

## **A Strength-Based Approach to Community Development** Using A Local Semi-Professional Football Club in Cheltenham as a Pilot Scheme.

A strength-based system means empowering and enabling individuals to take control of situations that were previously controlling them. It uses the strengths and resources people have within themselves to help turn their lives around for the positive. Empowering is more than just driving and motivating individuals, it's about building a community of individuals who will be role models for future generations.

The approach used with a local football club worked on a similar model. Using a **strength-based approach**, whereby it focussed on the strengths and resources the community already had, to turn around the football club and the community it served for the positive. It was very **organic** in the way it progressed. In the past people had come in and told the club what they needed to do to get themselves out of the mess they were in. Very much a 'top down approach,' whereas the strength-based approach is all about **empowering** people to do things for themselves, using the resources and ideas that they've already got and have come up with **themselves**. It is also about offering guidance and facilitating positive change.

The local football club had been running for nearly fifty years. It had its own floodlit football pitch on the edge of a deprived area in Cheltenham with almost five hundred members. The organization also had a cricket club, darts and skittles teams. In 2011 the club was on the verge of bankruptcy with only twelve weeks to meet requirements and deadlines.

The reputation of the club was also in decline. Members were leaving. They were not only losing sponsors and unable to gain new ones but were about to lose the facilities they were using in partnership with the University, due to unpaid arrears of fees. The club's teams in the lower leagues had a reputation for theft, drugs and fighting and the facilities of the club's higher teams were an embarrassment to the local Premier League they were in. Therefore, other Clubs didn't want to play there.

Mark Griffiths wanted to see if the process he used for individuals could work on Groups / Organisations and Communities.

### **Responsibility**

When Mark took over the club the first thing he had to do was to get everyone associated with the club to attend a meeting to see if they thought the football club was worth saving. It was agreed that people were passionate about the club and wanted to be a part of it but had lost confidence in the club due to the way it had been run. Mark had to take full responsibility and ownership for everything including the money that was going astray. Members knew that money was unaccounted for, but no one would admit it or take any responsibility for it. However, once the situation was made open to all, something had to be done about it. Mark got people talking about this along with all the other gripes and issues the club had. (For the first time they felt someone listened to them, agreed with them and was offering realistic options).

Mark and the team opened the doors to anyone connected with the club, giving them the opportunity to become a committee member, so they could be involved in future decisions concerning the club. In the past, committee members were a select few operating with only five people attending meetings and making all the decisions, whereas now there were over fifty people with ideas, solutions and resources.

Also, the teams were keeping their money from subs etc and running as individual teams not as part of a club, which meant the teams had money but the Club had none.

The practical solution to the finances was that a new bank account was opened and responsibility was allocated to a certain number of individuals (voted in by club members) who were then the signatories for it. The account was also made public to club members so that everything could be accountable and transparent. This, over a trial period of time, gave individual teams confidence to put their money into the new club account. Then issues were worked through, one at a time with individuals offering assistance and taking responsibility for certain tasks.

## **Repairing the reputation**

The reputation of the football club had slowly been going down the pan due to some of the adult teams in the lower leagues exhibiting behaviour that was not only inappropriate but also illegal. Mark wanted to merge the adult and youth sections of the club to improve cash flow but the youth had bad role models. To combat this problem he removed the three teams who were the worst offenders, in terms of their behaviour, to ensure people realised there was a certain standard required for anyone who wanted to be part of the club.

In addition to this the team displayed banners with the club logo on at the Floodlit ground as a statement that they were proud to be part of the football club. Mark wanted any individual who was connected to the club to feel proud that they belonged and were a part of it. Then a new team was installed, with a new manager and new players, who the following season won a trophy and were voted and awarded 'Best Sporting Team' in the league. This was the start of repairing the reputation of the club locally.

Another change that emerged organically was when Mark started personally cleaning up the place. The floodlit pitch was in a state of disrepair; it hadn't been maintained and looked very run down. So the first thing he did was to get out there himself and start mowing the paths to make it look like someone cared about the ground. When someone saw him doing this they offered to help, followed by others, until six weeks later the club had over forty people involved, including labourers, painters and electricians. People came forward to offer the skills and talents they had, right down to making the tea. Mark approached a previous sponsor, who was a painter and decorator, and asked for materials and possibly labour as payment for a new sponsorship. He offered spare paint as well as help on a Saturday morning in return for a sponsorship deal for him. This was the new approach and it wasn't just about the money. Mark and the team wanted to create as many win-win situations as possible (apart from on the pitch, of course!).

The 'new look' club began to look further afield for support and contacted numerous organisations including Prospect Training, who had unemployed people on their books needing work experience, and they offered them voluntary work. This gave them the chance to work alongside people and companies, who might need workers in the future. This also equipped them with work experience which could go on their CVs for future job prospects. Mark's team encouraged these people to register with Fair Shares, a voluntary organisation which creates a data base of individuals who can share their skills and talents with each other; this also opened the club up to new resources. So, they were linking up people with companies and organisations that could benefit from each other. One such organisation was the Princes Trust who needed a project to get some young people involved with. The club provided them with a painting project, creating a 'win-win' situation. Plenty more win-win situations were in the pipeline and over 3000 volunteer man hours had already been put in to the club.

## Community involvement / inclusion

So now, this local football club had a vast number of committee members on board but Mark wanted to get more young people involved and start a fruitful youth academy, as the set-up of the youth teams was inadequate and they only had council pitches to play on. They invited the youth teams to start practising on our floodlit pitch and using the club facilities and encouraged family and community members to make tea and refreshments and get involved in training, which for some, led to them becoming fully qualified coaches.

Individuals were beginning to feel differently about the club and realised that their skills were just as important to the running of the club as the managers and coaches etc. They began to feel it was **their** club, something they could take **ownership** of.

The club was becoming a success and Mark felt it was important that they gave something back to the community. They decided to run a youth tournament and as a player's mother had unfortunately passed away due to cancer, the suggestion was put forward to raise money for Cancer Research through the tournament. So the club invited someone from Cancer Research to come along and raise money for their charity. (The Mayor invited representatives to his parlour for tea and to receive a certificate, along with Cancer Research). This started the process of getting more involved with other charities that the members were passionate about, such as the Sue Ryder Home, local scout groups and other local organisations. The football club tried to share resources as much as possible so that any funds could be spent on areas where only money would do.

The youth league took off in a big way and they got the first teams to present their trophies and have their photos taken with them. The youth then had good role models and something to aspire to. This also boosted the first team players. Getting people involved wasn't just about getting more hands on the job. It wasn't just about football. **The club were really interested in them as people.** We wanted the whole family to get involved so we looked at what they were interested in, including what their hobbies and interests were and this had further benefits. For example, we got some of the wider family members to design a flyer for the tournament and then we got a sponsor to produce the flyer for us as part of a sponsorship deal. We were then able to give him free advertising on the club web site and free tickets to home games, which in turn built a good relationship between the club and the sponsor and meant the sponsor was inspired to get further involved in activities.

Whenever possible, people from all walks of life were involved. When Cheltenham Community Projects were doing some community work cleaning up the adjoining park, the gates were opened for them and they were given access to toilet facilities and refreshments.

There were also some homeless folk who had been sleeping rough locally, so Mark and the team invited them in to shelter in the stands, when there was a game on or when there was work going on at the ground. Cups of tea were made for them, for which they were really grateful.

There were also some elderly people who had previously not been included much and they were given the opportunity to take tickets at the gates, make teas and sell the programmes. Some single parents who often got bored in the week also came down and cleaned for the club. It was exciting to see how a new community of individuals was being built and all were pulling together to make things happen.

## **Repairing relationships**

Mark and the team needed to repair relationships with clubs and organisations on a wider scale, as the first team played as far afield as Reading. They also wanted to build new relationships for a positive future.

Relationships with previous sponsors and certain companies were poor as the club owed money to them. One company approached as potential sponsors informed the club that they were still owed £300 from several years previous so a new deal was struck with them. Mark and the team, presented to them their newly designed sponsorship packages, Gold, Silver and Bronze deals, where a percentage could be offered in materials / labour and they offered them a Gold sponsorship for £50 (normally £350) which included an advertising banner, their name in the programme, tickets to the game and promotion at tournaments. It meant that the debt was written off and the company would get the advertising they wanted. The £50 would cover the cost of materials needed to promote their company. It was another 'win-win' situation and helped to repair the business relationship with the company. The following year they went on to become an even bigger sponsor.

Some sponsors became committee members to be more involved and one even became Chairman when Mark stepped down.

The club also had a broken relationship with the university as it owed money for the use of their football pitches for the last three years. So the 'new look' club set up a realistic payment plan to make sure all the money owed would be paid back. While in talks with them it was discovered that they had qualified football coaches, with no experience, in need of teams to coach. They were given the placements they needed to be able to get the experience. Yet again the club had created a 'win-win' situation and repaired their relationship with the University.

## **Building new relationships**

The outlook for the club then really started changing. They got awarded funding through various different grants, one for three years from the Gloucester FA. This combined with the extra attendances at the ground meant that they were able to start the season in credit for the first time in the club's history.

The football club went on to join forces with Cheltenham Borough Council who had a sports department but were hiring other venues in order to create sporting opportunities for people across Cheltenham. The club offered them their pitch and facilities for free, to allow their funding to stretch further and therefore give access to more people. Together, they managed to gain small grants which were used for youth events.

They also tapped into CSR organisations and formed a partnership with the YMCA. The club offered their facilities to local scout teams for their tournaments and provided them with coaches, as referees, for their tournament. In return they made a donation to the club which benefited the organization and saved the club more than 50% of its allocated funds. Adult education wanted to start doing courses at the club instead of individuals going to the college as they thought it would be good to bring the courses to the community. The area is now part of the 'Big Local'.

## **On the Pitch**

The First team went from strength to strength and for the first time in its history, they actually got to their first senior cup final, playing against Oxford City. They finished in their highest league position in their history. The following year they entered the FA cup for the first time, where they won their first game, winning £1,500 prize money. This buzz spread around the community and more and more people came to watch their games.

Attendances went from 20 to over 100 for some games. Everyone wanted a piece of the action. More and more people offered to help for free, volunteering to run the website, and Facebook page, involved in press officer duties and as club secretary. The club was now successful and everyone wanted to be involved.

Two years previously the press had written a real scathing report on the club. Amongst many derogatory comments, they had said that the club was an embarrassment to the area. Mark and the team invited the same person back to do another report and it couldn't have been more different. The glowing press coverage had a knock-on effect and now a professional team were asking if they could pay to use the pitch for their warm up, before their game against Cheltenham Town FC, which in turn generated a lot more local interest.

Mark believes that the foundation, its base and community was naturally there but that it needed facilitating in a strength-based way to maximise resources and provide a positive environment. He created an environment which allowed people to work to their strengths, both individually and collectively, gave them a secure platform to build upon, built confidence and empowered people, while at the same time creating positive role models. By staying true to beliefs the club achieved successful outcomes without jeopardising their morals, principles and ethics.

Mark believes that by using this same strength-based approach process he used in the football club with individual clients, as long as you've got a natural hub to work from and a core community that wants to create change, these principles can be applied to building further successful communities and organisations and has the conviction and proof here that these methods work.

## **Future**

When Mark left the Club he wanted to see how it progressed to ensure that the change was sustainable. There was an initial dip in their progress and development, which was expected, but the Club with its new Chairman then began to build back up. So much so that they are now in a position that there is a £1.2m Community Hub being built on the site of the Football Club, to including Housing, Police, Education and Community.