OCALI Podcast 26

Small Gestures and True Wins—The A + B = C Equation

[AUDIO LOGO]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SIMON BUEHRER: Welcome to Rewind, the Inspiring Change podcast series featuring conversations and connections from OCALICON, the premier autism and disabilities conference. Each year, OCALICON brings together a cross-section of internationally recognized leaders, educators, service providers, self-advocates, and many others for a multifaceted approach to improving the lives of people with disabilities across the lifespan. Rewind is the audio showcase of some of OCALICON's best moments, the speakers, sessions, and stories that make it all happen. I'm Simon Buehrer.

Here at OCALI, we talk about community all the time. We even include it as part of our conference tagline. Welcome to the community, we say. There's a place for you here.

But how do you build community, true community, with depth and substance and full membership and true connections? What does it take? And is there a formula for it? Well, our executive director, Shawn Henry tackled these very questions in closing remarks he delivered at OCALICON. Here's Shawn.

SHAWN HENRY: When we have the opportunity to interact, when we have the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging, we have the opportunity to build community. But there are some keys to building a community. There are some keys to being a part of a community. Honestly, they can be quite simple.

I call these keys the ABC's of community. It's a simple equation. A plus B equals C. A plus B equals C. "A" stands for access. "B" stands for belonging. And "C" stands for community.

You see, we cannot have true community until we have access and belonging for all. If you have belonging but not access, you're not including everyone in the equation. If you have access but not belonging, you are merely providing space but not engagement. C is only achievable when A and B are both parts of the equation.

Let's take, for example, the outdoor movies that many communities host in their local parks. You know what I mean, right? A big, colorful television screen, the cool night air with the sound of a movie echoing through the trees and people sitting on blankets on the dewy grass well into the night. It's a beautiful and wonderful community experience.

But how many of them are truly community experiences? And, honestly, what simple things can we do to make that happen and facilitate A plus B equals C equation? Perhaps it's ensuring that there's a paved area so that people in wheelchairs can easily get there to watch the movie and

sit with their families. Perhaps it is turning on the captions so that those who are deaf and hard-of-hearing can read the screen. Or maybe it's offering technology that allows those who are blind or visually impaired to experience the movie with audio descriptions.

Or let's look at a parade in a small town community, where they have already met the physical access needs, but they added an area for people with sensory concerns to view the parade, knowing that candy wasn't coming flying at them, that bands would march in place softly, and floats would turn down their music and sounds so that individuals could feel safe and yet be a part of this community activity. This is how we take the A plus B equals C equation and put it into action, by intentionally ensuring that we are not making access or belonging the flavor of the week, but by intentionally employing these principles at every turn.

A plus B equals C happens—We go from access and belonging being exceptions in our communities to being expectations in our community. It becomes the rule by which we design our community experiences. We build the ramp first because everyone can use the ramp instead of building the steps first and then deciding to build the ramp.

Right now, our society has to let people know that there are going to be accessible areas, that there are going to be places where people with disabilities can feel a sense of belonging. We have to advertise this. We have to shout it out from the rooftops so that people know about it and can come and be a part of the community, enjoying being a full member of the community.

We need the A plus B equals C equation to be so much a part of the daily conversation that instead of people with disabilities having to ask, "do you have this?" they were able to ask, "where is it?" Instead of asking, "do you have a sensory room?" the question becomes, "where is the sensory room?" Instead of asking, "do you have a place where I can watch the park movie from my wheelchair?" you ask, "where is the space for me to watch the movie from my wheelchair?" That is when we know we have made A plus B equals C equation a reality. To do this, we have to build the confidence and competence within our communities to be able to ask the right questions and make the right decisions when they are designing spaces, places, and events.

I know a young men with autism—let's call him Cam—who wanted to try a team sport. Cam asked his parents to sign him up for football in sixth grade. There were many concerns within the league to make this experience positive but also keep him safe.

I remember during this first scrimmage against another team, Cam was blocked very hard and landed on his back, sending him to loudly yell, "ow!" Just as quickly, he yelled, "I'm OK. I'm OK." He was part of the team.

Instead of asking, why should Cam be a part of the team, we need to ask, how can Cam be a part of a team? How can the Cam's of the world be a contributing part of a team and experience that sense of belonging?

But here's the thing. So often we are quick to say, it's never enough. OK, so they did that one little thing. But that's not enough.

We have to start looking at those small little wins as true wins so we can appreciate them and build on them. Take that one gesture and use it to start building capacity and confidence so that they are snowballs into the A plus B equals C equation. Maybe it's a small "a" not a capital "A," but it's still an A. It is still access. How do we build on it and show people that it's not that hard?

So often we are quick to jump to the negative. We are so quick to think that that one little change isn't enough. So why bother? Well, little things really do matter. Small gestures really do matter in our lives.

If you remember what Temple said in our opening keynote concerning access, she told all of us to take a positive approach, work on specific things, and be constructive. Help each other. And then we can build community.

A recent New York Times article talked about the impact of small gestures on people's psyches. It told the story of a woman who was having a really hard time and walked into a Target Starbucks. The barista noticed that she had been crying. And so she put a heart on her cup and wrote, "Your soul is golden."

The woman who got the message said she didn't even really know what "your soul is golden" means. But she felt seen and she felt a sense of belonging. These small gestures in our day can make a huge difference in cultivating a sense of belonging for those in our communities in the most need. We have to take the wins, big or small, and build on them until we reach true belonging and true access, so that we can reach a spirit of true community.

Since our founding, OCALI has been focused on the three P's-- partnership, policy, and practice. It takes all three of those to build the confidence and competence within our communities. But perhaps the most important is partnerships. At OCALI's October Advisory Board Meeting, we talked about the need to identify new partnerships and new opportunities within our communities so that our goal of ensuring that people with autism and disabilities have the opportunity to live their best lives for their whole lives is truly realized.

So we are focused on a future of cultivating confidence and competence within our communities by identifying new partners and new ways to make our equation of A plus B equals C work. Access plus belonging equals community. It's only by working together that we can ensure that everyone in our community truly has access to and belongs to our community. It's A plus B equals C. And it just adds up.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SIMON BUEHRER: That was Shawn Henry, executive director of OCALI, walking us through the importance of ensuring community through building and supporting access and belonging, or, more succinctly, access plus belonging equals community. A plus B equals C.

Hey, we have a ton of resources on our website, much of which is designed to help build access, ensure belonging, and grow community-- from online modules to videos to downloadable intervention tools. And almost all of them are free. Go to ocali.org and get connected with ideas, tools, and strategies to help you build and strengthen the communities in your own part of the world. Again, that's OCALI, O-C-A-L-I, dot org.

If you have other ideas or resources to share or just want to get in touch, email us at ocali@ocali.org. Again, that's ocali@ocali.org. You can also connect with us through social media. We're @ocalioffical on Twitter and Facebook.

Thanks for listening. I'm Simon Buehrer. We'll see you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]