

# TOP OF MIND: MULTIPLYING ORGANIZATIONAL VITALITY IN-COMMUNITY

*by Father Charlie Fermeglia, Sister Jeanette Braun, & Debbe Kennedy*

## Discovering a New Patch of Common Ground

The power of *building community* within an organization is often undervalued. Not intentionally, but consider this question: How often have you seen *building community* listed as the top priority on a business or organizational plan? Or as a new leader's first concern, when named to head a major organizational transformation? We believe that if we had the opportunity to share experiences across sectors, we would prove that building community, especially in turbulent times, can become secondary, falling somewhere between a passing thought and strong desire. In truth, when we're just getting

started, taking our work to a new level, working through a major transition, or planning to accomplish those big goals we have in mind, our best intentions for building community can easily get lost as we get consumed by *first-things-first*.

Case in Point: *Building community* was a goal for us from our beginning. In 2012, when the TABLE of PLENTY (TOP) was founded by a priest and a wine merchant, our passion to complete an organizational start-up in less than six weeks took over. Our mission: going from new idea—to raising seed-money—to engaging supporters and volunteers—to opening TOP's doors to the public. Fr. Charlie's initial vision opened the way. The idea of TOP being a weekly

supper for the hungry seemed to excite everyone who heard about it. He spoke about the need in our community and the inspirations for the idea from success stories he had witnessed in San Francisco and Half Moon Bay, as well as from Biblical parables about Jesus feeding the hungry and helping those in need: “We have a chance to create a new common ground for a diversity of people to come together. This is what matters. It isn’t religious; it is human and full of life.”

Support for the new idea grew. The first volunteer came from the outside. She contacted Fr. Charlie after reading his first interview in the local paper. We soon learned people were drawn to serve others and wanted to give back.

What none of us understood at the time was what would be revealed to us about the power and benefits of working *in-community*, now six years later. Only through the experience of forging the path together, with all its twists and turns, could we know what would come to light in the process. This truth is affirmed by Aristotle’s wisdom. Although written more than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle’s message offers insight from one of his most important studies. With *needs for change* calling out to us all from every direction, Aristotle’s message is a timely reminder of the role and advantage of *learning by doing*:

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II.1, 1103a-b

The kind of people-focused expertise needed to put differences to work effectively as a community isn’t complicated. It does require conscious attention, but we discovered it was driven more by *actions* than by *words*. It often begins with small shifts in behavior—changes that are subtle, maybe even seemingly insignificant. There are no costs associated with them, but when they are consistently delivered, community blossoms. They may take the form of simply saying hello, smiling, saying thank you, giving someone your undivided attention for a few minutes, recognizing and responding to a need, or perhaps acknowledging a special contribution someone makes. Small acts of

consideration routinely demonstrated by example, build trust, inspire self-direction, create fellowship, and work to instill personal responsibility for the organization’s mission. It is surprising how such changes take root; not so much by proclaiming initiatives, creating new rules, or posting notices on a bulletin board, but instead by being open to innovation: removing a roadblock, agreeing to pilot a process improvement, actively listening to new ideas and inviting questions, and changing a few attitudes—*maybe even your own*.

In retrospect, several actions we took made a difference.

We set a high standard for personal conduct: *Striving to create an environment where everyone experiences what it means to love one another*. Although there is no formal program, regular practice is encouraged. Sr. Jeanette uses her weekly briefings with our TOP volunteers to suggest one or two ways for everyone to practice at our suppers (e.g., introducing themselves to each guest at their table and learning to call each person by their name, as a gesture of respect). She has incorporated similar ideas when she formally welcomes our guests each week.

*Learning by doing* worked! It wasn’t long before we witnessed leadership by example coming from even our youngest TOP volunteers. It taught us that age isn’t a factor. Leadership and kindness at any age or station in life calms and assures everyone without words. When everyone is regularly practicing, it provides exemplary behavior for all to emulate. Central to operating within a community is the *humanity* each person contributes. Improving our human qualities enhances our ability to connect with others. It brings out the best in everyone, which enriches the vitality of the whole organization. We learned that if community isn’t a good fit for some people, they seem to fall away naturally.

We believe we are standing on a new patch of common ground. *Learning by doing* has changed us. The insights and lessons learned have surprised us all.

## Where We Are Today

TOP has been blessed at every turn. We have come a long way since we were invited to share TOP’s founding story, “View from the TOP: Universal Principles for

## MILESTONES

TABLE of PLENTY: A weekly supper for struggling families, elders, and homeless

### 2012 Beginnings

**November:** TOP founded by a priest and a wine merchant.

TOP's founding leadership team established.

**Nov. 17:** 3-hour wine tasting to introduce and raise seed money for first-year suppers.

**December:** TOP founding director named; built our TOP volunteer core supper teams.

### 2013 Start-Up

**January:** First TOP supper held; 50 suppers produced in the first year.

TOP GOALS:

1. Building a TOP Volunteer Team, second-to-none
2. Creating strong, sustainable business structure
3. Controlling the rate of growth; getting better vs. bigger

### 2015 Growth

**April:** TOP founding story published in Spring 2015 issue of *Leader to Leader*, "View from the TOP."

**June:** TOP's recognized by state of California and IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

**October:** TOP moved to a new location: a place to refine, change, and grow.

Building Community and Achieving Results," in the Spring 2015 issue of *Leader to Leader*. The Milestones sidebar provides a summary of where our story left off in 2015; here is a summary of where we are today:

TOP is a distinctive weekly supper for the hungry in Half Moon Bay, California. Our TOP all-volunteer community works together to create and produce 52 warm, healthy Thursday evening suppers.

Each week, we cook for 150 guests. Seven days a week, someone in our TOP community is working toward producing our next supper or taking care of TOP business, behind the scenes. On Thursday at 2:00 PM, our volunteers begin arriving to a large, empty meeting

hall and kitchen. Arrivals are staggered throughout the afternoon based on what is needed and when. It has been mentioned more than once from observers that TOP could be likened to a well-choreographed ballet. Everyone has an important role.

Our TOP chefs have one goal: To prepare and serve a delicious, warm, healthy supper with all the trimmings, including an organic salad picked in the fields and served to each guest at their table, a hot entrée, a fresh vegetable, garlic bread, freshly baked desserts, and a choice of beverage.

Our dining room is set with round tables, linen table cloths, fresh flowers, white plates, and flatware. The room is appointed with beautiful table displays of freshly baked desserts, a welcoming alcove for our TOP volunteers, and a reception area for greeters and guests with photos from our previous supper to take home.

By design, our TOP volunteers stand out. Our uniform is simple: A freshly pressed black apron over a white shirt or blouse, and TOP's signature name badge with our logo and names printed on them. The volunteers' special look helps team members, our guests, and other visitors quickly identify them, even from a distance across our dining room.

TOP is a portable, renewable community resource. We begin and finish in the same sequence every week (see Figure 1). At 5:50 PM the dining room fills with live music. Doors open. We greet every person. TOP supper is served. Parting farewells begin near 7:00 PM. TOP volunteers have supper and sharing. And before 8:00 PM, there is hardly a trace left in the building.

#### The Art of Working In-Community

Contribute to the harmony...

Attend to small, subtle details with care.

Be mindful of every person you meet.

Look out for one another.

Together, put everything away in its place.

Lights out...

good-bye ■ adios ■ ciao ■ boa noite

FIGURE 1. THE ART OF WORKING IN-COMMUNITY

# Multiplying Organizational Vitality: Insights and Lessons Learned

## All in One Day: Decision to Action

In the fall of 2015, there was a defining moment for TOP. Changes were made beyond our control, and it was necessary for us to find a new location in just a few days. We did. It became one of the best leadership decisions any of us could remember making. The approach we chose was to finalize our decision, mobilize our team, engage our partners, friends and guests (*each in a personal way*), and publicly announce the change—*all in one day*.

We invited everyone to a TABLE of PLENTY Town Meeting & Picnic Supper at what soon would be our new dining room. On Thursday night, we showed up to meet our guests arriving for dinner at the usual time and place. We had two small buses waiting and a group of our most well-known TOP servers, ready to accompany our guests on the short ride. We had room to take dogs, walkers, wheelchairs, and whatever else needed transportation.

When we arrived, we had a greeting team waiting at the door to welcome each person. They walked into a beautiful intimate place, dressed up just as TOP did each week. There was a new look and feel. The highlights included a nearly new facility, round tables instead of oblong—and the sounds of a baby grand piano being played during supper. What was most empowering and affirming is that the bold all-in-one-day idea made it possible for us to tell our whole TOP community at the same time. The joy present that evening marked the beginning of a new chapter in TOP's history. The local newspaper followed within a few days to tell the story they witnessed.

## Insights and Lessons Learned

- *A quick, thoughtful business decision has its advantages.* It helps avoid complexities, rumors, misinformation, and needless stress on anyone. No one has time to speculate or worry.

- *Open, honest communication strengthens a community.* Inviting everybody affected into the process from the beginning is invaluable. When people are included, trusted, valued, and informed, the support for change multiplies.

## Focusing on What Works

After settling into our new facility and the responsibilities of being a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public charity, we had many opportunities to consider and a lot of work to do. Like many organizations, we were tempted to consider diversifying and expanding our mission before we were ready. We soon learned that responding to every idea offered was costly in time and effort.

Fortunately, from TOP's beginning, Fr. Charlie has served as an objective voice of reason when we've needed it most. Spring 2016 was one of those times. With just a few words at a TOP board meeting, he encouraged us and offered a few sound suggestions that set our direction: "You should all be proud of what you've accomplished," he told us. "As you finalize plans for the rest of the year, I urge you all to stay with what you know works. This year, with all the change TOP has been through, keep it simple and beautiful in TOP's tradition. Refine where it makes sense. Then focus on being with our community. Listen to them and get to know them well. Be patient with each other and remember the words of St. Paul, '*...Support one another.*'"

## Insights and Lessons Learned

- *Staying the same can be the best leadership strategy.* This is a valuable lesson. Change refreshes. Standing still has benefits too. It allows time to reassess where you are, what you need, and what's next.
- *Supporting one another in transition can create an enduring bond.* Change gives everyone an opportunity to practice *leading by example*. The decision to stay mission-focused influences results achieved, builds self-confidence, and promotes organizational stability.

## Growing and Changing

A while back, we started noticing substantial changes in our TOP community. You could almost feel it. We began recognizing a new, passionate, more spirited group of individuals emerging. What no longer fit was the idea of TOP being a “small group of people serving supper.” As our community began maturing, TOP volunteers identified their own interests and focused on their strengths. As a result, they participated with a new level of commitment and skill where it was needed most. Even our supper guests began showing interest in being involved. Some joined our volunteer team. There were other visible signs that we were evolving as an organization:

1. Community partnerships emerged that were *mutualistic*. By partnering with another organization, we helped each other fulfill our respective missions.
2. New sources of talent have strengthened our community (e.g., college interns; new musicians wanting to contribute; families wanting to participate together; groups of friends wanting to create and serve a meal; local businesses asking how they could donate a special evening meal for our guests).
3. Our TOP volunteers share supper together after the TOP closes. It adds several layers of value: Our students and commuters are hungry! We unwind together and learn from the evening’s experiences. Sr. Jeanette’s weekly challenge to our volunteers and our guests to learn each other’s names has paid off. With our richly diverse community of guests, student volunteers often recount the heartwarming stories they have been told; always mentioning how much they are enjoying learning to appreciate differences. We’ve also learned that having your name called out in town by one of our guests waving to say hello has become a special honor for us all. Building relationships has added vitality to how we work together *in-community*.
4. Our fifth and sixth annual wine tasting fall fundraisers attracted well over 425 guests with

new interest in our mission. An innovative idea came from Clyde Beffa, one of TOP’s founding fathers, well-known wine merchant, and long-time resident of Half Moon Bay. He picked a new venue for our annual events and hosted a special reception the last two years. Working closely with TOP’s board, he sent out invitations to people new to TOP. It was notable to experience how much fun and joy people had being together for a good cause. This innovation immediately multiplied the vitality of our annual wine tastings: It changed them into *Half Moon Bay community gatherings*. How do we know? Our guests told us so!

## Insights and Lessons Learned

- *Multiplying organizational vitality invites new thinking and ideas.* This appears to be a natural progression. When you love what you do collectively, a new spirit, energy, and passion is reflected in the work.
- *Working in-community means more than working effectively.* It elevates the experience of work when you are surrounded inside the community by friends who work and care about one another and your mission.
- *Don’t be afraid to look outside your boundaries.* All organizations have special qualities. We’ve found it validating and inspiring to discover what employees and volunteers think and care about in organizations chosen across the world in every sector as *best places to work*. We have a lot to learn from one another.

## Conclusion: Signs of Vitality

Where do you look to find signs of new vitality in your organization? We discovered the best places to look are within the stories of community life where the action is. We offer three examples to inspire your own discoveries:

1. Work beyond yourselves as individuals. Not too long ago, we had a rare night when seven very hungry guests were late because a local bus broke



down. Our kitchen crew is always on the lookout for us way across the room, where guests arrive. That night, one of the leads in the kitchen came to the back. She whispered, “Set your table, we have seven plates coming shortly.” Within seconds, three of our greeters were quietly preparing an extra table in the back. Another valued volunteer arrived with the chairs we needed. As the plates were being served, one of our regular guests welcomed and introduced himself to a veteran in a wheelchair, new to TOP: “I come here often, because the food is great and they love us here!” *How to Begin:* Strive to support one another even when you are busy with your own assignment. Practice staying *tuned-in* so you can anticipate others’ needs.

2. Look for opportunities to get to know people who are different from you. When we first opened, struggling families, elders, and homeless all seated themselves at separate tables. The past year, we have watched a transformation take place. Our guests have found it is enjoyable to get to know different people on their own. They started integrating themselves into our TOP community. It’s fun to watch as they make new friends. No one chooses to go to the back corner anymore. They walk with new confidence. We observe some using their human qualities to help new people join in. Loving one another changes people. *How to Begin:* Challenge yourself to look for chances to get to know people in your organization who may not be connected directly to your work.
3. Identify people ready to take on new responsibilities. Last year, a young man showed up after summer school. He said, “I got out early today and wanted to know if I could help for a couple hours.” We put him to work. He showed up every day. By the end of a few weeks, he could practically run our operation. He made it his

business to get to know our team and many of our guests. This is not so uncommon. These spirited talents also come to us as college interns, who return after they graduate, and as TOP guests who want to contribute. The valuable quality they have in common is the vitality they bring to every assignment.

*How to Begin:* Watch for people ready to contribute at a higher level. Two qualities to look for: They are naturally curious and often are the first to show up to help, if they see a need.



*Father Charlie Fermeglia is founder of the TABLE of PLENTY HMB, a weekly supper for the hungry in Half Moon Bay, California; where he formerly served as parochial vicar at Our Lady of the Pillar. Under his leadership, the foundation for TOP’s success was established: seed money was raised for TOP’s first year, and people engaged across cultures and generations to bring the new idea to life. He served as a valued leadership advisor in TOP’s formative years. In 2015, he was named to TOP’s board of directors and remains actively involved. [www.tableofplentyhmb.org](http://www.tableofplentyhmb.org)*



*Sister Jeanette Braun serves as the director of the TABLE of PLENTY HMB. In 2015, she was named president. Under her leadership, TOP has provided more than 40,500 meals to struggling families, elders, and homeless people. She was instrumental in developing TOP's volunteer team and repeatable processes necessary to create a self-sustaining nonprofit organization, meeting all of its goals. She is a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur (SND), celebrated for 60 years of service in 2017. [www.tableofplentyhmb.org](http://www.tableofplentyhmb.org)*



*Debbe Kennedy served on TOP's founding leadership team in 2012. She was named secretary and treasurer for the TABLE of PLENTY HMB in 2015. Debbe is founder of the Global Dialogue Center and Leadership Solutions Companies, specializing in custom people-focused leadership communications solutions since 1990. Formerly, she had a distinguished leadership career with IBM Corporation. She is the author of Putting Our Differences to Work (Berrett-Koehler 2008), an 2010 Axiom Business Book Award Winner. [www.puttingourdifferencetowork.com](http://www.puttingourdifferencetowork.com) [www.tableofplentyhmb.org](http://www.tableofplentyhmb.org)*