

## Peacemaking Powers and the Culture They Create

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In a neighborhood, people are empowered by the work they do together. Often, they use this power to confront institutions and advocate for the neighborhood's self-interest. In this kind of action, power is understood as our ability to get someone else to do something for us. This is the consumer power of confrontation.

The other kind of neighborhood power results when we come together to create something for ourselves – from ourselves. This is the power of citizens engaged in using their communities' assets.

Many of us think of power in terms of the confrontation approach. In this way of thinking, power is about advocacy, demands, negotiation and control. From this perspective, the second strategy is often viewed as “nice and cooperative but not powerful.”

There are at least six powerful characteristics of neighbors that empower their neighborhood: cooperation, hospitality, generosity, kindness, accepting fallibilities and forgiveness.

Each of these qualities is a power and creates powerful results:

**Cooperation** is the power to join with your neighbors to create a future. Every totalitarian system knows that the greatest threat is people working together in groups, small or large. In totalitarian societies, the power to associate cooperatively is called a *conspiracy*.

**Hospitality** is the power to welcome. A fearful neighborhood is frightened of strangers and greatly weakened by its exclusion of the talents of strangers inside and outside the community.

**Generosity** is the power to give. Powerlessness is greatest when we are denied the right to contribute and express ourselves. That is why prison is so terrible, even though food, clothing and shelter are provided. There is no stronger punishment than denying a person's power to give.

**Kindness** is the power to care. A careless society is a weak society. It finally descends to callous practices and harmful disregard for its members.

**Accepting fallibility** creates the power to enjoy and work with each other in spite of our failures, deficiencies and differences. It creates the glue that holds us together in spite of our human nature.

Finally, **forgiveness** is the power to forget. Many communities have been weakened for centuries because of events that happened in the distant past. Until a community or its members can overcome a pervasive sense of grievance, that community will atrophy in a spirit of retribution.

Each of these qualities is abundant among neighbors and when they are combined they create peace in a place.

Today we are troubled by violence nationally, as well as in neighborhoods. Locally we frequently respond by funding paid anti-violence workers. We ask them to deliver peace to the neighborhood. And skilled and committed as they are, they have had minimal impact over the years. This is because it is neighbors together who have the power to create peace. It can't be delivered from the outside.

This peaceful creation emerges when neighbors of all ages become associated and decide how they can manifest these six great powers. And as a result of this manifestation they will unintentionally create a culture that calls forth these peacemaking powers in each neighborhood. And as time passes, the neighborhood will have a history – a story of its own.

This is the story of a neighborhood in a city in Sweden. The neighborhood, like many in Sweden, is a subsidized housing development of about 5,000 people, perhaps 1,700 households. It was once described as a “cold, aging, unsafe place.” A new manager was hired to see if there was some way to improve the development. He first noticed that there were some people who didn't seem to have anything to do. He thought that there needed to be an incentive for these people to create a better neighborhood. And, because he had come from the field of marketing, he felt that creating a brand name should be part of the incentive.

He then bought a hundred yellow jackets with the emblem of a flame and the words, “FIRE SOUL” printed on the jacket. He also arranged to have a vacant room painted yellow with the Fire Soul logo on the wall.

Then, he told a couple of people who seemed to have nothing to do that he could give them a jacket if they would do something to make the neighborhood better, but they had to conceive

and do it themselves. Several people accepted his offer and singly or jointly undertook a creative improvement initiative. When they were done, he gave them each a jacket and told them that they could gather any time in the Fire Soul room. He asked that they wear the jackets frequently and to tell their friends and neighbors how they got them. “Tell them,” he advised, “that they could become Fire Souls too.”

The Fire Soul idea caught on and more and more people created initiatives, wore jackets, gathered in the Fire Soul room and invited their neighbors to become Fire Souls too. Eventually, the neighborhood valence shifted and the question for some residents became, “Why aren’t you a Fire Soul?”

One Fire Soul told the others that some people weren’t becoming involved because they were isolated and lonely. So, they posted flyers throughout the development advertising a free luncheon for lonely people. About 80 people showed up and each was invited to become a Fire Soul. Many undertook an initiative and joined the social gatherings in the Fire Soul room.

One Fire Soul noticed that only adults were wearing the jackets. She proposed that the children should have the opportunity to contribute their talents and gifts. So, the Fire Souls bought 100 yellow T-shirts and each had a logo that said, “Sparks.” The children were excited to contribute and create – just like adults. Even two and three-year-olds became Sparks.

The Fire Soul room became the heart of the community filled with stories and a sense of celebration.

Finally, the manager was able to observe that the neighborhood had become safe and that it had its own story. And that is the story that is written above. It is a story about the power of cooperation, hospitality, generosity, kindness, accepting fallibilities, forgiveness and the culture shift they created.

Social scientists might say this is a story of the rich “social capital” created by coalescing peaceable capacities. And, it is this social capital that creates proliferating effects beyond even peace and security. This is because the Fire Souls were also increasing the health, knowledge, economic viability, environmental integrity and child-raising capacities in the neighborhood without intention. Instead, they were guided and mobilized by a culture of contribution.