



# THE Hopeful NEIGHBORHOOD

## FIELD GUIDE

Six Lessons on Pursuing the  
Common Good Right Where You Live



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# Focus on Possibilities

## A HOPEFUL NEIGHBORHOOD IS WHERE POSSIBILITIES ARE THE FOCUS.

Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future.

JOHN L. MCKNIGHT AND JOHN P. KRETZMANN

**N**o matter what kind of neighborhood you live in—urban, suburban, rural, whatever—we are glad you’ve decided to invest time in thinking about it. We ourselves have found it fascinating and beneficial (and even life-changing) to be thoughtful about the people and place right where we live. And we are confident you will find the same to be true.

This is especially true if you are interested in pursuing the common good of your neighborhood. Many good things can come from even the simplest efforts to pursue the common good right where you live.

**COMMON GOOD:** “the flourishing or wellbeing of the sum total of communal life in a given place.”<sup>1</sup>

As you begin to think about this for your own neighborhood, it’s important for you to consider how you will look at the people and place surrounding you.

In this session we invite you to learn about and contrast two very different ways of looking at your neighborhood: you can focus on problems or you can focus on possibilities. The difference between these two approaches is significant and the evidence is unambiguous: focusing on possibilities is what will foster a hopeful neighborhood.

Obviously, there are many aspects of your neighborhood you could focus on in order to pursue the common good. You could focus on something in your neighborhood that irritates you. Or you could identify a neighborhood initiative you've seen work somewhere else (like a neighborhood garden) and attempt to reproduce that initiative in your own neighborhood.

But in a hopeful neighborhood, *possibilities* are the focus.

When we talk about possibilities, we're talking about practical opportunities to pursue the common good that arise from the unique specifics of your neighborhood. These possibilities are ideas you might not think about if you were focusing on obvious problems or weaknesses.

**POSSIBILITY:** "a specific path toward greater neighborhood well-being that relies on current gifts in the neighborhood."

Possibilities are powerful. They can liberate you from the tyranny of the urgent, help you avoid the small horizons of a problem mindset, and allow you to escape the trap of assuming that what worked in another neighborhood will work in yours.

Possibilities can show you an unexpected path right in your own neighborhood—a path that leads to a more hopeful horizon.

## WHAT'S YOUR FOCUS?

The power of focusing on possibilities rather than problems was first discussed by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann. Their research in the early 1990s was based on various Chicago neighborhoods, and their findings challenged the traditional approach to neighborhood development.



### **THE POWER OF FOCUSING ON POSSIBILITIES**

Go to [www.hopefulneighborhood.org/fieldguide](http://www.hopefulneighborhood.org/fieldguide) to see for yourself how powerful it can be to focus on possibilities rather than problems. Use the space that follows to respond to the reflection and discussion prompts in the video:

The traditional approach was to focus on what was wrong in a neighborhood: getting service providers and funding agencies to address needs and deficiencies. Kretzmann and McKnight's work illustrated how much stronger an asset-based approach is than this more familiar deficit-based approach.

**DEFICIT-BASED:** "a needs-driven approach to community in which solutions are sought for community problems."

**ASSET-BASED:** "a gifts-driven approach to community in which opportunities are sought for community possibilities."

Their 1993 book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, started a revolution in community development that caused leaders, nonprofits, and everyday neighbors to begin looking at neighborhoods with new eyes: focusing not on what was *wrong* in the neighborhood but on what was *strong* instead.

This refreshing, powerful approach (commonly referred to as "asset-based community development" or ABCD) involves developing a detailed "map" of all of the many assets, or gifts, within a neighborhood.

**ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (ABCD):**

“pursuing community or neighborhood revitalization by focusing on what is strong instead of what is wrong.”

There are many advantages to this approach. As you consider pursuing the common good of your own neighborhood, it is important that you first consider some of the important distinctions between an asset-based and deficit-based approach.

**IMPLICATIONS OF FOCUSING ON ASSETS OR**

**DEFICITS.** Go to [www.hopefulneighborhood.org/fieldguide](http://www.hopefulneighborhood.org/fieldguide) to understand the very practical

implications of an asset-based and deficit-based approach to your neighborhood. Use the space below to respond to the reflection and discussion prompts in the video:

**FOCUSING ON POSSIBILITIES**

When you start by focusing on what is strong rather than what is wrong in your own neighborhood, you will naturally begin to imagine possibilities. Possibilities are inherently about the future—a better future.

As you'll see in session three, there's something about mapping out your neighborhood's many assets, or gifts, that naturally suggests various hopeful possibilities for the future. These specific possibilities are what hope is all about. While focusing on what's wrong may or may not produce hope, focusing on what's *strong* produces hope naturally. This hope is based not on wishes alone but on the very real, very concrete possibilities that the gifts already in the neighborhood suggest.

## COMPARING APPROACHES

 <b>Deficit-Based</b>	 <b>Asset-Based</b>
<b>Wrong</b>	<b>Strong</b>
<b>Problems</b>	<b>Possibilities</b>
<b>What's Missing</b>	<b>What's There</b>
<b>Scarcity</b>	<b>Abundance</b>
<b>Needs</b>	<b>Assets</b>
<b>Outside-In Control</b>	<b>Inside-Out Leadership</b>
<b>Institution-Led</b>	<b>Neighbor-Led</b>
<b>Do To</b>	<b>Do With</b>
<b>Can't Do</b>	<b>Can Do</b>

**FIGURE 1.1. TWO APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

In this way, focusing on possibilities takes you further than focusing on problems. And the experience of discovering gifts and the possibilities they naturally suggest is inherently hopeful for everyone in the neighborhood.

Don once had lunch with a member of the Hopeful Neighborhood Project who is committed to focusing on possibilities. As a simple thought experiment, Don and his friend pretended they lived on the same block and asked this question: *What are some neighborhood possibilities we can imagine based solely on the gifts the two of us have?*

Forty-five minutes later they were wide-eyed, genuinely excited about the possibilities, and wishing they really did live on the same block! Why? There's just something inherently hopeful and energizing about focusing on possibilities—even in a simple exercise like this.

So why don't more people begin by focusing on what's strong in their community or neighborhood? In short, because of unhealthy muscle memory.

## **OUR KNEE-JERK PROBLEM MINDSET**

*Muscle memory* is a term used to refer to an action you've done so many times that you now do it without thinking. Athletes strive for muscle memory. Baseball pitchers will throw a specific pitch over and over so that when they are in the game, they don't have to think about that pitch consciously—they can just throw it. For an athlete, muscle memory is a great thing.

But when you are taking your first steps in pursuing the common good of your neighborhood, muscle memory can be a problem. A problem mindset is so common that most of us have developed the knee-jerk habit of looking for difficulties. Without thinking, we default to focusing on what is wrong.

We may not have the fancy language for it, but most of us take a deficit-based approach to looking at our neighborhoods, whether we know we're doing it or not. In our work with the Hopeful



Neighborhood Project, we have seen this play out again and again: even people who are trying to focus on what's strong inevitably slip back into a problem mindset.

We once hosted a gathering of community development experts who are firm believers in an asset-based approach to neighborhood work. While together, we engaged in some possibility brainstorming exercises and were surprised by how often everyone there (including the two of us) defaulted to solving problems. This is how strong the knee-jerk focus on problems is within all of us.

This is why we all need to be encouraged from time to time to focus on what is strong in our neighborhood. And that is our encouragement to you.

## SESSION REVIEW

Begin your pursuit of the common good by taking some specific steps to conceptualize, personalize, and visualize what it would look like to intentionally focus on possibilities.

**Conceptualize.** Restate in your own words the advantages of an asset-based approach to looking at a neighborhood.

**Personalize.** Reflect on a specific time you personally saw or experienced a person or group using a deficit-based approach. How many of the deficit-based attributes listed in figure 1.1 did you see in action?

**Visualize.** Reflecting on that same experience, imagine how things might have gone differently with an asset-based approach.

## **SUMMARY**

We spent this session discovering that a hopeful neighborhood is where possibilities are the focus. You may now be wondering how to get a handle on what exactly is strong in your own neighborhood. In short, you begin by discovering gifts that you and your neighbors already possess, and that is what we turn to next.

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