

Hi all!

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> I've heard about conflict in Cohousing especially in newer groups where people tend to take sides and the whole place gets divided up. I'm wondering what makes those type of things happen and how do communities heal from it. you can email me off list if you prefer.

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> Thanks,

> Carol

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It seems to me that as groups rub along together after awhile trust builds as you live together and make many decisions together. One of the advantages of a long multi year planning process is you have a chance to really get to know each other and the folks who absolutely can't compromise and MUST have their own way get weeded out over one issue or another. The rest learn to trust the consensus process and put the necessary time and attention in to arrive at a decision acceptable to all. That's not to say it's easy. There are always unexpected surprises that come up and must be dealt with. Folks who are used to efficiently run business meetings can have a hard time adapting to a model where everyone needs to have a say. We run into trouble most often when we try to skip through the process too quickly and some people feel unheard or disrespected. That will always come back to bite you later, guaranteed.

Also certain issues are predictably contentious, like Pet policies, and standards around child behavior, and how to get exactly equal amounts of community work out of everybody; what's acceptable and what's not. The more you talk these out and come to common values before move in the less time you will spend in meetings arguing about it later. And then just when you think it's all settled after 19 Years a bunch of new folks move in who weren't around for the previous agreements and want to revisit all those topics again. Prepare to get a Ph.D in communication if you live in Cohousing.

Finally, certain narcissistic personalities will always create drama and division in any group, cohousing is no exception. Beware of people with a long history of dramatic break ups. Don't bend over backwards to keep people in the forming group who threaten to leave if they don't get their way on some issue. It's part of the weeding out process, let them go. Groups have dissolved after years due to the divisive nature of one or more members. You want folks capable of being considerate of everyone's welfare and opinion. Even so there will always be differences of opinion but they can be worked through with care and respect. If a new narcissistic person moves in later you would be surprised how quickly an established community will come together and resist their attempts at division because the trust has been built over time.

Good luck and love,
Bonnie Fergusson
Swans Market Cohousing, Oakland, CA

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I think that if a majority of the community chooses to not "take sides" but rather to evaluate each issue individually that will go a long way toward avoiding creating separate communities. Those individuals need also to decide that they won't "be against" the people who just can't help but be on a "side".

The thing that happens over time is that people who seem to always be on the wrong "side" turn out to have depth of personality that we all didn't see in the early years. It's one of the things I love about cohousing--unlike other groups where it is easy to leave--over time you see strengths of the people you didn't like as much, and the weaknesses of the people who seemed more like yourself.

So early on you want to create situations to see each other outside of the decision making and gossip. Sit with different people at common meals. Volunteer to work with different people on work days. Join a team or circle that is different people then you usually hang out with. NOTE this doesn't need (and shouldn't) be a *rule*, it is just something that lots of people can do in order to break down potential "sides".

Liz Magill
Mosaic Commons Cohousing, Berlin, MA

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Carol,

It's a really good question. I think conflict comes from lots of thing, but at its root, it happens because we're trying to do a new thing and we aren't good at it yet. Many of the key components of cohousing are specifically designed to create connection between neighbors - consensus, shared property, self management, community design. I believe in those things, in that I think they really can build community when they are done well. What causes the division is it is really rare for people who grew up in North America to know how to do them. There are foundational skills around communication and curiosity, and culture shifts that are needed. Very few communities invest as much as I would recommend in building that foundation and the result is the kind of conflict you are describing. Or to say it another way, the result is that consensus and shared property and such don't work very well, and since folks lack that skills to make it work better, they apply the skills that have worked very well for them in school and work and our generally competitive culture which makes things worse.

I believe this is a case where the best solution is prevention. I recommend that groups hire a process consultant very early on in formation, before it's obvious that you need one. If things go well, you'll never know how much pain you avoided by learning how to do things well from the start. Think of it as education and insurance. It won't prevent conflict, conflict happens. What a good process consultant does is prepare you and support you in working through conflict productively so that at the end of

it you are a stronger and more connected community than you were at the beginning, and you don't end up with division.

Note: This is self serving advice as I work as a process consultant. Being with communities in that way is my very favorite thing to do, so maybe I'm biased.

In Community,
Karen Gimnig
Professional Facilitator

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Karen may be biased, but I think her advice is golden.

I would encourage any forming cohousing group to spend more time learning and practicing interpersonal communication and decision making skills than they spend on design decisions.

It's not usually that way in my experience. It seems that most forming groups spend an inordinate amount of time on site design, common house design, and private home design. Leave that to the professionals (assuming you hire professionals with lots of cohousing experience) and instead work on the skills that will strengthen your community fabric.

Mac Thomson
Heartwood Cohousing
Southwest Colorado

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Karen is correct, probably one of the reasons we've managed as well as we have for 20 years is that the original group got training in consensus decision making before move in and also hired such experts to help update our skills several other times over the years, when we seemed to be getting stuck or had new people move in.

I would add to this that when a group begins, things are discussed and decided as a group. But as time goes by information gets transmitted much more often from one person to the next. It becomes a game of telephone. New people will have a different belief depending on which person answered their questions.

I had this experience this morning so I'm hot on it. Suddenly because the person who lives next door or who ran the orientation session or welcomed someone to a team, becomes THE AUTHORITY on whatever the new person asks a question about. It isn't always the member presents themselves or their information as the TRUTH, but new members are looking for the TRUTH. It's much more comforting to believe you have it.

As time has gone by I find more resistance to having these meetings with discussions of issues that are unrelated to a specific policy decision. Those who have been here 20 years are already tired of them and there is little point in new people going off and to do them alone.

Sharon Villines
<http://sustainablecohousing.org>