

The 7 habits of highly connected people

Do you know someone on your street, neighbourhood, or village who is much beloved by their neighbours? I do! In fact I know lots.

As a child it was my Grandmother on my mother's side who first modeled the behaviour that causes neighbours to fall in love with you and each other. From a very young age her effortless elegance in connecting with people fascinated me. Long before I knew the words Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), she was teaching me the value of community building, of story telling, of using what you have as a community to secure what's needed and of standing shoulder to shoulder with regular folks. Her most important lesson to me was to make a habit of connecting.

It makes sense that my grandmother would teach me ABCD in this way; after all ABCD is but a set of observations around what non-credentialed people do when they effectively join together to improve things in the place they call home.

“True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd

What oft was thought, but

ne'er so well epress'd”

(Alexander Pope)

What I now do on a day-to-day basis with Nurture Development and ABCD Europe is no more than an extension of my childlike gazing and learning as I watched my grandmother in action. She had no credentials, no fancy words to hide behind, and she was far from perfect.

I still remember ducking the sleepers she used to throw at me when I didn't do what I was told. But in her presence I knew I was loved, and I never doubted it for one second. Being held in that way enables you to forgive a multitude of fallibilities; it was an embrace sufficient to hold not just her family, but also an entire village. She was a woman defined more in deed, than in word. She made a practice, a habit you might say, out of connecting.

She raised ten children, largely alone, and worked several part time jobs to make ends meet, but still had time for community. She knew poverty, a poverty of the kind reminiscent of Angela's Ashes (Frank McCourt), which was written about Limerick. This was the city she grew up in and raised her family, but she was a proud Limerick woman, and as such she also understood the pathos and stinging irony unpinning the opening Chapter of Frank's McCourt's book:

“It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priest; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Above all—we were wet.”

(Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*)



She knew the other side of that story too: she knew how important Lizzy Noonan, Peggy Pender and scores of other neighbours were to her, her children (my mother among them) and the community in general. From baptisms to funerals in a community almost devoid of men (most had gone to England, or further afield to find work) these women shared one alarm clock that got the entire community of Ballinacurra Weston up in the mornings, the sugar ‘for the tea’ that kept them going through the day, and the care of old and young across the life course.

In the middle of this community stood a statue of the Virgin Mary. It strikes me now that it was more emblematic of the feminine wisdom and leadership of my grandmother and the women she called neighbours and friends, than a religious symbol. It was an apt tribute, rightly placed at the centre of things. As is so often the case it was women who were at the center of building and maintaining the relational capital and social fabric of that community, while many of the men hovered around the edges transacting in a nomadic and pedestrian way.

To truly understand the nature of this dynamic you need only read the first chapter of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), or any of Sean O’Casey’s plays.

My grandmother, like many women and an increasing number of men, exhibited what I like to call the 7 habits of highly connected people. Over the last 20 odd years I have been paying close attention to folk like my Grandmother; the training I received from her, to shut up and listen, has stood me in good stead.

Though no doubt I could do even more listening, here's what I've learned so far:

First Habit of Highly Connected People: Naming

They name what they do and what others do and are therefore predictable and help others become predictable too. They have an innate belief that others are listening and willing to connect. They have been communicating on the basis of this belief since they were children. In the play ground, when dominant kids led the crowd in a game of football, they didn't wrestle with them for power, they just said (with quiet confidence) "I fancy a game of basketball." Then they would scan to see who else was up for that. They were born with rubbernecks that could sweep a crowd of hundreds for micro expressions/signs of interest, then, with a face full of teeth, they'd let their smile do the rest.

There is no manipulation, just gentle magnetism that comes from an innate ability to name what you care about and want to act on, without feeling the need to convert everyone to agree with and/or follow you. They don't just name what they do, or want to do, but they name what others are doing. This disarmingly simple act is transformational, done without judgment and often in an effort to connect with someone else. "Anna, did you know Cormac writes poetry, don't you organize the poetry festival?" Then they smile, and a twinkle appears in the corner of their eye. Simple, but like magic, topped off with: "I think you'd make good friends". They feel able to say such things, sometimes to complete strangers, primarily because they take seriously the sentiment:

"There are no strangers here, just friends you haven't met yet"

Attributed to a wide range of people from Will Rogers to William Butler Yeats, (you choose).

Second Habit of Highly Connected People: Waiting

They wait. Have you ever been last to be picked in gym class? You know the scene: two of the more confident athletic kids are given the chance to choose from the class the people they want on their team. You sit and wait, and wait and watch, and wait some more as every other child in your class gets picked, but you. Then finally, and only because you are the last one left, you're called. To the din of sarcastic comments, and giggles you join in, but with that sick feeling in the pit of your stomach that comes with not being chosen or invited, but accommodated or tolerated. Yours is not a valued role, it's a concession, extended to you, by your peers, who have learned it is wrong to exclude.

We live in an extraordinarily competitive world, where, as Alfie Kohn puts it in *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (1986), the dominant message is 'for me to win, you must lose'.

Sandwiched between alpha types who are intent on getting in first, and those traumatised by being last one too many times, it's hard to carve out enough time to discern what time it is, let alone what matters most. Here enters yet another habit of highly connected people: waiting.

Imagine the joy of encountering someone who knows the value of creating protected space where you can figure stuff out, wrestle with dilemmas, and come face to face with what you really care about and feel energised to act on. No sales pitch, no nudging, recruiting, coaching, or inspiring, just... waiting. In every neighbourhood people with such a habit exist, and guess what? They are not likely to be found at meetings.

These days we take our secrets to the therapist, or the grave, but in every neighbourhood there are unqualified folk who came into the world with a capacity just to wait. I think it's a habit worth seeking out; it may well be the best kept secret of all. But what you look for, you find, because what we need most is in fact abundantly available, free, and closer to home than we think.

Third Habit of Highly Connected People: Hearing into expression and action

They hear people into expression and action. How many times have you experienced the frustration of trying to communicate and being interrupted, or blankly ignored? People with a tendency towards such disconnecting habits are 'waiting' alright, but in sufferance.

As the well-worn joke has it: people don't stop to listen, they just stop to reload. That said, there are a lot of people who are the exception to that rule, and when we have the privilege of being in their presence we find ourselves better able to express ourselves and connect with others, leading to productive action. It is as if their behaviour activates us.

Hearing people into expression and action is a third habit of highly connected people. They are much beloved for this wonderful gift for creating just the right ambiance to plant the seeds of mischief making and reckless acts of community building.

Their listening is laced with curiosity, and their primary interest is not your opinions on what everyone else ought to do to put the world to rights, but in what motivates you.

They have an innate understanding of the three things that motivate people to take action:

- What they care about and therefore want to move towards.
- What they are concerned about and therefore want to move away from.
- The opportunity to contribute a gift, skill or talent.

Yet when they listen for these things they do so not in an effort to get us to act as they see fit, but simply to enable us step into our own power. Do you know anyone like that?

“When change is done to people they experience it as violence. When change is done by people they experience as liberation.” (Elizabeth Moss Kanter)

Fourth Habit of Highly Connected People: They follow our initiatives

They follow our initiatives, not expecting us to follow theirs: the dominant narrative tries to sub divide us into two camps: those who lead and those who follow. But there are so many other ways of being in the world, including being a connector; someone who connects the gifts, wants and offers of others.

Connectors instinctively understand that people form relationships with other people based on how they make them feel. Healthy relationships form between people who have the capacity to help others identify, connect and mobilise the agency within and around them, while also pitching in what they have to offer. In other words, they are reciprocal.

The best way to activate someone’s agency, especially if that person as yet is unaware of their own capacity, is to follow their initiative. Help them catch themselves doing the very thing they think they can’t or don’t do. In the same way that a toddler learns the word ‘light’ best when an adult they trust notices and follows the child’s initiative to look at the light. “Ah, you’re looking at the light”, said over and over again just as the child looks towards a light, is the basis of language acquisition. Following young people’s nascent civic participation is similarly the basis of citizenship and democracy.

Just as the act of following the child’s initiative to look at the light activates them to acquire the language to describe their own initiative, as children we learn citizenship by flexing civic muscles.

When adults and peers that we trust notice and lift up our random acts of kindness, our moments of mutuality, or other forms of civic action, we deepen our capacity to contribute to the deepening of community and democracy.

We can say therefore that neighbourhoods are the nurseries of democracy.

This sort of following is a form of leading by stepping back, while still caring, it creates a space into which we can step with a sense of belonging to a wider community beyond our family and friends, with the agency to make a valuable contribution to it.

Fifth Habit of Highly Connected People: They're selective about what they follow

They select what they follow: not every initiative in community life translates to the deepening of community, in fact many don't amount to a hill of beans. Some are just outright *exclusory* and fear based. If I had a penny for every opinion I spouted about what should be done and what ought to happen, I'd give Donald Trump and Richard Branson a run for their money.

Like me, most people procrastinate about what should happen in community life. Once again this is another entry point for the habits of highly connected people; this time the habit is their capacity to select what they follow.

How easy it would be for them to follow the track of bemoaning all that isn't being done, or joining in with me as I give out about this, that or the other. But they don't. When a neighbour says they are worried that their daughter who's 13 years old is going down the "wrong road, falling in with the wrong crowd", a highly connected neighbour listens to that, and then does something truly transformational. At just the right moment, having waited and heard the person, they select not to follow the moan, but intend to follow what the person has said that they care about. And with that they ask the question, that only a highly connected person can ask: "So Mary, you know how you said you're worried that Jane is going to go down the wrong track, and because it's coming close to the summer holidays you're even more concerned? So, what are you planning on doing about that?". Then they wait, and wait some more, as Mary reaches inside of herself, to inventory what gifts she has within her grasp to act on what she cares about.

They have effectively taken somebody from a deficit view of the situation to a strengths based perspective.

Sixth Habit of Highly Connected People: Positive Connecting

They engage in positive connecting. As well as helping people tap into their own potential they understand the power of connecting people together by gifts and passion.

Highly connected people are connected because they connect so many people to each other, who in turn are connected to them. But that's not their primary motivation. They are not networking out self-interest, they are connecting because that is what they love to do.

Using the example above, as well as helping Mary shift her perspective from a deficit to a strengths based one, they go further and transform the conversation into an asset-based learning conversation. They help Mary to use her connections as well as her personal skills, "I wonder who else might help? Sally, four doors up has talked about this, she's always saying that there's nothing

for girls to do, all the activities are geared for boys. And Mike is raising two daughters on his own, I bet he'd have something to say, do you know any one else?". Mary: "Come to think of it..."

Instinctively they know that there are three kinds of assets:

- Primary assets that are local and within community control that just need to be identified, connected and mobilised.
- Secondary assets that are local but not within community control, and therefore require more complex negotiation.
- Potential assets that existing outside of the community and outside community control.

Highly connected people have a habit of guiding people through a thinking process that helps them start within what Stephen Covey

refers to as their sphere of influence :they ask questions which explore how primary assets can be used first, then they are mobilised to start thinking about tapping into secondary assets and so on.

This unconscious wisdom builds personal and collective agency which in turn grows the power needed to release potential assets for local development. This is why such an emphasis is placed on the Community driven/citizen-led perspective in Asset-Based Community Development.

Seventh Habit of Highly Connected People: They grow their power by giving it away (connectors not networkers)

They grow their power by giving it away. Highly connected people don't work through hierarchies; they work through connections.

It is important to make a distinction here between a networker and connector.

In my mind a networker is much more likely to use language such as: 'my network', "I use my network to..", "it's not what you have, it's who you know that counts". A networker has clear self-interest in engaging and investing in their network(s), they will be clear on 'who's good for a favour', and will happily reciprocate because they understand the trade offs. They will make what they often refer to as referrals in business, or introductions in their personal lives, and expect the same in return. In that sense there is a certain amount of opportunism in constructing and maintaining a network. It's important to say there is nothing wrong with that, but connectors and connecting seem subtly different in motivation.

Yes, as with all of us there is self-interest in what connectors do but, to my eye, that's not the primary drive. Connectors are more likely to use 'our' and 'we' language: "we just get together on our street, at the drop of a hat", "our book group hardly ever actually reads a book". They also tend

to describe what others do for others, rather than what others do for them. Connectors don't tend to think of themselves as networked, which is somewhat ironic given how networked they actually are. But they do think of themselves as connected deeply with, and in, the lives of their neighbours and friends. They are driven by an innate desire to weave their community towards denser, deeper connections.

In simple terms I would say networkers invest in multiple interpersonal relationships; some are deep, but the wider the network the more surface level many of the relationships are. Connectors by comparison may not know as many people, since they are driven, not only by depth in their relationship, but also by the desire to connect the people they know to each other.

The drive to grow interpersonal relationships vs. a culture of community marks a critical distinction between networking and connecting, but it also provides us with an insight into how both think differently about personal power. Connectors tend to feel powerful (a sense of agency in the world) when people who were disconnected become connected and reciprocal, that sense of agency grows as those connections deepen and the associations spread.

They experience a certain glee in hearing how two people they know, who didn't know each other before, got connected under their own steam or through another connection that networkers don't seem to experience. Many networkers I know experience a certain controlling twinge at such moments, "why wasn't I informed of this", "but you're *my* friends?!" Of course, these thoughts rarely get spoken out loud.

My sense is that the glee a connector experiences is grounded in joy at the idea that a culture of community is taking hold, but also in the absence of the need to objectify or control their relationships. The connector grows their power by giving it away. My mother is her mother's daughter to her toenails. She too is a connector. We're told that there are only six degrees of separation between any two people on the planet, regardless of how far removed they are from each other. Well growing up in Limerick among my family I came to believe that there were at most only three, and with my mother and grandmother less again. Their habitual capacity to connect has in my estimation made a marked difference in the lives of thousands of people who they have come in contact with, but more importantly, with thousands more that they will never meet.

And that's the point. It was these habits that inoculated many from the misery of poverty, and helped people to use what they didn't have, in a way that inspired them to use what they did have, to get what was best for the community. So when it comes to addressing the four crises of our time, environmental/ecological, democratic, economic and relational, I'd be inclined to make a habit of finding highly connected people, before seeking out networkers or traditional leaders. Now more so than ever we need to value the habits of connectorship.

Cormac Russell.