



Citizen Leaders for Community Betterment

by Kenneth Pigg

Usually our purpose in conducting community leadership development programs is to increase the capacity of community leaders to engage in efforts to materially benefit the community, or, to enhance community development. Very often, however, these efforts may become entangled in conflict over objectives and approaches. The basis for this conflict is often differences in values held by different segments of the community. Thus, the solution to moving forward with some sort of action is a political solution. That is, community leaders must figure out a way to balance the different values with actions that can accommodate as much diversity as possible or invest in a broader process of collaboration than was originally planned. This engagement with politics or the involvement of citizens in the public sphere is also known as civic engagement. The following discussion outlines the nature of civic engagement as one of the important outcomes of many of our efforts to develop better community leaders through educational experiences and discusses why it is important for our communities.

DeTocqueville called it the “Mother Science” when speaking about what he saw as the foundational difference between American and European democracies which was how often the Americans formed associations of some sort to govern themselves. Today we refer to this collaborative governance process as civic engagement, the process of citizens being actively engaged in “public work.”¹ We may think of this civic process as being based in our Constitution from the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence (i.e., “we the people...”) to the Ninth and Tenth Amendments that make it clear that all powers NOT delegated to the state remain with the people, the citizens who make up the civic space in our communities.

Understanding what Civic Engagement means involves a number of behaviors and attitudes. One is a commitment of leaders, commitment that is reflected in their involvement in the community. This involvement is more than volunteering in local organizations. Being engaged in civic affairs means that leaders are directly involved in taking action to address public issues and needs. They

are engaged in significant ways with other leaders, even as they strive to extend leadership into new areas. Being civically engaged also means that leaders have developed trust among a group of collaborators that provide a base for civic influence. Further, it means that, as individuals, leaders have confidence they can lead in elected positions if appropriate. We are most interested in producing the kind of civic engagement that is dedicated to change, to organizing actions that improve the lives of people in the community. These are the kinds of leaders that recognize the importance of community, the set of relationships shared by people who live in a common place.² Civic engagement is what is required of citizen leaders whether they are elected officials or just a citizen fed up with the “way things are.”

Citizen Leaders are Everywhere

Popular opinion these days holds that it is the responsibility of elected officials and their appointees to solve community

¹ Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari. 1998. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

² Kenneth Wilkinson. 1991. *The Community in Rural America*. New York: The Greenwood Press; Richard A. Cuoto. 1992. “Defining a Citizen Leader.” Pp 3-9 in *Public Leadership Education: The Role of Citizen Leaders* by S. Morse (ed.). Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation.

problems. Yet, as DeTocqueville noted in his visit to American in 1831, the Americans generally avoided any association with government entities and did whatever was necessary themselves. Of course, that was in simpler times, and our communities were generally smaller and operated in a more self-sufficient manner. Today, all manner of external forces impinge on the capacity of local citizens to solve community problems.³ Those external forces make it difficult for local leaders to effectively address some problems, such as the global AIDS epidemic or climate change, in ways that are seen to be meaningfully effective. However, it does not stop them from taking action on local health problems or environmental conditions that they can deal with effectively. The challenge is that “effectiveness” may depend on the existence of a civic structure⁴ or the culture and processes of collaboration and collective decision making that can tackle complex problems, sort out conflicting values in a balanced manner, and produce innovative solutions that will satisfy most interested parties. This is the challenge of “public work,” but it is also the heart and soul of the American democratic system.

Some critics have argued that this system is completely broken, that corruption has so infiltrated all levels of government that it cannot be trusted to act for the “common good” any longer or that the influences of the global business system has so overwhelmed our national system of governing that we cannot effectively manage our problems when they extend beyond our borders.⁵ At the same time, Cuoto has written extensively about the numerous leaders he has found in small communities across Appalachia struggling with difficult and emotion-laden issues.⁶ Similarly, Beaulieu reports that even the smallest of communities, often composed of minorities disenfranchised in most every possible manner, have learned how to engage in public work and take up the challenges of civic engagement and local governance for making decisions about how to improve the places they live.⁷

I hear and see this same sort of news from many places across rural America that the news media typically ignore. That is not to say that local civic leadership is easy or popular. In fact, voter turnout in local elections has been lower than for state and national elections for many years,



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and it is often difficult to find individuals to run for local offices. However, the research we’ve done demonstrates that community leadership development education (CLDE) can make a real difference in the level of civic engagement of those who participate.

Of, By and For the People

As a product of CLDE efforts, local citizen leaders do get involved in community improvement activities. These activities typically cover a wide variety of interests. Most importantly, the activities address local needs in one way or another, often relying mostly on local resources for success. Citizen leaders mobilize others who share their concerns or interests and whom they think can contribute in some fashion. Rarely do they try to mobilize the whole community unless the activity involves something like a cultural event or celebration in which everyone is invited to contribute something unique of their family history or their ties to the community. Particularly in small communities, these citizen leaders may act as a “parallel government” when local government leaders are not ready or able to act, or they may act as a “shadow government” acting in opposition to government leaders unwilling to take substantive action on their needs.⁸ The point is that these citizen leaders have thrown off the mantle of “citizen as consumer” or “spectator” and have engagement themselves in the public or civic sphere as actively as possible in a democratic system.

What does it take to move community residents from spectators to active citizen leaders who are ready to engage in public work? First and foremost, it requires an understanding that community problems are political problems involving diverse, often conflicting, interests. Therefore, the avoidance of civic engagement in the political process is unavoidable. Community problems are “of” the people, but so are the solutions. So, the second requirement is a full realization that there exists in community residents

3 Robert Fisher. 1993. “Grass-Roots Organizing Worldwide: Common Ground, Historical Roots, and the Tension Between Democracy and the State,” Pp. 3-17 in *Mobilizing the Community: Local Politics in the Era of the Global City* by Robert Fisher and Joseph Kling (eds.). *Urban Affairs Annual Review* No. 41. Newbury Park: Sage.

4 Lois Wright-Morton. 2003. “Small Town Services and Facilities: the Influence of Social Networks and Civic Structure on Perceptions of Quality.” *City and Community* 2(2): 101-120.

5 Peter Bearse. 1992. “Citizen Leaders for a New Politics. Pp. 44-50 in *Public Leadership Education: The Role of Citizen Leaders* by S. Morse (ed.). Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation.

6 Cuoto, op cit.

7 L.J. Beaulieu. 2012. Personal communication.

8 Cuoto, op cit.

the resources, intellectual and otherwise, to devise a solution to the problem. Granted, the solution arrived at might not be the solution that some external expert might recommend, but it will be a solution arrived at “by” the people. Therefore, it will serve the people and be “for” the people’s best interests. It will be for the “common good,” a concept often forgotten in our current political debates. Devising solutions to these sorts of common or community problems calls for:

- civic processes that bring together the diversity residing in the community
- processes for eliciting the broadest possible spectrum of ideas for solving the problem and the agreement that all will listen to each other even when we disagree
- processes for weighing the possible outcomes of different courses of action along with methods for establishing priorities for deciding among these different possible courses
- a process of decision making that acknowledges all of the ideas presented, reviews the various available options and decided-upon priorities, and proposes a decision for reaction and consensus support even while acknowledging the decision may not be optimum

These are skills not learned in high school civics classes, in college political science, or public administration or business classes. In fact, they are rarely taught at all. However, if civic leaders, elected or not, are to be effective in governing “by” and “for” the people, they must be skilled in this sort of political engagement rather than the sound bites and backroom negotiation among elite interests so often associated with current politics. These skills can be learned. Most often they are best learned by experience, by cooperative learning, through mentoring, collaborative problem solving and learning to ask good questions and frame problems effectively.⁹

Additionally, citizen leaders need to learn “how the system works,” a common admonition among community observers. Specifically, citizen leaders need to understand that the decision-making processes are not always

9 Cheryl Mabey. 1992. “The Making of the Citizen Leader. Pp. 10-16 in in *Public Leadership Education: The Role of Citizen Leaders* by S. Morse (ed.). Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation. Eric Zachary. 2000. “Grassroots Leadership Training: A Case Study of an Effort to Integrate Theory and Method. *Journal of Community Practice*, 7-1: 71-94.



transparent nor do they necessarily conform explicitly to local statutes. Relationships among individuals and community organizations really do matter. In addition, citizen leaders need to fully understand the nature of the situation and the problem they want to address. They should understand whether the situation is created by structural conditions or intentional actions on the part of individuals or corporate entities. They need to be certain that, for the majority of the community, the cause of the situation is clearly identifiable and is either undeserved or unjust, creating a condition legitimizing organized collective action. Lastly, they need to be able to foresee a plan that has a reasonable chance of success in the face of whatever risk might be involved in taking action.¹⁰

The Challenge of Creating Citizen Leaders

A number of years ago a Framework for 21st Century Leadership was proposed.¹¹ While the general idea of this seems good, I want to offer my own content based on the research I have done regarding the effects of CLDE and its community effects. This framework is in the form of several general principles that I think should be central to any effort to develop citizen leaders and increase civic engagement.

1. Diversity is deep and broad; it takes many forms, and each form represents potentially valuable resources for new ideas and new perspectives on complex issues that are faced by the community. If citizen leaders are to be true to the notion of government “of” the people, then this diversity has to be fully embraced and welcomed, not just appreciated or tolerated. Knowing your neighbors means more than just recognizing them and greeting them by name or knowing their job or their kids’ names. In community leadership development, this means spending time learning more enough about “difference” to be able to trust each other despite differences.
2. Citizen leaders are like entrepreneurs and so should be nurtured in a similar manner. They need access to resources, mentors, space to innovate, and

10 Fisher, op cit.

11 L. R. Sandmann and L. Vandenberg. 1995. “A Framework for 21st Century Leadership.” *Journal of Extension*, 33-6: 1-9.



networks in which they can bounce off ideas among other people and get honest feedback.¹² Community activities may always be characterized by leaders and followers, but, if you change the activity, you will likely change the mix of individual leaders and followers. So, it is important that we treat each other like we would want to be treated if we were trying to be innovative ourselves.

3. Change is unavoidable if leaders are engaged. Therefore, leaders need to be unafraid of change and adaptable. They ought to be able to present a vision of the future that is “by” the community that provides a shared sense of direction for the next steps. This helps remove a lot of the uncertainty about the future and the effects of change.
4. The “common good” needs to become more than just a phrase of moral purpose; the collective benefits of any action posed or taken needs to be fully subscribed to by the community or else it is not “for” the people. This means building a sense of community which is an ongoing process involving frequent references to others who have been involved in the process, how the collective benefits, activities which demonstrate our “collective” togetherness and sense of oneness, and symbolic communication that identifies our relations with our community as opposed to some

¹² Henton, D., Melville, J. and Walesh, K. (1997). *Grassroots Leaders for a New Economy: How Civic Entrepreneurs Are Building Prosperous Communities*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass.

other identity. In the era of “identity politics,” citizen leaders must learn to play this card effectively and frequently to overcome all the other “players in the game” of politics underway.

5. What citizen leaders need to know can be learned, and leadership educators must take advantage of every possible resource available today to support the necessary learning. In addition, we must recognize that the learning does not stop with our “course” offering, but continues with experience. In fact, research shows that existing community leaders without access to formal educational offerings learn leadership skills from their experiences.¹³ We need to take advantage of what other community leaders know and are willing to teach new leaders. We also need to make sure that citizen leaders get introduced to each other and form broad networks representing leadership resources that can be mobilized as necessary for collective action. Such activities can take place even after formal learning efforts are completed.
6. You have heard it before: communication is important. Yes, citizen leaders need to know how to communicate. But, leadership educators also need to be sensitive to their own communication. To what end are we preparing citizen leaders? Preparing them for public work is more than increasing the capacity for community development, although that will likely be one of the outcomes that result. We need to make sure we are communicating the equivalent of public, engaged citizen rather than spectator, consumer, private citizen which Kemmis has called the equivalent of “dry water.”¹⁴

At no time has the challenge for civic engagement been greater in our history except perhaps in America’s infancy. As Ben Franklin was reported to have said when asked what kind of government resulted from the meeting in Philadelphia: “A republic, if you can keep it.” Maintaining the American republic remains a challenge, but much of the solution is local.

¹³ Pigg, K. et al. forthcoming. *Community Leadership Development Education: Community Empowerment and Civic Engagement*.

¹⁴ Daniel Kemmis. 1992. “Citizenship and Leadership.” Pp. 33-38 in *Public Leadership Education: The Role of Citizen Leaders* by S. Morse (ed.). Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation.