

DON'T BUILD BRIDGES FROM THE MIDDLE



By Tom Neumark

We've been looking at how to see difference, conflict and division as an opportunity to pause, seek to understand, and find a fresh way, one of the cross-cutting questions on tackling roadblocks emerging from our discussions last year. Tom Neumark writes here about what he's learnt from his experience of trying to do this.

As I looked out onto a half empty floodlit pitch, I kept repeating a simple question to myself, 'Why is this going so wrong? Everyone loves football!' I had tried to organise a girls' football group but almost no one had shown up.

The idea had been to bring people together over their shared interests, to build a bit of community in a highly segregated neighbourhood, but it had not worked. A few kids had shown up from the local estate, barely enough to get a kickabout going, and none had come from the leafier streets up the hill. One parent, expressing a mild interest, had tentatively enquired 'Will there be any rough kids going?' I never saw her again.

Now I realise that the reason for this failure is that I was, in the words of Neil Denton, trying to build a bridge by starting in the middle. This is a recipe for disaster.

Instead, as Neil lays out in his *Bridge Builder's Handbook*, you should start from something, not from nothing.

The football project had started from a problem, an absence, a need. It had started from a lack of community cohesion. It had started from nothing. It had not started from a group of girls that love playing football or from a group of parents who wanted to design fun activities with their kids.

In Neil's term, you need to 'establish your foundations' and 'build your span' before you 'reach out to another group'. I had raced to the finish line before going through all the initial steps and had fallen on my face.

What do they say about houses that are built on sand? The same can be said for bridges that are built from the middle out. This is a timely and important observation, given our divided societies.

There is no shortage of people decrying how polarised our society is, and no shortage of people offering solutions. Invariably these solutions fail because they are based on the idea of using some form of activity to bring people together, as a way of healing divides. They are focused on building the bridge by starting in the middle.

Activities can bring people together. Football can be a great way for people from different backgrounds to get to know each other, to break down stigma, but a game of football, just like any other activity, has to be organised in the right way and by the right organisations, otherwise no one will show up or, worse still, they may have a negative experience that reinforces their prejudices.

We are lucky to live in a country full of groups that are passionate about running activities in their communities. There are more people still that would love to be involved but have never been asked and are not sure how to start.

Rather than building bridges from the middle out, we would be much better off

getting to know the people that already do so much in our communities and supporting these often beleaguered and besieged groups to 'expand their span'.

After the failed football project, I changed tack and spent my time listening to the community. Quite quickly I found someone who loved basketball and wanted to get a team going. He was just one of several people in the area that were keen to get involved in a variety of different ways, from photography to parties to newspapers. I supported them to start or develop their activities and, over time, I noticed they started to use a common language, referring to their work, their neighbourhood and each other, using similar terms to each other. We had started to develop a shared keystone. The middle of the bridge was the end of the journey, not the beginning.

Tom Neumark is CEO of 999 Club a charity in South East London supporting people to escape homelessness for good.