

EPISODE 05

ARE WE SUSTAINING THE PROBLEM?

**If it keeps happening,
something is
helping it happen.**

FOOD FOR THOUGHT — A SUSTAINABILITY SERIES

Clay Coleman | Community Mountain

August 2026

© 2026 Community Mountain. All rights reserved.

ARE WE SUSTAINING THE PROBLEM?

Sometimes the most persistent thing in a system is the very condition everyone is working to change.

Sometimes the most persistent thing in a system is the very condition everyone is working to change.

This Is Not About Blame

This is not an accusation. It is an inquiry. Good people can make reasonable decisions and programs can successfully deliver services while the larger condition still persists.

The forest is difficult to see when everyone is responsibly caring for a particular tree.

Successful at the Wrong Level

A food pantry can distribute every available meal while community hunger increases. A shelter can operate efficiently while homelessness rises.

The meal and shelter still matter. The question is: at what level are we measuring success?

Transaction, Outcome and Condition

Transaction asks what we did. Outcome asks what happened to the person. Condition asks what happened to the larger circumstances producing the Need.

Activity can rise, people can genuinely be helped, and the underlying condition can still worsen.

Activity can rise, people can genuinely be helped, and the underlying condition can still worsen.

Persistent Problems Have Fuel

If a fire keeps burning, something is feeding it. Conditions endure because resources, behaviors, relationships, incentives, isolation, trauma, habits or missing opportunities keep supplying the ingredients.

We must ask not only what keeps the solution going, but what keeps the problem going.

Two Reinforcing Directions

Need → Isolation → Harm → Greater Need is one reinforcing direction. Need → Connection → Serve → Outcome → Capacity → Greater Serve is another.

The challenge is to interrupt one reinforcing cycle while strengthening another.

But So Can LOVE

A small act of generosity can affect giver, receiver and witnesses. Cupcakes decrease; LOVE increases.

Beneficial behavior may propagate through a community just as harmful behavior can.

Beneficial behavior may propagate through a community just as harmful behavior can.

What If Everybody Is Doing Their Job?

Every organization can meet its objectives and the community's underlying condition can still deteriorate.

Organizational success and community success are not necessarily the same measurement. The problem may be fragmentation.

Follow the Trajectory

A snapshot tells us someone is hungry. Trajectory asks why, what happened yesterday, what will happen tomorrow, what connections are missing, and what happened after Serve occurred.

No villains are required. Sometimes changing trajectory begins by seeing differently, connecting differently, acting, observing and learning.

Food for Thought

- What if persistent community problems have become self-reinforcing?
- What if successful programs can coexist with worsening conditions?
- What if we measure transactions while missing trajectories?
- What if harmful behavior can propagate through networks — and LOVE can too?
- What if everyone can be doing their job while the system still produces an outcome nobody wants?
- What if the better question is not “Who is failing?” but “What is sustaining this?”

NEXT EPISODE

EPISODE 06 - WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE THE FIGHT?

**The next question is already hiding inside the one we
just asked.**

Clay Coleman | Community Mountain | August 2026

© 2026 Community Mountain. All rights reserved.