anger can build motivation and teamwork to accomplish citizens’ goals. The confessed themselves tired of the politics of anger.* (*Actually the phrase was a bit more colorful than this, but you get the idea.) Two reviewers, both neighborhood organizers, even suggested how neighborhood enabling could complement the usual work of neighborhood associations, as a warm-up, ice-breaker, pump primer, for team-building and to bring more members to the association by adding friendliness and mutual helpfulness as an attraction.

4) A community or neighborhood center might come quite close to the neighborhood enabler role envisaged here, especially when such centers use their good offices to help form common interest and common groups among the people served, facilitate networking in a neighborhood, and the like. But, as we shall see, the neighborhood enabler also works with informal non-programmed slices of life, daily, in the streets, for all people in an area. This would be a somewhat unusual level of outreach for any community center I know of – though I’d love to stand corrected on that one.

Goals of community centers, neighborhood associations, and even service clubs have commonalities in their purpose and mission, i.e.: to improve “quality of life”. The populations served may be quite diverse in size, needs, and demographics, but the commonalities enable collaborative efforts in meeting needs.

(Comment by a neighborhood worker on earlier draft of neighborhood enabler paper)
Chapter 3

CONNECTING PEOPLE

Chapter Six deals with issues in defining the scope of an enabler’s responsibility. For now, let’s assume this will be a neighborhood, or some other group that belongs together in some sense; for example, a school, a church or synagogue, an apartment building, a hospital ward.

The next chapters describe three major kinds of strategies a neighborhood enabler can employ.

Chapter Three: Connecting People.  
Chapter Four: Catalyzing Positive Relations Between People  
Chapter Five: Recognizing and Endorsing Informal Helping

Connections, the theme in this chapter, include the formation of common interest and/or concern groups, the facilitating of networks and the identification of linkages “upward” to resources available from specialized helping organizations.

Group Formation
The overall concept/belief is that many people in a territory will have something naturally to give to others, for mutual assistance, support, and enrichment. They simply don’t know about one another, or if they vaguely know about one another, they may need some facilitation to establish the linkage.

The enabler team will have the people knowledge needed to identify such mutually beneficial connections.* (*In many other cases, the common interest and concern will be vital and visible enough so that people will identify themselves.) The enabler remains low profile as s/he builds the linkage mechanism, tells people about it, and pulls out of the operation as soon as possible. I’ve seen it over and over again; just get people together who share a common concern, and they will usually find ways to help one another on the problem. Attempting to program them is suspect of serving our ego needs rather than their needs.

Quite straightforward methods exist for facilitating such group formation. For example, ask people in your territory to complete a statement like this:

I would like to be in touch with someone else who is also concerned about or interested in... Put an asterisk next to topic areas you’d be interested enough in to do a little coordinating work.

You might get concerns/interests such as:

- community gardening
- improved road repair
- solar power
- declining property values
- day-care centers
- food-buying co-ops
- crime prevention and control

The interests and concerns identified in the above form almost always find ample company in my experience using this simple search procedure over the past year.
You can go house to house with this, similar to what was done in Project Link-Up in Mordialloc, Australia some years ago.* (*Ivan Scheier. People Approach: Nine New Strategies for Citizen Volunteer Involvement. Volunteering Reader, Boulder, Colorado, 1977.) Or you can have interest/concern ballot boxes at easily accessible locations in the territory. Then the enabler team can sort out common interest groups and put the people in touch with one another.

Where you can—with people together in a meeting—it’s more exciting and democratic to let people sort themselves out. You can do this by having people put posters on the wall with their interest/concern areas, and plenty of room on the posters for other people to sign up. Or you can simply let people wander about the room with their concerns on slips of paper attached to their clothes, forehead, etc., and then mix and match.

These face-to-face approaches have been successfully tried, but don’t underestimate the time they take: at least 30-45 minutes.* (*For more on these approaches see The Bridge by Ivan Scheier and Susan Dryovage, Yellowfire Press, 1981.)

Group formation—getting people together who in their shared concern can genuinely help one another—can be divided into common interest and common problem connections, as in sections A and B following. The distinction between the two is sometimes quite subtle and a matter of degree.

A. Forming Common Interest Groups
The enabler identifies a set of people who are not in communication with one another, but share an interest in, say, stamp collecting, historical preservation, hiking, environment, bicycling, etc. The enabler then puts the interest-sharers in touch with one another, and might even go as far as setting up a first meeting.

B. Forming Common Problem Groups
The process parallels formation of common interest groups and might lead to finding or founding groups such as Parents Without Partners, a Seniors Club, all kinds of companionship groups for the lonely, Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. The group may or may not choose to be a chapter of a national organization. It may also be relatively informal and temporary; for example, parents concerned about an unsafe crossing for their children.

There are issues and pitfalls in forming both common interest and common problem groups. (The two kinds of groups can obviously overlap.) First, the enabler who expects to retain credibility and cooperation in the territory must stay within the scope of community tolerance. In most cases, this excludes a single swingers’ club, say, or a political cell advocating the violent overthrow of the government. Some neighborhoods will be very uptight about formation of virtually any issue-oriented or social action group, where strong feelings on both sides of an issue exist; for example, either pro- or anti-ERA, abortion, gun control, nuclear energy, etc. The enabler’s involvement merely in facilitating either side of such issues will tag her/him as partisan and as representing less than all of the neighborhood. Loss of trust and loss of information sources are two likely penalties for the enabler.

How to be both relevant and uncontroversial will be an extraordinarily difficult decision for enablers in many cases, and there must be the clearest possible guidelines formulated on this issue from the beginning. Again, my inclination is for the enabler to concentrate on the release of service, and refer the rest to community organizer type people – at least at first. Later, as trust builds, the enabler role in responsible social action may come to be more widely accepted. But pure and clean distinctions will often be impossible at any stage, since many worthwhile groups are inextricable mixtures of service and advocacy. Even supposedly uncontroversial interests such as bicycling can quickly get you into hot issues; for example, bicycle paths and the rights of bicycle riders vs. the convenience of the motorist.
For the politically polarized at least, one way out may be to have both more liberal and conservative enablers working more or less independently in a territory, so that the liberal enabler, for example, would naturally be expected to facilitate liberal positions on nuclear power, abortion, ERA, etc.; ditto on the conservative side for the conservative enabler.

For whatever topic area groups are being formed, the enabler must avoid investing too much time and effort doing for groups; for example, writing proposals or becoming anything like their executive, office manager, or even their agent. The enabler should only facilitate connections which provide the opportunity to form and continue a group. What people do with that opportunity should be left mainly to them. The enabler must be free to build connections for other common interests and concerns.

Networks
A network is an ongoing sharing connection between people or organizations for exchange of ideas, information, expertise, personal support, or materials. For the membership in any network, the assumptions are that:

1. Everyone, no matter how inexperienced or helpless, has something to give;
2. Everyone, no matter how experienced or skilled, needs something, and
3. In the matches possible between offerings and needs, a great deal of relevant, high-quality, yet inexpensive help can be exchanged, of the type we might otherwise have to purchase or solicit from outside sources.

Common interest or common problem groups will frequently – but not always – network within their group as a way of achieving their goals. Networks are often – but not always – composed of people who share a common interest or problem. But networking can occur over shorter time-spans than the maturing of a common interest or problem group. Networks may also require more individual initiative and skill in developing and maintaining linkages.

Networks can be deliberately built and maintained; a recent guidebook describes a variety of methods for doing so.* (*The Bridge: A Guide for Networkers, by Ivan Scheier and Susan Dryovage, Yellowfire Press, 1981). The role of the enabler is to identify people in the territory who have something to give to one another in relation to their real needs, then facilitate formation of the appropriate network, say, babysitting pools, crime-watch procedures, widows’ phone support systems, helping hands (mothers in a neighborhood available at safe-point homes for kids who are scared, need to go to the bathroom, etc.).

The enabler can also build more trust and efficiency into existing help-exchange systems; for example, I.D. cards and safe pick-up locations for hitchhikers and people who pick them up.

Finally, the enabler need not be restricted to the exchange of work. The exchange of things which perform work might also be an area explored for facilitation; for example, sharing or exchange of home repair tools in a block or cluster of homes. But there are some cautions in material-exchange networks; for example, what happens when an implement-on-exchange is damaged or not returned on time? Rules for dealing with such situations must be clearly established from the beginning.

The previously described networks tend to be specialized for dealing with certain types of problems such a transportation (carpool) and loneliness (widows’ phone support system). There are more open-ended systems in which one doesn’t really know beforehand exactly what people are willing to give to one another and what needs will be identified.

A basic element in such systems is the “glad give”. A “Glad Give” is some fairly specific activity a person
(1) likes to do, enjoys;
(2) does pretty well,
(3) which might be of use to someone else.

Examples of a person’s “Glad Gives” might be swimming, vegetable gardening, cooking, sharing weatherization information, etc.

In the past eight years, I’ve observed about 5,000 people participating in the Glad Give exchange processes. The conclusion: about 80-90% of the things people enjoy doing and do pretty well prove to be useful in filling other people’s needs.

The enabler team would first inventory Glad Gives in their territory, then “market” and match them by setting up face-to-face round-table meetings, classified columns in newsletters, bulletin boards, sharing trees, and helping trade centers* at appropriate places in the territory: apartment buildings, shopping centers, neighborhood centers, public buildings, on malls, etc. (*On the model of Resource One in San Francisco, a helping trade center would be a booth, preferably with volunteers in attendance, where people could come and register their Glad Gives and needs, and get some help in finding appropriate matches for either gives or needs.)

These exchange points might differ somewhat from the usual bulletin boards, etc. First they should deal with services, materials and facilities people can offer each other free or on a win-win trade basis, rather than paid services and products for sale. Second, they should have some notice attached to the effect that any transactions are the risk and responsibility of the persons involved and cannot reliably be monitored or policed to prevent rip-offs. This risk would be reduced somewhat if volunteers were available to evaluate potential linkages and conduct sample checks on the effectiveness of existing matches between “Glad Gives” and needs.

This strikes some reviewers as a rather dreadful form of policing. Still, a network system should ordinarily have some protections against exploitation, the imbalance which can occur when too much is taken from a person relative to what that person gets. While presumably you can’t be exploited if you’re only offering what you’re glad to give, some protections are nevertheless desirable to assure that people take just so many times before they give, or vice versa. But such rules would quickly get us into record-keeping, and maybe some associated bureaucracy, too. Nor should remedies against exploitation throw us to an equally distasteful other extreme of super-careful calculation to ensure getting precisely as much as we gave (or more). Such is not volunteering.

Maybe the best procedure is to make people aware of potential dangers, perhaps offer workshops for those wishing to perfect their networking sophistication and skills, and then let grown-up people take their own risks.

Another way of dealing with the possibility of exploitation is to canvas people in a territory on both their needs and their “Glad Gives”, analyze the whole pattern, and make people or groups aware of positive linkages. Instances of this have been described elsewhere as in Project Link-Up in Mordialloc, Australia,* (“People Approach” publication, 1977) the Christmas Project in Kalamazoo, Michigan,* (”People Approach” publication, 1977) and certain elements in Involvement Day,* (”Exploring Volunteer Space, 1980, Chapter 18) All of these have one basic element in common: both needs and gladly shareable resources are inventoried for individuals and organizations in a territory, door to door, via newspaper advertisements, etc. The enabler team then studies the overall pattern and usually finds that appropriate connections between individuals and organizations will assure that at least some of the needs of virtually every individual or organization can be met by matching with the “Glad Gives” of another individual or organization. In this system, satisfaction is only achieved via rather complex linkages in which A gives to B and receives from C, etc.
The Upward Connection
The enabler mainly tries to make it easier for people to help one another as peers or equals. But when that doesn’t produce needed help, the enabler may assist in connecting people “upward” to resources and assistance available only from the helping establishment in human service delivery agencies, at City Hall, etc.

Unlike the precinct worker or the Mayor’s neighborhood representative in our previous example, the enabler won’t expect votes or party loyalty in return for such favors nor will s/he necessarily have much clout or influence to pry the needed resources loose.

What s/he will have is information or ready access to it. The complexity of modern society is such that relevant resources often exist but can’t be located by the people who need them. Therefore, accurate up-to-date information on available resources is a crucial dimension in effective upward connections. Local Information and Referral Services often associated with Volunteer Centers have been enabling in this dimension for many years in communities across North America. I can visualize enablers roaming their territories with walkie-talkies, linking people directly to Information and Referral Services, Citizen Advice Bureaus, and the like.
Chapter 4

CATALYZING POSITIVE RELATIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE

Somewhere between doing for or to people and passive spectating – both no-no’s for enablers – is an appropriate level of involvement which encourages and catalyzes. The following interrelated approaches – triggering, modeling, and signaling – are interventional in the sense of involving direct action by enablers, though this action is still catalytic, stopping short of control.

Triggering
In some cases, a behavior or action initiated by an enabler, though itself of minor direct helping significance, will lead to far more helping; it will break the ice and start a snowball effect (to mix some chilly metaphors).

The post office clerk did not usher me to the right window; he certainly did not pick up the package for me. What he did was in itself very little compared to what his action released, setting the scene for several of us to get involved in self-plus-other-helping tasks. An enabler could have done the same triggering in the post office, if s/he knew about the pick-up line and scanned the longer line for innocents like myself. There must be hundreds of such trigger opportunities which could be identified in a territory.

For example, this happened last winter. Detroit Airport, fog, canceled and delayed flights for two days. Traveler’s Aid recommends to Chicago-bound passengers that they rent a car and consider carpooling. That suggestion triggers a great deal of successful initiatives in that direction by otherwise stranded passengers. Here the triggering resembles forming common problem groups (discussed earlier), in this case quite temporary common problem groups.

A colleague shares an instance in which recognition or acknowledgment of common feelings served as a trigger.

I’m in an unemployment line, feeling like an absolute fool standing there with all those losers. Then, I turned to the person behind me and told him how stupid I felt being here and I was amazed how much that broke the tension. The more we talked the more nods and comments we got from others in the line. Amazing what kind of nice feelings come from simply showing your human-ness.

Affirmation can also be a trigger. We need only remember to give praise where praise is due – so often we neglect to do so.

Tell a waitress she’s doing a great job, and maybe inspire her to do as well or better at the next table.

Tell a father he’s a superb parent and he might give even more proud and careful attention to parenting from now on.

If you’re a passenger in a car whose driver is exemplary in road courtesy and safety, don’t just be silently grateful; tell him so. It will reinforce his excellence and might impress other passengers in the car. Who knows, you might even impress yourself.

Affirmation is upbeat and effective, so long as the compliments are honest and not intended to manipulate for the selfish gain of the complimenter.
Practicing simple courtesy as one walks about a neighborhood is a kind of triggering. Have you ever noticed that when one person holds a door open for the person behind, that person seems more likely to do the same for the following person? The first person does not have to stay around to hold the door open for everybody, though one does sometimes get caught that way.

What about the warming people-relaxing effect of kiddies, kittens, puppies, and the like? I’m seriously suggesting enablers could trigger by walking around with one or more of the above.

What about mime artists on the street? At least one mall boasts a wandering mime every now and then. Somewhat related is a special genius in America, an ability to “kid around” with each other, our gift of friendly banter. The right kind of humor (non-threatening, non-aggressive) is a kind of trigger; it eases tensions, makes people feel better and perhaps do better things. Could we do more of this deliberately? Clowns are trained, and some enablers may be trainable as clowns (or vice versa) beyond their natural aptitudes for same. Friendly, humorous events could regularly be planned. Probably, every territory should have a court jester or two.

Some triggering also occurs in the other two catalyzing methods to be discussed next: modeling and signaling. In fact, the three tactics overlap considerably.

**Modeling**

Modeling resembles triggering in being a relatively limited act which can start a much longer chain reaction of helping. Modeling differs in that it comes closer to being the entire helping act – barring the absence of others to complete that act. Say a car is stalled with bystanders seemingly poised to help push, but waiting for someone else to make the first move. The enabler can make that first move.

There are both stop-go and timing questions here. Thus, how long should the modeler wait out the stalled car situation, hoping for the better event of someone else volunteering first? And what about the possibility of getting stuck alone, pushing the stuck car? Moreover, some situations are far more subtle than a disabled car, in posing a decision to intervene or not. For example, the blind person may not want help crossing a busy intersection. This situation also indicates another modeling issue. If the blind person does want help, and the enabler intervenes to provide it, no one else need be involved. The modeling still has value in reminding bystanders that they might do a similar thing on another occasion – and if there’s a little guilt feeling built up, too, I for one have no objections.

Moreover, frequent modeling by enablers – even if they must do it solo or nearly so – can influence people who are on the fence about whether they should risk helping behavior, by demonstrating that such behavior is acceptable, respectable, and safe.* (*This begins to resemble a longer-term meaning of modeling; for example, a woman as an excellent adult model for a little girl. Clearly this section’s focus is on shorter-term situational modeling.)

On the disadvantage side, the enabler who frequently models intervention risks personally doing too much for others instead of releasing people’s potential for helping one another. Worse, seeing the good deed done by the enabler might give some people an excuse to abdicate responsibility for such helping behavior. Others are taking care of such matters, so why worry.

**Signaling**

Signals are not the kind of behavior that physically moves things like a stalled car. But when appropriate in nature and timing, they directly help the signal receiver by making him/her feel better. They may also trigger in the receiver an inclination to give the same kind of signals to others, and/or generally fill his/her day with more helpful behavior. One friendly nod inspires another.
Signaling may be understood in relatively ongoing as well as immediate terms. The examples of acknowledging and affirming people, in the section on triggering, represent a kind of ongoing signaling: you’re okay; we’re all in this together. I think you’re worth communicating with, etc. Such signaling may extend over only a few minutes, but that’s far more than a smile takes.

Though little is understood about more temporary kinds of signals, such as smiles, we do know they can be important. Years ago, the custom in Boulder, Colorado, when people met on the street, was to look a person in the eye and say “hello”, “howdy”, or some such. The greeting was regularly accompanied by a friendly nod or smile. This custom may seem trivial to some, but it was one of the first things I noticed about Boulder, and a main reason I decided to settle here. And in many other places and times, the right kind of smile at the right time from a passerby, can make a day.

I’m proposing that a relatively large team of enablers emitting such friendly signals could do much to turn a territory around in terms of “signal quality.” I claim only that the hypothesis is plausible enough to test out in practice, perhaps first with friends and acquaintances, and then on to strangers. The first task is to be sure we’re aware of a wide range of possible signals: a smile, a nod, a “hi”, eye contact, etc. One reviewer who has done this kind of thing with a friend and believes it works adds as a signal moving over even slightly to make more room for another, in an elevator or other crowded place. Apparently the message here is: I respect your private space and want to help you be comfortable.

There must be dozens of such signals and combinations of signals, some of them very subtle. Others, such as body language, are ordinarily difficult to control consciously. Then there are all the variations within a single type of signal; there are smiles and there are smiles. One nod is not like another. Indeed, there is probably no such thing as a universal positive friendly signal, always accepted with precisely the same meaning, by all people in all circumstances. A smile, a nod, and certainly eye contact, will threaten some people in some situations or cultures. Or it will be understood as flirting. There will have to be research and pilot testing on generally acceptable signals in a particular territory. (For example, be very careful about the “V” or peace sign in Australia.) Beyond that, there must be sensitivity to differences in how signals are received by different types of people (older or younger, for example) and by individuals within each type.

The challenges are formidable, but success is possible, and worth trying for. Maybe the best advice is not to get easily discouraged. If at first your signals are not responded to or are misinterpreted, keep smiling.

**Triggering!**

Excerpts from a recently received “Report of an Enabling Experience”

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**KALAMAZOO (MICHIGAN) EAST SIDE BLOCK ASSOCIATION’S PLANTING PROJECT**

This project’s key enabler was the East Side Center Manager/Neighborhood Worker. Utilizing the receipt of 400 flats of flower and vegetable plants as resource, the enabler was able to enlist neighborly volunteers to pick up the donations and deliver them to the back yard of a neighbor across from the center for storage and distribution. Word of mouth and uniqueness of opportunity motivated over a hundred neighborhood residents to come and pick from the donation of the day.

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The report goes on to describe many other enabling spin-offs, such as people planting flowers around public buildings.
RECOGNIZING AND ENDORSING INFORMAL HELP

The Distinction Between Endorsing and the Other Strategies
Connecting and Catalyzing are strategies designed to produce more helping behavior. Now we’ll deal with a more passive approach: recognizing and endorsing good things going on now between people. The hope is that this reinforcement will encourage more of the same in the future. (So, in a sense, intervention to change behavior is also in the picture here, but as a more indirect ultimate purpose.)

This chapter also moves further towards a focus on informal helping. Indeed, much or most of the helping that goes on in the world is not even as formal or continuous as a network, nor is it as deliberately planned as modeling or common interest group formation. It resembles far more the decent informal slices of life so far described here, on the streets, in post offices, airplanes, homes, and everywhere.

Far too little is understood about this informal brand of helping. Many believe we should leave it strictly alone, because “messing around with it” will destroy its naturalness and spontaneity.

Here we will attempt to establish the plausibility of an alternative view: that a set of strategies can be developed which will catalyze kindly behavior, encourage more of it without ruining it.

The Visibility Issue
One thing is clear about these strategies: their effectiveness will depend largely on many enablers working a territory at something like saturation level. That means volunteers along with paid people. But the visibility of people as enablers is an especially difficult issue in this informal domain. On the one hand, there seems no reason why enablers cannot be fully identified and visible as such in forming common interest problem groups or networks (Chap. 3). But reviewers have raised serious questions about whether enablers should be visible vs. incognito in endorsing the informal. Walking around with an enabler badge, say or a uniform might make the whole thing too artificial. I might do a nice thing or two while an enabler is in sight, much as I might drive more carefully when traffic police are in sight and forget it the rest of the time. Not knowing who’s watching or when, might put people on their mettle to act more kindly more of the time.

There may also be a greater possibility of ridicule when enablers are identified. I’m not sure, and can only suggest both visible and invisible approaches be tried out and evaluated for relative effectiveness.

Otherwise, we should also note that while networks and common interest or concern groups might not always be feasible in more transient territories (bus stations, shopping centers), the reinforcing of informal helping behavior, as described here, would be.

Recognizing Good Things Going On Now: Examples and Issues
Virtue is its own reward – for some. Others can use some encouragement. The basic hypothesis is that immediate reward of existing levels of positive helping interaction, at both individual and territorial levels, will produce an encouraging atmosphere and momentum for more of the same.
Some years ago the police in a large city reluctantly agreed to try a different approach to traffic safety. They were to watch drivers not only for violations, but also for exemplary safe driving. On observing the latter, they were to pull the driver over and give him/her a ticket of another kind, to a local athletic event. The program was successful until it died for lack of funds. Other wrinkles in this reward-for-good-behavior approach illustrate several cautions for the enabler team in their help-endorsement efforts. Thus, one exemplary driver, seeing a flashing red light behind, signaling him to pull over, lost his cool, ran a stop sign, and presumably received both kinds of tickets. Probably, the police should have a distinct kind of signal for good behavior, a green light perhaps, or appropriate music over the loudspeaker (“I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby”?).

By contrast, enablers would observe and reinforce all kinds of decent doings in their territory, not just good driving. Otherwise, lessons suggested by the police example include:

1) Enabler signals for good behavior should clearly differ from classic bad behavior signals.

2) Less expensive rewards are desirable, so the program won’t fold when funding expires.

3) It’s good to have a range of rewards tailored to individual preferences. Not everyone values a ticket to a ball game.

Let’s elaborate these points. First of all, some people won’t want public recognition at all, or high-profile recognition anyhow. Their acceptance (vs. embarrassment) limit might be a quiet “that was a nice thing to do”, or “thanks”, or just an appreciative smile, or not even that much. For this reason, I’d also worry about an across-the-board public recognition kind of approach for individuals.

The enabler must therefore approach decent-doers inconspicuously, privately, and very sensitively to determine whether they want recognition, and if so, what kind. Some people will be happy to accept tangible recognition; others will prefer the symbolic – or nothing. There should be some prior market research and pilot testing in each territory to determine the most feasible and effective rewards for that territory. Provisionally, here are some general guidelines.

1. As noted previously, there should be a range of rewards from which individuals can choose the most meaningful for them. Perhaps there could be a symbolic award for everyone – a badge for example – plus a choice among several more tangible rewards.

2. To repeat, recognition items cannot be expensive, first of all because the ideal is frequently to recognize decent acts of frequent occurrence, rather than just the rare and outstanding deed. But even if in-kind donations by territory sponsors permitted widespread distribution of fairly expensive items, the program cannot come across as payment for decency or as advertising for in-kind donors either.

3. The recognition item should ordinarily have immediate rather than deferred value. A badge you can pin on right away or a free parking ticket you can use this week might mean more than a ticket to next month’s band concert, or a promise of public recognition at the end of the year. But I am not entirely sure of this; anticipation can also add to satisfaction.

4. The symbolic reward seems most promising as something which all or most people might value (see paragraph 1 above). Examples of such awards include pens, buttons, badges, balloons, bumper stickers, window stickers, forehead stickers, certificates, and armbands. Be creative here.* (*See discussion of symbolic rewards in Chapter 18 of Exploring Volunteer Space by Ivan Scheier, Volunteer Recruiting, Boulder, Colorado, 1980.)
Market research can identify the most effective recognition items for a neighborhood or other grouping. Also important would be a media/advertising/public education campaign which establishes the award-token as valuable, respectable. Public endorsement by a wide range of leadership and “average” people will help here. Overall, this campaign must avoid the do-good, good-deed image; the many of us who happen to honor this image aren’t usually the people who most need to be reached by the program. Choice of words can be all-important. Thus, concepts such as “good neighbor” or “concerned citizen” pretty much say what we want to say in a way which is widely accepted and respected. The “bleeding heart of the month” does not.

When all the market research and media blitzes are over, we may succeed in discovering what we really knew all along: for many if not most people, just knowing they are needed and appreciated is the best reward of all.

Let me freely concede some concerns with the immediate on-sit reward approach for individuals. Some of these concerns have already surfaced: the subtlety and sensitivity required in selecting, offering, and individualizing rewards and the danger of a do-gooder image. There is also a possibility some people may try to exploit the system, especially insofar as its rewards are tangible rather than symbolic, and offered in a geographically limited area. I can cynically visualize some people dropping by the shopping mall daily to perform good deeds and pick up as many free parking tickets as they can, then sell them. However, alert enablers in a restricted geographical area will learn to spot these people and avoid repeated rewards to the same person (although the person can still go on to a different territory). And once again, an emphasis on symbolic rather than tangible recognition items will alleviate this problem.

Transfer of recognition items might also pose problems. Suppose a directly rewarded parent gives her free movie ticket to her son, or to a friend. True, the reward for kindness has become the occasion for another kindness. But the direct reward for decency to the parent seems diluted by the process. A clearer case is the person who collects free movie tickets for resale. Some safeguards against such practices have been indicated previously.

Through it all, I remain haunted by the idea that virtue maybe should be its own reward, or at least the reward should be deferred till heaven. This must be true for some people, once the habit of virtue is well formed enough to be essentially self-reinforcing. But relative beginners will probably need a bit of outside encouragement before reaching the self-rewarding level.

In any case, the reward of virtue should not be mechanical, and this suggests another worry. Some readers will already have recognized the resemblance to behavior modification and will share my concern about the “mechanical” channeling of human, as distinct from rat or pigeon behavior. Still, the enabling approach is not supposed to be mechanical; it should instead be sensitive, empathetic, humane. Nor should we have rigid expectations of only certain restricted behaviors as worthy of reward. The enabler should be flexible, willing to recognize the widest range of decent actions and styles of helping.

What about non-decent actions? A sense of completion suggests that the enabler’s role in endorsing helpful interactions should have as counterpart, the discouraging of unhelpful interactions. But there are cautions here. Accentuating the positive is tricky enough. Intervening in a negative situation – i.e., trying to stop an argument or a fight – can be sheer disaster. Certainly, the enabler has the duty of any citizen to report dangerous or illegal actions, and, as a constant observer in a neighborhood or other area will likely see more of this than most people would. But the enabler must carefully avoid being seen as a spy or becoming one by reporting merely suspected illegality.

One commentator believes the above attitude is too cautious. She believes that skilled people can regularly and successfully interrupt conflict or trouble a-brewing. Moreover, if we advocate taking so much of the potential “good” back into private hands, is it fair to leave so much responsibility for the “bad” in government hands, via law enforcement, the courts, etc.?
So, I leave this open for your consideration and testing. Resolved: the enabler role can include eliminating the negative as well as accentuating the positive. I remain skeptical on this, especially in the earlier stages of an enabling program.

Recognition at the Level of Groups
The entire previous section on immediate reward for decent doings at the individual level leaves me somewhat uncertain and worried. I was a bit more optimistic for symbolic tokens, powerfully established as valuable by means of the media or community consensus. Indeed, the most symbolic recognition of all might prove the least problematic: observe and identify instances of helpful interaction, never let the observed individuals know, but still record and count these acts for the enabled area as a whole. Or we might give only symbolic recognition to individuals receptive to same, plus this “quality of life” count overall for the area or neighborhood.

The count could be reported weekly or daily on radio, TV, in newspapers or billboards, perhaps scaled something like the United Way campaign barometer, or a “good news” version of the pollution index, or the highway death toll.

Over longer periods, these helping interaction statistics could be collected in a quality of life index for each enabled area and across areas for an entire community. Realtors and property owners should be vitally interested; so should the Chamber of Commerce, civic and church groups, and every individual. Perhaps the great American love of competition could be tapped into: which area is leading the likeability league today? In any case, the group index for a territory might be reward enough with little or nothing needed in the way of individual recognition. True, there is a little “Watch me, Mommy or Daddy” in even the most adult of us. In later life, we might not ask explicitly to be watched all the time; it simply affects our behavior to know we might be being watched by someone who cares about good standards and about us. Finally, a sense of affiliation may give us pride when, say, we read in the newspaper that our area has moved up to second place in the quality of life index (“Gee, maybe I was counted in that!”). One commentator goes further to suggest “candid camera” type filming of particularly inspiring neighborly acts in an outstandingly well enabled area, and other enabled areas too. I’d be willing to see that every idea tested out, provided there were very careful, sensitive respect for the privacy of people who might not want their decencies displayed on prime time.
Chapter 6

THE SETTING: NEIGHBORHOOD IN A NEW SENSE

The main functions of enablers are connecting, catalyzing, and endorsing. But where will they do this?

One answer seems to be: almost anywhere. Enabling needn't be restricted to a fixed locale. The best triggering and modeling I ever saw was by a streetcar conductor in Melbourne, Australia, over a mile of track. An enabler could employ catalyzing and endorsing tactics without intensive knowledge of a fixed geographical area. Indeed, it is pleasant to contemplate enablers-at-large roaming freely and leaving legacies of goodwill as they go.

In other cases, it seems best for enablers to operate consistently within the same setting. This will be desirable whenever enabler effectiveness depends on familiarity with the residents or typical transients in an area, and the area’s special conditions, problems, and resources. Being consistently on the same scene also permits time for planning coverage of an area, and for certain kinds of enabling techniques to take hold. Thus, it is difficult to imagine successful identification and formation of common interest and concern groups by an enabler who is just passing through.

The enabler scene, in this settled sense, will certainly include neighborhoods as traditionally defined (see Chapter 1).

But I believe enabling can also occur in settings much more broadly defined than neighborhoods. The domains include any collection of people for whom the quality of interaction can benefit from enabling strategies: connecting and/or catalyzing and/or endorsing.

On this definition, I do not see how any of the following brainstorm possibilities could be excluded as settings in which an enabler team might work.

- an airport, bus, or train station
- a shopping center, mall, or department store
- public places such as post offices and museums
- libraries, employment offices
- schools, colleges, dormitories, student centers, community school target areas
- a local of a labor union
- a business office
- an industrial plant
- resort and recreational areas
- a club group
- church and synagogue congregations (or portions of them such as the women’s circle)
- a neighborhood association
- a street, block, ward, precinct, or neighborhood
- a smaller town or village
- a common interest group, say in community gardening
- an apartment building or complex
- a nuclear or extended family or a cluster of these
- a hospital ward
- a clinic, an agency waiting room or office
- a jail or prison
- a group of clients, patients, consumers of services
- a group of volunteers
- an advisory or policy board
- a group of staff
- mixed groups of volunteers, clients, and staff
- someday a global neighborhood in which we share more with our far less fortunate brothers and sisters.

Any of these (except, for now, the last-named) seem plausible as settings in which enabling techniques might successfully be applied.

This is a varied assortment, indeed - -

From a few people to thousands

From high density of people to scattered

From primarily fixed residential populations to primarily transient populations (as in a bus station or airport)

From a circumscribed or bounded area, such as a block to a geographically diffuse responsibility. Thus, members of a church, a club, or a labor union, or an extended family, might live almost anywhere in town (or out of town). Here the feeling of belongingness decisively dominates geography in the definition of neighborhood.

Do we still dare to use the word “neighborhood”, after taking such liberties with its more conventional meaning? We do have distinguished company in deviating from commonly understood meanings. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1967, unabridged) gives as one meaning of neighborhood, “neighborly feeling or conduct”. So, just as motherhood is the state or quality of being a mother, neighborhood is the state or quality of being neighborly, friendly, and helpful towards other people.

There is little of geography in this and much of hope. We also seem to be saying that neighborhood, in this sense, is not so much where enabling begins as where it wants to end. I, for one, am content with this newer neighborhood of hope, as the place where enabling happens.

Speaking of hope, since June, 1981, the Voluntary Action Center of Kalamazoo, Michigan has been holding regular meetings with Neighborhood Associations and Community Center people, in part to discuss the neighborhood enabling concept. The group is now moving into a second phase of working together which includes plans for recruiting neighborhood enablers, volunteer coordinators, and service delivery volunteers.

As this guidebook goes to press, I’ve been invited to come to Kalamazoo and work with this group to implement more neighborhood involvement and enabling.

I expect to be there.
Chapter 7

GETTING A PROGRAM ORGANIZED

There are three approaches to maximizing the amount of enabling in a neighborhood or other setting. These are the Selected Multiplier, Open Multiplier, and Concentrated Program approaches.

The Selected Multiplier Strategy
Both multiplier approaches attempt to increase (multiply) the number of people, or key people, who are enabling in a neighborhood. In the Selected Multiplier model, the object is to train and support in enabling techniques existing fixed figures in a neighborhood or other setting. This can include sales personnel, waiters and waitresses, office workers, delivery people, bus drivers, airline ticket counter people, clergy and lay leadership in church and synagogues, teachers, police, etc. These people then have the enabler role grafted onto or, better, integrated with their main role. Insofar as this integration is successful, a great deal of enabling would occur regularly and continuously in the neighborhood or other setting. A problem with the Selected Multiplier model is that you may be attempting to train as enablers a lot of people who have neither the aptitude nor motivation for the role.

The Open Multiplier Strategy
In this model, as many people as possible in an area would be trained or educated and supported in enabler concepts and techniques. These would not necessarily be staff people, or other fixed figures in the neighborhood; nor would they necessarily be leaders in the community. They would simply be the largest possible cross-section of men, women, and – yes – children in the neighborhood. They could be reached through courses or workshops in schools, clubs, churches, and synagogues, 4-H, neighborhood associations, etc. Graduates might or might not formally enroll in the Concentrated Enabler Program described later in this chapter.

The two multiplier models represent a saturation strategy: as many people as possible knowing about enabler strategies and using them. Both models would make training and being a resource to others the predominant function of a relatively small number of people concentrating on being enablers, and highly trained and skilled in that role.

The Concentration Program Strategy
In this model, a team of highly trained and skilled enablers takes primary direct responsibility for doing nothing else but enabling in the neighborhood or area.

We’ll focus on this model henceforth in this chapter, but not before recommending that you try all three approaches concurrently: Selected Multiplier, Open Multiplier, and Concentrated Program models.

Motivation and Recruitment of Volunteers
In the Concentrated Program model, the paid person(s) who are coordinating (in larger settings at least), will have to involve large numbers of volunteer enablers, to saturate the area. The enabler role, or specialties within the overall role, should be naturally attractive and challenging for many people. The work is upbeat; it accentuates the positive, in immediately or rapidly apparent ways. Moreover, those likely to volunteer will often be enabling in a nearby area such as their own neighborhood, which naturally concerns them. This is also a convenience or even a necessity in
an era of expensive gasoline. Finally, if, as would often be expected, the enabler is working in an area s/he would normally inhabit or pass through, the role will require little or no special scheduling or time allotment on the enabler’s part; s/he will enable as s/he goes about his/her daily rounds in the territory.

Word-of-mouth (“the friendship chain”) will probably be the best volunteer recruiting method. People who’ve been enabled, realize it, and appreciate it, are prime candidates as future enablers. The program would start small, to smooth out procedures and gain experience, but let there be no mistake about the goal for a territory: everybody an enabler, all the time.* (*This relates back to the Open Multiplier Model and also to the issue of whether or not enablers should be visibly identified as such.)

**Enabler Characteristics**
That doesn’t mean any of us can be equally good in all the aspects of enabling. Therefore involvement of volunteers must carefully respect the sensitivity and tact required in many enabler functions such as modeling and signaling. People who don’t excel at some enabler functions might still be suitable for other program support roles such as tabulation and analysis of quality of life counts, publicity, securing contributions of recognition items, etc. One nice thing, though: level and/or type of education probably won’t be a primary qualification. Familiarity with the neighborhood or setting might be necessary or it might not. Some people hold that a certain level of ignorance yields a fresh perspective and that whatever knowledge is needed can be acquired rapidly. On this issue, much will probably depend on the nature and complexity of the enabled area.

As for attitudes and abilities, it does seem desirable that he concentrated program enabler have a low-profile work style, sensitivity, tact, and the ability to identify and grasp initiatives when no two situations are quite alike.

**Orientation and Training of Enablers**
Clearly, cookbook or formula training will not suffice to prepare people for the subtleties and challenges of the enabler role.

The present guidebook and references might serve as an orientation manual for volunteers; at least, it suggests the subject areas which should be covered in training. This training will probably be quite intensive and might well include an apprenticeship or job-shadowing period with an experienced enabler. Deepening and expansion of understanding through regular in-service training would also seem to be highly desirable.

Where the Concentrated Program links with the Selected and Open Multiplier models, enablers will be doing a great deal of training of others in enabling concepts and techniques. If such is the case, enablers in the Concentrated Program will also receive training in how to be good trainers.

The link with the saturation approach is never broken, even in the concentrated or specialist enabler program. Thus, an important positive spin-off of large numbers of trained and experienced volunteer enablers is the raising of their own awareness of the potential for informal helping in daily life. Many of these people will probably never go entirely off duty as enablers again, even if officially off duty, and even as they move to and through other settings. Indeed educating the maximum number of people in enabling techniques could be important, even if these people don’t formally join the enabler program but use the methods with friends, family, at work, and throughout their daily lives. Thus, opening up training to the widest range of people in the Concentrated Program model actually grades over into the Multiplier model of enabling.

**Other Program Functions**
The text has already indicated the kinds of publicity and public education functions which will form an important part of the overall effort.
Helping interactions, actual or potential, do not neatly terminate at neighborhood borders. The principal enablers in an area should logically have responsibility for inter-area coordination.

**Material and Financial Support**

In some cases, the program might plausibly be all-volunteer, as in a church, synagogue, or club group. But even here, a modest amount of funding or its in-kind equivalent will probably be needed for recognition materials, telephone, office space (though enablers themselves should not NOT hang out at the office), etc.

Large and/or more densely populated territories will probably require at least one full-time paid person for coordinating volunteers and program support functions.

Frequently, administrative siting and funding support will be implicit in the definition of the territory; for example, the church or synagogue, the transportation authority, or the downtown business association.

Where a territory has no sole proprietor, or predominant one, the widest, most representative range of organizations and individuals should be involved as sponsors.

That the program is experimental may be a drawback for more cautious funders. On the other hand, some backers may favor support of innovative program models, and in any case, the program is not entirely experimental. As previously noted, some neighborhood enabler functions are plausibly practical now; for example, formation of common interest groups, common problem groups, and service linkage systems.

The program might appear too loose-knit for some investors. Yet other funders might prefer a free-flowing style. In any case, the core of the concentrated enabler program, as described here, is by no means disorganized or unstructured.

Overall, at this point, I believe the prospects for financial and other material support of a neighborhood enabler program are good. In the first place, the desirable and virtually necessary predominance of volunteers in the program is attractive for its dollar-stretching feature, especially in today's economy. The anticipated outcomes are visible, positive, and widely distributed in a neighborhood or other setting, rather than targeted on less visible groups.

The program is upbeat, and, with the caveats previously noted, non-controversial. Program impact is positive in terms of human quality of life considerations. Enabling also has the potential to relate to pocketbook purposes such as property values and business prospects, and to the attracting of members to organizations.

Let's look in more detail at the program’s selling points for administrative and funding sponsor support. Definite predictions can be made of payoffs which should occur as a result of effective neighborhood enabling, effective because it increases the frequency of friendly/helpful interactions in a target setting. There are several general reasons for the expected benefits. Where it's more pleasant to be, people will naturally want to be more often. Secondly, in a more supportive environment happier people are more likely to do better work, be less distracted by mean-ness, sniping, etc. Finally, I believe we tend to give back in kind what we receive. If what we receive is consistent decency, it’s a bit harder to be ugly in our own behavior.

For reasons such as these, business should improve in well-enabled retail stores, shopping centers, recreation centers, resorts, bars, etc.
Employees should be happier and more productive in the well-triggered agency, office, factory, store.

Students and teachers at schools should also be more fulfilled and productive. Generally, offices, industries, and schools would be nicer places to work, with higher quality in the work produced.

Over the longer term, membership should increase in the well-enabled church, synagogue, club, chapter, or association.

More people would move into the well-triggered neighborhood or apartment complex. Property values should rise.

Crime might decrease, along with other anti-social behavior. Inmates of institutions might be “easier to manage” for the right reason: achievement of reasonably humane conditions.

It’s even conceivable that meetings might be fun and effective, properly enabled.

Worth noting on this list, is that some of these pay-offs will appeal to the direct self interest (vs. philanthropic inclination) of the profit sector. This provides an important funding alternative to government, foundations, and individual philanthropists.

Beyond “pay-offs” in the narrow sense, shall we dare to dream? Widespread effective enabling would enrich quality of life in the kinds of daily situations virtually untouched today in any systematic self-conscious way. Life might be happier, more fulfilling for people. In the long run, we might prevent some mental or medical problems from reaching a stage requiring professional or institutional treatment.

Such goals are grand but need not be grandiose if we take it one step at a time. At each step, the most important investment is not money; it is the time and caring of individual people.

Dear Neighbors:

I’m new at writing these neighborhood letters. Please bear with me. We are Neighborhood #5. There are 42 neighborhoods in Independence (Missouri). Some of these neighborhoods are organized beautifully. Friendly neighbors work together to make their areas more safe, more beautiful, more friendly. LET US BRING OUT NEIGHBORHOOD TO THE TOP. Who does it benefit? Guess who? Each one of us.

[Part of meeting notice in Neighbors magazine.]

See you there?

“This freedom to care is not easy. It is not a gift given but a choice made.”

- Ursula LeGuin

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Yellowfire Press
1705 14th St., Suite 199
Boulder, CO 80302

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