

I've been on a reading spurt lately, and I picked up a book entitled ***The Art of Community*** by Charles H. Vogl. I was drawn to this book by the title because at the Y, we say we are about belonging. I wanted to see if there were any insights I could draw from this author's reflection on community building that would be useful to us as Y professionals. Turns out, there's a lot in this short book that I found applicable and helpful.

First was about serving members. Vogl says "communities function best and are most durable when they're helping members to be more successful in some way in a connected and dynamic world." He goes on to say that the communities we build should make people stronger, happier, full of well-being. This is exactly what we do at the Y – build healthy spirits, minds and bodies! Check!

Vogl outlines seven principles of belonging, and a couple of them may be helpful to us coming out of the pandemic and thinking about how we rebuild with membership defined as our primary focus in the realm of social responsibility.

The first I'll share is "initiation," which he defines as any activity that officially recognizes and welcomes the new member into the community. What are we doing to welcome and recognize new members? How do you officially or unofficially initiate new members? Vogl says the initiation can be as simple as a welcome letter or email, a phone call, an introductory visit to see the facility and meet other members. My church does a newcomer's lunch, and "oldcomers" can come too to visit with and get to know newcomers. How are you initiating new members? Is this something you do as a matter of course for every new member? If not, might be an idea worth a try.

Another concept I thought particularly relevant to our business model is the stories principle. This principle says that each member of the community needs to know the community's origin story. How often do we tell our members Y's origin story? I'd be willing to bet that we never do. I know I didn't know the origin story until I became an employee. Do our employees even know our origin story? That our story begins with belonging first? That our story is about people who were socially isolated in a new community, needing a place to belong and people to call friends? Think about it. When was the last time you told that story to anyone? A new member? A new staff member? Is it part of new employee orientation? Is it part of new member initiation?

How can we frame belonging at the Y more fully to the audiences that need to hear that? People are looking for a place to belong, a cause to support. We know that social isolation is one of our most prevalent public health issues today. And the Y is in a unique position to be able to invite people in, to belong. I would love to hear

your thoughts about how we might use Vogl's tips to improve membership engagement in our YMCAs across the state.