The first step in community action

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The idea of focusing on purposes isn't always popular, especially when a problem situation becomes urgent. If the members of a group feel that they're facing a crisis, there's a natural tendency to want to get on with it, to do something—anything—before it's too late. In this situation, someone who wants to talk about purposes and ideals can be seen at first as a troublemaker, someone who is standing in the way of progress.

At some time, you've probably been in a meeting that was called to deal with a crisis. The dynamics of the meeting might have been similar to those in the following story.

Not long ago, the tenants of an apartment building became alarmed about a number of break-ins that had been reported in their neighborhood. In one incident, a middle-aged man was killed with his own gun when he attempted to stop a burglar. Later that night, after the ambulance and the police had left, the tenants met to talk about what they could do to protect themselves.

At first, there was no real direction to the meeting. They took turns relating the facts that were known about the incident that night. Others related similar experiences, news items they'd read, close calls they'd had personally. Finally, somebody said, "Let's get on with this! What the hell are we gonna do?"

Of course, no one really knew. That's why they'd called the meeting. Most of them came expecting to be told what to do. No one had any answers, but there were plenty of opinions:

"We wouldn't be here, you know, if the police would just enforce the law."

"Yeah, they let criminals off too easy. None of 'em pay."

"I think the police are doing what they can."

"You can call the cops, but you could die waiting for them to get here."

"That's just because people call them every time a dog knocks over a trash can."

"Call the cops. That's all we can do."

"No. We can get together and police this building ourselves."

"Look, I'm all for taking action, but I can't spare much time for this."

"Some of us here never take part. The same people run the block party every year. What ever happened to pitching in?"

"Me and my brother can fight 'em. We ain't afraid of anybody."

"What would we do if we came across somebody dangerous? We can't carry guns."

"It's drugs. They're all high on drugs."

And so on.

Most of the comments were negative; many were complaints. Most of the people were angry, and it was natural to want to blame someone. The remarks that suggested action seemed poorly thought out. A sense of frustration began to build.

Finally, a young woman blurted, "Just why are we here? This is a waste of time."

It was a hostile remark. The woman was genuinely fed up. The meeting seemed pointless. Other people, who felt they were finally getting a chance to speak their minds, were offended. There was a stony silence from the group.

But the woman persisted, "I've heard a lot about what's wrong. I don't like it any more than you do. But nobody's told me why we're here."

To many in the group, the woman was just being obtuse. One man thought he'd put an end to her objections: "We're here to deal with criminals. It's about time."

The woman wouldn't give up. She genuinely questioned why she should be involved. Whether she knew it or not, she had taken the first step toward dealing effectively with the problem.

She lowered her voice and asked the belligerent man, "Do you really think that we can hope to deal with criminals?"

Someone else answered, "We're here to enforce the law!"

As far as the young woman was concerned, this wasn't an answer. "Can we enforce the law?" she asked.

The reply was, "The police are supposed to enforce the law."

From another corner of the room, a boy, probably not yet in his teens, offered, "We could help the police enforce the law."

The young woman looked hard at the boy. "Now that sounds like something we could work on."

The belligerent man confronted the young woman, as if, finding a purpose for the meeting, she now had responsibility for dealing with the problem.

"How can we help the police?" he asked.

At first, the woman's answer sounded as though she wanted to antagonize him. "I haven't the slightest idea," she said.

Then, she thought a moment, and continued: "Why don't we invite a police officer here? Let's ask him what kind of help they need." For the first time that night, she smiled a little. "If you want, I'll even make the call."

Not much later, the meeting broke up—after the tenants had agreed that they would meet again soon with a police officer. The purpose of their meeting, it turned out, had been to gain a purpose in working together. Eventually, they all agreed the purpose was to help the police enforce the law. Once that purpose was identified, the next step seemed obvious.

The young woman in this story didn't solve the problem. Quite naturally, and thinking perhaps only of her own busy schedule, she questioned why she should be involved in solving it at all.

Instinctively, she turned the attention of the group to the purpose of the meeting. Members of the group resisted talking about purposes at first but eventually realized that a purpose was needed. And it was something on which they could all agree.

The idea that purposes are areas of potential agreement points toward ways that individuals can be effective in group efforts. This is a major advantage of thinking about purposes, but it's not the main reason for starting that way. Even when you're working on a problem by yourself, focusing first on purposes can increase your chances of success.

In other words, defining the purposes of working on a problem ensures that you will apply your efforts in areas where you can have the greatest impact.

Thinking about the purposes for working on a problem prevents wasted effort. This approach guarantees that you're not going to be working on something that won't meet your needs. Further, finding the right purpose greatly increases your chances of discovering a breakthrough or an innovative solution.

Finding the right purpose to work on involves thinking about purposes at different levels. For any problem there can be many purposes.