

# Building Connections the 'Nice Bike' Way

A DISCUSSION WITH **MARK SCHARENBRUCH**, SPEAKER AND AUTHOR OF THE BOOK *NICE BIKE*



Mark Scharenbroich

In today's busy, "virtual" world, it can be difficult to make genuine connections. Yet strong connections with people are so important to the work of cities. Mark Scharenbroich developed the "Nice Bike" philosophy, and he shares it with organizations all over the country through speaking engagements and through his book *Nice Bike: Making Meaningful Connections on the Road of Life*. *Minnesota Cities* talked to Scharenbroich about the Nice Bike principle and how cities might employ it to create more engaged,

connected communities.

**Minnesota Cities** What is the story behind the philosophy of "Nice Bike"? Can you explain what it means?

**Mark Scharenbroich** While visiting Milwaukee, I stumbled upon the Harley Davidson 100th anniversary rally. There were thousands upon thousands of black leather, bandana-wearing, tattooed bikers all over Milwaukee—the home of Harley Davidson. I've never been on a Harley in my life, yet that day in my beige rental car, I really wanted a Harley! I stopped by different venues and I kept hearing bikers pass each other and say, "Nice bike!" You could just feel the connection those two words created between bikers. So "Nice Bike" has become a metaphor for me about how we connect with others.

**MC** What are the primary actions that comprise the Nice Bike principle?

**MS** The Nice Bike principle is supported by three actions: Acknowledge, honor, and connect. When we acknowledge others and honor them with passionate service, we then build stronger connections.

**MC** We live in a digital age where people are connected 24-7. How has this changed the way we connect with each other when we're together, in person?

**MS** Smartphones are one of the greatest tools in the world for staying in touch. However, it saddens me to walk into a restaurant and see a family at a table all looking at their devices instead of each other. Nice Bike encourages people to be more present in the lives of others.

**MC** In your book, you encourage readers to "get off the bike." What do you mean?

**MS** The best leaders step out of their offices and get a feel for their entire community. Once when I used a Delta upgrade

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certificate on a flight, I recognized an individual boarding the plane—it was Richard Anderson, the CEO of Delta. I greeted him as he walked past me, and he thanked me for flying Delta. He then continued walking back to his center seat in coach. I shared my surprise about this with the flight attendants and found out that Mr. Anderson will spend time working different jobs throughout the company—he'll serve as a flight attendant and baggage handler, he'll work the reservation phone lines, etc., so he can keep in touch with both his customers and his Delta team. Mr. Anderson knows how to acknowledge, honor, and connect.

**MC** Most people who run for local elected office do it to make a difference in their community. But that's easier said than done. How can the Nice Bike principle help them be more effective leaders?

**MS** All people have two core needs. They need to be a part of a community, and they need to know that their lives matter. Great leaders know how to tap into those needs and create opportunities for people to be active in their own community.

The City of Pequot Lakes hosts "Bean Hole Days" every summer. They pack the day with a lot of fun activities. More than a thousand people show up for a cup of beans, a roll, and a cup of lemonade. It's not really about the beans, it's about bringing



**Making Connections That Move People**

a community of people together. Great leaders create communities that are livable, safe, economically healthy, and most of all—a place where people feel connected to each other.



**MC** You say that communication is as much about listening as talking. How can we become better listeners?

**MS** Barbara Jordan, the first African American woman from Texas to be elected to Congress, said, "It's more important to be interested than interesting." Everyone has a story and when you go out of your way to find out about someone's story, you will make a connection. It's simple: learn how to stop, drop, and listen.

**MC** Minnesota is known as the land of 10,000 lakes, but it also seems to be the land of 10,000 community festivals. How do these traditions help individuals connect to their community?

**MS** People want to be a part of their community. However, sometimes it's easier to sit home and watch television. We need to create traditional events that get people out of their houses as volunteers or participants to interact with their neighbors.

I once worked with members of the Minnesota Square Dancing Society, and their question was, "How do we get more people to join our group?" I asked them if they joined the group because they saw an ad on TV about square dancing. No. Did they see an ad in the newspaper? No. Did they hear an ad on the radio? No. Then what got you to join? The answer: a friend asked them to attend. The lesson here is that you have to create the opportunity and then knock on people's doors to create a community.


**MC** One of the issues worrying local officials these days in civility—mayors and councilmembers not getting along, abusive comments being made by citizens about city officials and even about each other, demeaning comments being made to city staff in public meetings. You get the idea. What does your Nice Bike message have to say to us about how we can get passed that and start treating each with a little more civility again?

**MS** Leaders set the tone for their community. They need to agree on a common vision of what they want for their community, and act on that vision. Acknowledge someone else's ideas, honor their feelings, and find a way to connect on what they can do together to leave the campsite better than you found it.

**MC** How does that work when people just have honest, strongly felt differences of opinion?

**MS** A lesson I learned in parenting was to separate the child from his or her action. You say, "I love you. However, I am disappointed in what you did." As leaders we need to change from saying, "That's a stupid idea and you are a stupid person for coming up with it," and say things like this: "I see where you want to go on this, but I respectfully disagree with how you want to get there." Take a lesson from Gandhi, who said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

**MC** How do we get the broader community of citizens to buy into that?

**MS** Leaders set the tone by their vision, values, and actions each day. The best companies have hands-on leaders like Delta CEO Richard Anderson. The best schools have amazing school principals and superintendents. The best teams have talented head coaches. The best communities have leaders who are dedicated to creating a well-connected city. Businesses, schools, and teams reflect their leaders. Be the leader your community needs you to be. 

### Meet the Author at the 2014 LMC Annual Conference

Mark Scharenbroich, a motivational speaker and Minnesota resident, will be the closing keynote speaker at the 2014 LMC Annual Conference, June 18-20 in St. Cloud. He is the founder of Scharenbroich & Associates and travels the country sharing the "Nice Bike" message. His book, *Nice Bike: Making Meaningful Connections on the Road of Life* was the 2011 Gold Winner of the Axiom Business Book Awards and the 2011 Silver Winner of the IBPA Ben Franklin Awards.

Don't miss Scharenbroich's inspiring presentation at the Annual Conference. Learn more and register at

[www.lmc.org/ac14mncities](http://www.lmc.org/ac14mncities).