

DISCOVERING, PARTNERING WITH, & HIRING C - O - N - N - E - C - T - O - R - S

in your community engagement work

WHY CONNECTORS?

- **Every community is filled with assets** — more than any one person or group knows. Strong communities are those in which assets are well-connected and utilized, including those of people who have traditionally been labeled as having little or nothing to contribute.
- **Engaging community involves** (a) discovering and connect the skills, passions and resources of community, starting with residents and associations at the grassroots neighborhood level and (b) support residents to lead the change they wish to see.
- **Connectors play a vital role in this work.** Without them, it's almost impossible to achieve inclusive, broad engagement or contribution of resident abilities.
- **There are many naturally skilled connectors** in every neighborhood and community!

"Community changes blossom from empowered residents interacting and sharing their gifts and information.

A connector's primary role is to ignite that action and then let residents and community organizations imagine, create, and build based on their gifts and capacities."

*Ray Thompson,
"Thoughts on a Connector"*

Qualities of a Connector

- ↔ **Has a natural curiosity about people**
- ↔ **Well-connected & trusted in their neighborhood**
- ↔ **Fearless**
- ↔ **Passionate about people, neighborhoods and the power of citizens**
- ↔ **Able to talk naturally with many kinds of people**
- ↔ **Often in the back or middle of the room (or moving all around it!), NOT at the front of the room taking charge**
- ↔ **Values relationships above and beyond what a relationship can produce**
- ↔ **Understand that community life suffers when neighbors are not in relation**
- ↔ **Sees and values the gifts and capacities of people who may have been defined by their needs or problems** (people with disabilities, experiencing homelessness or poverty, young people, etc.)



Some Ways to Engage, Enlist & Partner with Connectors:

Connectors are not "trained" — they are discovered, enlisted and supported! Roles they can take on to help build community power, inclusion and connection include:

As Partners — who may or may not attend organizational or project meetings but who can be "on tap" to help recommend people within the community who could help with various parts

As Community Leadership Team founders or members — to participate regularly in envisioning how an ABCD community partnership might expand local engagement and leadership

As Paid staff — who identify community assets and connect community members with opportunities to lead, meet others who share their passion, or contribute their skills and talents to local activities.

Finding Connectors *Some common steps for finding connectors:*

1. **Clarify with yourself and others** you are planning with how you would like to enlist connectors: as partners, team members, hired staff? Multiple roles can work, but be clear on what the options are.
2. **Start with who you know.** Chances are, you or someone you are working or connected with already knows one or more connectors!
3. **Ask 2-5 others** in your organization or group who seem locally connected to brainstorm who you know collectively that fit the descriptors above. If possible, do this over coffee or a meal!
4. **If your work is centered around a particular neighborhood or group of neighborhoods, focus there.** If you know anyone at all from those neighborhoods already – especially a resident – invite them to this brainstorming and/or meet with them one-on-one to brainstorm. If appropriate, explain in your own that your goal is to learn about the community and support community members to reach their own goals. (This is especially important if your group or organization is based outside of the neighborhood and/or has a weak or conflictive past relationship with the neighborhood.)



Hiring Connectors

Hiring a full- or part-time connector or “asset based organizer” can powerfully mobilize local assets and leadership. A few tips and practices to consider:

- **Dedicate enough funds** to be able to offer a decent rate for their services.
- **Invest time up front** to find the right person and become comfortable and confident in their role and in working together with you or other staff.
- **If possible, hire several connectors** at one time and create a structure for them to compare learnings, help sharpen one another’s skills, and celebrate accomplishments together.
- **Create a position where the connector can focus fully on their role** and exercise lots of creativity and initiative in who they connect with, how they do so, and how they connect them with others.
- **Design the connector/organizer’s role so that they can operate mostly independently** from any formal organizational structure, with minimum administrative duties or “behind-the-desk” expectations.
- **While protecting their independence, find ways to weave their work and progress** into the work and culture of your organization, group or project. For example:
 - If they are regularly documenting their discoveries, connections, learnings and ideas for using or supporting community assets, regularly share this with your staff or group members and, if possible, your community partners.
 - Build time into your staff, committee, or team’s regular meetings to hear from the connectors what they are discovering and how they think your group or organization might help their work or the work of the community.
- **Include funds in your budget for their “tools”:** funding for hosting meals, celebrations, gatherings, or meeting one-on-one with community members (an alcohol budget is helpful if possible, since many “meetings” in community happen over a beer!).

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

“Building Mutually-Beneficial Relationships Between Schools and Communities: The Role of a Connector”

(Ray Thompson) <http://bit.ly/2lZBxzD>

“When People Care Enough to Act” – Chapter 5 “Organizing an ABCD Community Partnership” (Mike Green)

<http://bit.ly/2k4oigw>

Compiled by April Doner and Joseph Erpenbeck, [The ABCD Institute](#) (2019)

Thoughts on a Connector

Raymond Thompson

Connectors come in all shapes and sizes. They are found in the mahogany covered walls of academia and on our urban streets, where liquor stores sit perpendicular to churches. In a connectors field of interest contradictions abound. A single mother with three children has found a friend in an older woman who lives alone in the apartment below. Taxpaying residents decide to shovel the alley they share because “we can’t wait for the city”. From an apartment building to an inner city alley, many connections are waiting to be made. A connector exists to initiate the link.

Connectors have a natural curiosity about people. Questions are asked and a conversation spontaneously takes off. Gifts are shared and a new friend is made. Gifts and capacities are aligned to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods. Community partners are created and mutual interests are met that directly involve and benefit residents. Sometimes bridge building is needed and a connector is the contractor initiating its construction, relationship by relationship.

A connector values relationship above and beyond what a relationship can produce. Social and financial outcomes are beneficial, but a senior’s love of reading shared with children who are frequently at home alone after school until their mother returns from work can’t be tangibly measured. Though it can be shown that these interactions are investments of time and self that result in hard benefits seen in safe communities, productive and caring school environments, and responsive local government. A connector understands results, but is not results driven. The challenges in communities are complex, but are overcome by getting down to grassroots levels where human interaction takes place and all systems emerge.

Connectors rely on residents for information and learn how residents use information to benefit themselves. Through these observations a connector sees natural synergies in neighborhoods based on the gifts of its residents and the capacities of its institutions. Through relationship the connector helps residents see the potential in the neighborhoods collective assets. Shifts in perception occur and the once half empty glass is now half full or running over, depending on our ability to be inclusion minded. Community changes blossom from empowered residents interacting and sharing their gifts and information. A connector’s primary role is to ignite that action and then let residents and community organizations imagine, create, and build based on their gifts and capacities.

A connector is never satisfied with traditional employment, though one may find them hiding out in social service agencies, community organizations, or doing neighborhood based organizing work. They can be found influencing others to become more interdependent and sharing helpful information. Some connectors may work from an Emersonian-like base of self reliance, motivating residents to rely upon their gifts and local capacities to create economic opportunity. And other connectors seek to weave our invisible and often excluded neighbors back into the fabric of our daily community life. Despite the many variations of connecting and connectors, all connectors understand that community life suffers when neighbors are not in relation. Our communities are the foundation of our civic, social, and economic lives. Community is also the source of creative change and innovation. As globalization and digital technology spreads information (and our attention) far and wide, a connector gathers people to reflect on their local lives. In this reflection community is strengthened, local opportunity emerges, and sustainable change ensues powered by active human relations and capacity.

A Guide to Selecting Community Connectors

Joe Erpenbeck
Faculty
Asset Based Community Development Institute



Northwestern University, Evanston Illinois
2015

This is a guide to a simple process that can be utilized when selecting community builders or connectors. We assumed that the best way to do this was to replicate, as closely as possible, the work we expected the applicants to do. Instead of a typical interview, we invited applicants to a conversation and to spend time meeting people in a neighborhood. This also provided us an opportunity to practice “radical hospitality” by welcoming each applicant and sharing and reflecting on their community experience.

We started by asking all applicants to write responses to three to four questions such as:

- Tell me about your neighborhood?
- What does community mean to you?
- Tell us a story about your community?
- What are you a part of in your community?

From these responses we invited 8-10 of the applicants in for an “interview” that was actually more like a conversation. We told them that we were trying something new and we hoped it would be fun. Because part of the interview would be spent outdoors, they should dress comfortably for the weather.

Six to ten applicants arrived for an interview at the same time. They were greeted warmly and engaged in conversation as they arrived. There were light refreshments, sometimes balloons and chalk welcome signs on the sidewalk. Once all had arrived we explained the mission of our group and then described what we would be doing in the neighborhood. Usually, we included 2-3 experienced connectors to sit in on the interviews as greeters and observers.

The applicants then spent time, 45 minutes to an hour, in the neighborhood with the following guidelines:

- Meet one to three people and learn about their gifts and what they are connected to.
- Be as natural as possible (taking notes was discouraged).
- Do not saturate a person or place.
- Have fun

Each person was told that we thought they would have a great experience connecting with welcoming people and places. We added, however, that sometimes it might not go so well and that would also be okay. They were told that rejection is no reflection on their ability to connect, it just happens sometimes.

Each applicant was given our phone number in case they got lost or ran into any difficulties.

When the group returned, we facilitated a group conversation around three questions:

- Tell us about one person you met?
- What struck you about this experience?
- What surprised you about this experience? About the people, the neighborhood or yourself?

The purpose of the discussion was to gain insight into applicants' ability to listen, be curious, have passion for community, build relationships, to tell a story and be a contributing team member. As we proceeded through the discussion the other team members were paying attention to assess each applicant.

- Do they appear to have a gift focused approach?
- Are they able to effectively build relationships?
- What is their non-verbal behavior communicating?
- Do they communicate effectively?
- Does the applicant appear to have enjoyed the activity?
- Are they curious?

We kept the discussion to no more than an hour.

Later that week after rating the candidates we invited one to three of the applicants back for a more in-depth individual discussion. These conversations often felt as if we were reconnecting with friends.

Although there is still much learning and continued refinement of the process, there are many apparent advantages to this method including:

- An opportunity to showcase key elements of the practice.
- A hands-on experience.
- The ability to build on relationships and connection.
- The advantage of saving time.

Recently, we added a “play it forward” piece – a thank you card personalized to the applicants with a handwritten note thanking them for coming in and spending time with us. We included a gift. The gift was something they could use to make a connection, such as a card to buy someone a coffee, or a marker to write a thank you to someone they appreciate. We asked them to email us a story about what they did with their gift. Some replied, some didn’t, but if invited back for a second interview we asked about what they did.

One of the major benefits of this approach is that it sets a tone of creativity, possibility, community and connection. It is usually a very memorable event for the participants. In fact, some applicants who were not selected commented about what an amazing experience it had been for them.

Following are five supporting documents (Exhibits 1-5) used in the process of selecting connectors.

Exhibit 1 | Job Description For Community Connectors



COMMUNITY CONNECTOR 2 - JOB DESCRIPTION - GRID LEVEL 12

The Community Connector is accountable to the Project Leader.

MANDATE

To build networks for people by using a person centred approach, the values and practices of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), and social innovation. To identify assets and gifts of individuals with disabilities and applying this knowledge to promote and foster meaningful, reciprocal relationships of acceptance and belonging with community groups, individual citizens, associations, or others in the community.

EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATIONS

- Diploma in Community Development, Marketing, or Social Sciences, or an equivalent combination of education and experience
- One to three years of demonstrated community involvement and development
- Class 5 driver's license, acceptable driving record
- Current Emergency 1st Aid and CPR
- Current TB test
- Criminal Record Check for Children and Vulnerable Adults - clearance

JOB SKILLS AND ABILITIES

- Well-developed interpersonal and communication skills
- Ability to work independently and as part of a team
- Good organization and time management skills
- Understanding and ability to apply the principles of ABCD and social innovation
- Knowledge of the challenges experienced by individuals who face barriers and possible discrimination
- Non-judgmental and genuine positive attitudes towards all community members

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES & DUTIES

- Member of the leadership/mentorship team for ABCD and social innovation within the Association.
- Develops, presents, and facilitates public presentations to community partners, businesses, and potential networks.
- Designs and implements the concepts and strategies of ABCD and social innovation.
- Modifies planning processes and supports frameworks so that they reflect an asset-based approach to individuals and the community.
- Identifies policy, procedural, or structural changes needed within service delivery system in order to support their work in the community.
- Independently makes decisions about the safety and risks of a relationship/connection within the community for people with disabilities.
- Facilitates a variety of community connections between people with disabilities and the community (e.g. 1:1 meetings, provide resources, organize, mentor, role model), focusing on choice and control for people with disabilities and overall principles of self-determination.
- Identifies and connects to people, places and groups that will appreciate assets of people with disabilities.
- Trains, mentors, and supports staff within the organization, professionals within the sector, and community members to understand and apply the principles of ABCD and other community development models and practices, to their work, missions, and communities.
- Participates in the development, ongoing implementation, and analysis of service evaluation and social impact.
- Develops and maintains relationships with people with disabilities, identifying assets and gifts of the person and taking direction from them as to how they would like to connect and participate in the community.

Exhibit 1 | Job Description For Community Connectors

- Builds relationships and connections with citizens, community groups, associations, businesses, and partners. This may include education, mentorship, support, and development, as well as discovering, supporting, evaluating, hosting, and attending events in which these connections take place.
- Seeks, secures, and mobilizes resources / partnerships / community assets for ABCD and social innovation opportunities
- Creatively problem solves and identifies opportunities in order for individuals in varying demographics (i.e. age, socio-economic, disability, etc.) to exercise self-determination.
- Represents the Association and is a positive role model while building connections and networks between community members, organizations, and/or businesses and people with disabilities.
- Participates in training and professional development and accesses resources related to ABCD.
- Completes required documentation.
- Performs other duties as required.

SHIFTS

Community Connectors' hours are flexible including some evenings / weekends, as determined by clients' needs and schedules

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The ability to function independently, with creativity and initiative, is an ongoing expectation.

Classification and Grid Level

Unique Position

JJEP Wage Grid Level 12

Exhibit 2 | An Advertisement Seeking Applicants As Community Connectors

We are looking for a dynamic community builder who enjoys meeting people and building connections in neighborhoods to be a part of our community development team.

Responsibilities:

- ✓ Ability to facilitate relationships and connections and to connect people of diverse backgrounds.
- ✓ Ability to identify and connect people and assets in neighborhoods and associations.
- ✓ Ability to work as part of a team with emphasis on relationships, outcomes, maturity and tact.
- ✓ A strong commitment to community and relationship building and inclusion of all people.

Qualifications:

- ✓ Excellent listening and relationship building skills.
- ✓ Strong interest in community development.
- ✓ Excellent communication and problem solving skills, initiative, good judgment and extreme reliability.
- ✓ Knowledge of computers and good writing skills.
- ✓ Work flexible schedule.

Position Type:

Full time 37.5 hours with benefits

(Post on Numerous websites)

Exhibit 3 | Introductory Statement for Applicants Who Are Interviewed

Welcome and Thanks for coming today, we are so glad you are here!

You are part of an initiative that is collecting information on the assets present in neighborhoods. Depth of information and relationships is much more valuable than quantity. Recognizing and practicing hospitality is paramount and a source of energy and learning.

Applicants will spend 45 minutes in the neighborhood meeting 1 to 3 people and collect information about:

What are the person's gifts?

What are they connected to?

Please try not to saturate a particular place/person and to be very natural. After an hour, return here and you can call xxx-xxx-xxxx if you need assistance.

Exhibit 4 | Rating Form for Applicants Based on Information From Interview And Field Visit

Candidate _____

1. Asset Based Competency

Definition: *Has asset based view, is connected, see potential in neighbourhoods*

Score	1. Tell me about a hobby or an issue that you care about and how you engage with community around it?

Score	2. Pick a neighbourhood you know well and tell me a bit about the people, businesses, associations and organizations that you know operate within it?

Score	3. Tell us about the groups both formal and informal that you are a part of?

2. Motivation Competency

Definition: *passionate about connecting and inclusion for everyone, able to meet schedule, is flexible*

Score	1. What interests you the most about this position?

Score	2. Are you available to work evenings and weekends?

Exhibit 4 | Rating Form for Applicants Based on Information From Interview And Field Visit

Score	3. What did you do to prepare for this interview?

Score	4. Tell us about a time when your initiative made the difference between success and failure.

3. **Connecting Competency** Able to support people in connections, sees potential and able to make invitations, relationship builder

Score	1. Tell us about times when you were networked to create new relationships or partnerships in order to advance a project.
Score	2. If you were asked to be a social convenor for a neighbourhood – to do community building – how would you go about doing that? What sort of things would you be looking for or thinking about?

Score	3. Tell us what you know of Asset Based Community Development or works of John McKnight.

Exhibit 4 | Rating Form for Applicants Based on Information From Interview And Field Visit

Score	4. What gift of yours would contribute greatly to building connections in neighbourhoods ?

Candidate _____

Score totals:
Asset Based Competency:

Motivation Competency:

Connecting Competency:

Gifts:

Exhibit 4 | The Learnings of 10 Community Connectors

Working through an intriguing network called “Possibilities,” we selected 10 community connectors using the methods and tools in this publication. After a year of work, the connectors were asked about their most significant learnings. The following is a compilation of their wisdom.

- Generalizing has collapsed.
- Everyone wants to tell you his/her story.
- I must be open, curious and interested.
- Believing that everyone has something to give.
- Relinquish control.
- Accept not seeing immediate results.
- Listening without an agenda.
- Realizing everyone wants friends.
- Embracing the unknown.
- Reflecting on one’s personal self in this personal work. It is difficult to find words in the world of the personal. You can see an empty place in yourself, so you learn you are like other people
- You get better and better questions to ask.
- It takes a certain kind of personality to be as adaptive as this work demands. We are stepping into new worlds every day.
- We learn how and when to say, “No.”
- Self-care is important so that we bring gifts to the relationship.
- People connect in many different ways.
- Community means many different things when it’s practiced.
- We must leave the expert role and stop thinking, “I know what they need.”
- We are learning and supporting at the same time.
- Openness requires personal vulnerability. This work is not about self-preservation.
- Learning to praise rather than encourage.
- Learning that we are disrupting isolation.
- Learning that people *really* care about their neighborhood.
- Learning that in neighborhoods, there are lots of positive groups.