

## Being Embraced by a Community

BY SHUNTAE RICHARDSON

**“Alone, we can do so little; together we can do so much.” - Helen Keller**

In 2018, I had the opportunity, as an employee of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, to participate in the center’s flagship Leadership Academy, *Taking Charge of Change™* (TCC). It was truly an empowering experience. Among the many memorable things I took away from TCC was being embraced by a community. TCC is designed for center-based administrators of early childhood education and programs. Although I was McCormick Center staff and not an administrator, I never felt excluded. Rather, the instructors and participants demonstrated to me what a true community looks like.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a community can be defined as “a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attributes, interests, and goals.” Being part of a community helps lessen feelings of isolation, division, and separation.

One night during my experience at TCC, participants gathered around a bonfire, sharing the many trials and triumphs of being an administrator. Again, although I was not an administrator, participants brought me into the conversation, shared details of their work, and authentically asked for and listened to my opinion. This made me feel seen, heard, and valued and is just one example of how TCC made me feel included.

The benefits of building a community include ensuring you have a circle of influence, people who can hold you accountable, others you can share ideas and network with, and people you can turn to when you need support. All the leadership academies at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership strive to create communities and an atmosphere where inclusion is the norm.

### BUILDING COMMUNITY ONE STONE AT A TIME

I like to think about the process of building a community like the process of building a rock cairn (stacked stones). Just like a rock cairn, you build a community one stone at a time. Below are a few of the stones I consider critical when building up a community.



### Critical Stones for Building Community

- Accountability—set clear boundaries and expectations, and communicate when these are not being met
- Empathy—try to view things through the perspectives of others
- Respect—make sure everyone is treated with kindness and consideration
- Trust—demonstrate values and beliefs through actions
- Connection—find commonalities and build bridges
- Openness—welcome others with diverse backgrounds and experiences

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Which stone(s) could you add to your rock cairn to make it stronger?

When was the last time you felt embraced by a community? How did it make you feel?

In what ways does your organization strive to build community? How does it support your mission?

*If you are interested in being part of professional learning community, consider joining one of the McCormick Center's [leadership academies](#). The academies are offered in Illinois and can also be brought to your state!*

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