



The Campfire Principle for Community

By [Charles Vogl](#)



Community leaders who talk to us about building community often envision building to a membership that will eventually fill an arena. Teams at Salesforce, Twitch, and Crossfit have achieved this.

It's important to understand that, while it's possible to grow to such a level, people don't feel connected to your community because they joined a big crowd in an arena. *They feel connected because of the individual conversations, private moments, and vulnerability* that they experience with other participants.

We call these "small" experiences **intimate experiences** because they feel intimate even if they're within a giant room, field, or arena. They almost always happen when we are physically close to others. This can happen in both planned ways in a small area and very often in unplanned ways, for example, while waiting in a line, sitting in adjoining seat rows, or even eating a meal close by.

In leadership, we can and should plan to support more and better intimate experiences like these. Too many events and spaces don't allow for or support these critical experiences for the community. If there is too much programming, noise, or tasks demanding attention, then it distracts from possible intimate experiences. If all your in-person events are like this, you will likely never build a real community.

To encourage rich intimate experiences, you need to plan according to what we call the **Campfire Principle**.

At campfires, we have time, proximity, freedom, and intimacy to connect meaningfully with others if we choose.

Those factors give us permission to share private conversations that can grow into vulnerable and memorable relationships. Most importantly, campfires are small enough that everyone can participate, if they choose, and feel seen.

The Campfire Principle: Within campfire experiences, participants have a venue to form relationships which, if nurtured over time, collectively create community. Campfire experiences are where community relationships actually begin and enrich whatever bigger event is going on around.

We can create **campfire events** where we invite participants to gather where they can find a scheduled intimate experience. We can also offer **campfire space** where an event is not planned, but participants can use the offered space for intimate conversations.

Consider this example: Imagine that we have invited you to a week-long brand community summit for 500 leaders hosted on Hawaii's Oahu North Shore. Now imagine that during that week we invite you to join just six of us to watch a sunset while drinking iced tea, sitting around a beach campfire. You can probably predict that the evening's conversation, sharing, and laughter will be much more meaningful to you, and will connect us more deeply, than all the time we spend

among hundreds. While intimate experiences may happen within the big 500-person event, they'll happen far more in campfire spaces. While they do happen serendipitously, you're much more effective if you plan for them.

A planned campfire event within a big event (say our summit) can be any event where participants will experience an intimate enough space, time, permission and conditions to share an intimate conversation, even in a space set up within a big arena. At our summit, walks on the beach, meals at tables of 8 people or less, musical jams or discussions on niche topics can all count.

In principle, you can just offer a campfire space with seating and a fire ring (real or metaphorical!) for others to use. (You can leave kindling and matches too.) Or you can plan a campfire event with invitations.

The important lesson is that no one gathers around a campfire if there is no campfire space.

For example, our Oahu summit is far better with a dozen cozy spaces with seating, comfortable lighting and views for new friends to sit together. Standing around a parking lot is way less fun, and that's exactly where many events figuratively leave participants to gather intimately.

To apply the Campfire Principle to an arena event (or any big main stage event), there must be areas created where participants can feel comfortable gathering and speaking in an "intimate experience."

The Campfire principle also applies to [online communities](#) and we offer a bit about applying it in digital meeting areas too.

When we attend events, we can tell right away if the producers understand this basic principle by the spaces they set up. If all the resources are set up for a "main stage" and the intimate gathering spaces are an afterthought (or are just plain

missing), then we know they're all show and no insight into bringing people together.

Consider that the travel to and from venues (walking groups, carpools, and shuttle rides) can also serve as "campfires." In fact, we see this all the time, even while participants and planners frequently miss it.

If you've attended (or event planned) big events and noticed participants felt connected far more than at other big events, notice how the experience allowed for and included campfire events and spaces that created the intimate conversations that lead to relationships. Main Stage programming and spectacle can be great. Let's never forget where the relationships get made.

You can learn more about how organizations succeed by creating belonging in our forthcoming book *Building Brand Communities* (Berrett-Koehler, 2020).

You can find out more about our work and stay updated about the book on our websites:

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