

Social Capital – it's about relationships!

It's been a little over a year since I began my position as a Family and Consumer Sciences (FCSA) Agent for Geary County K-State Research and Extension. In that time, I have had the opportunity to be involved in a variety of community-based coalitions, committees, and councils. I have been both amazed and impressed by the commitment our county has to celebrating successes, identifying challenges and seeking ways to address them. The success and drive of these different organizations is rooted in the character of the individuals that serve on them and the manner in which they approach relationships.

Ours is a community that strives to build social capital. Debra Bolton, SW Area FCS Agent, describes the term "social capital" as the personal relationships which, much like money, can be used for personal gain. The relationships people build are foundational to the success of the various organizations – the very ones I mentioned above that have awed and impressed me as a newcomer to the community.

The members of these organizations have developed trust over the duration of their work with the group. The relationships built within these groups are reflective of how all positive relationships are built. How can you build stronger relationships with family, friends, or co-workers? It begins with trust – a very complex concept related to relationships. Trust is centered on reliability, responsibility, respect, and gratitude.

Reliability in a relationship means that you consistently show the same positive responses or results over time. For example, if you offer to handle a task that needs to be completed, you get the task accomplished on time and it is done correctly. When you show you are reliable, you are also showing respect for those you are working with.

Another critical piece in building positive relationships is to show mutual respect. This one may prove to be a bit more challenging – especially if you have significantly differing views on a particular topic. In my family, we have a fairly wide variety of political viewpoints. When the topic of public policy or other "politically charged" topics come up, it is important to put the relationship first, recognize that there are differences, and show respect for the other person's opinion. It doesn't mean you have to agree with them, it just means that you are willing to show mutual respect in the midst of varying opinions. Keep the conversation focused on the topic rather than making it personal.

Demonstrating that you can handle responsibility is another necessary skill in building relationships. Responsible means that you are able to account for your actions – often in a way that shows you can consistently choose right over wrong in your behaviors, as

well. One way taking on responsibility in a family is when a family member completes a necessary task without being asked. If you see that the trash is overflowing, you take it out to the outside trash dispenser rather than pile it up by the side of the trash can. In the office, this may mean that you take on a co-worker's tasks when they are absent from work. "Being responsible" has different meanings depending on the situation, but in most cases, it includes approaching tasks as a team member rather than just an individual.

Showing mutual gratitude is another important piece of building relationships that is often overlooked or taken for granted. My parents taught me a lot of good things about how to get along with others, but perhaps their greatest lesson came in making sure we used the proper "bookends" when working with people (and siblings). Much like bookends on a shelf, they taught me to begin each request with a please and finish it with a thank you. When you show genuine appreciation for the work and efforts of your co-workers or family members, you are making a wise investment in the success of the relationship.

Just as we use money as financial capital, we can rely on our relationships to help build our social capital. Personal relationships allow us access to other networks and resources that we can use to meet our daily needs at home or at work. For example, personal relationships can help an elderly person living alone. If they do not show up for the noon meal at the center, it is because of their social capital that they will get a phone call or a visit from one of their friends or a center worker to check on them. Because that aging individual has shown reliability, responsibility, trust, and gratitude, they have made an investment in relationships that show return when the phone call is made.

There are many ways you can be intentional in building your social capital. One way is in being involved in a community coalition, committee, or council. These groups welcome volunteers who will invest their time and energy into the work at hand. If you are not comfortable being in a leadership role or serving on a public organizations, your efforts to build your social capital can be more subtle. Identify ways you can help your neighbors or co-workers. Offer your talents and time to those around you and branch out from there.

Building positive interpersonal relationships is intuitive for some, but a struggle for others. Recognizing this is important as you work with others around you. Your contribution may simply be helping others to get involved or to help them develop the interpersonal skills they need to build their own social capital. By doing so, you are contributing to the strength of your family and community. For more information,

contact me at the Geary County Extension office 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!