

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

Thinking Anew about Community Leadership

by Kenneth Pigg

If you have taken responsibility for developing community leadership through educational or other means, you must decide what kind of leadership is appropriate in your community. In a democracy, it seems there is only one answer. We need leaders in our communities committed to the collective whole, not to special interests. We need leaders motivated by service to the community rather than personal power acquisition. We need leaders willing to work collaboratively and share the duties and the authority (political and social capital) needed to achieve the purpose underlying the task. In other words, we need diligent leaders willing to get engaged and become active in the civic life of the community.

In contemporary society, these kinds of leaders often appear to be quite rare. However, recent research indicates that individuals routinely take on leadership roles in order to achieve important tasks successfully. Overcoming the anxiety of undertaking a new task and developing the confidence to do so are the first steps to initiating a project. Making the transition to civic engagement and community service reveals that citizens understand more about the nature of effective community leadership and community politics than they learned in civics class.

The following ideas should stimulate thoughts and additional learning about the styles of leadership that would be most effective in local communities today.

Leadership is a Relationship

Joseph Rost (1993)¹ defines leadership as an influential relationship between leaders and collaborators based on shared or mutual purposes intended to achieve real change. Leadership is not any particular set of personal attributes but a quality emerging from a specific type of relationship. This relationship is bound by respect and determination to achieve a common goal. He says the designation of “leader” can be quite flexible including anyone involved in the initiation or collaboration of change or execution of a particular subject.

Rost highlights three key concepts that drive a leader:

influence purpose change

The type of relationship that determines leadership is based on mutual and reciprocal influencing efforts. It is not just a one-way relationship, but instead includes followers influencing leaders. Also, having a shared purpose gives the relationship meaning and direction and helps to define the outcome desired by all the parties. This might be interpreted as a “vision,” but that is not always the case, nor is it always explicit. Lastly, leaders seek to join with collaborators to make effective changes in their community. However, the nature of change may not necessarily be progressive or materially beneficial. For

¹ Rost, Joseph (1993). *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Leaders are Teachable



instance, groups may organize to affect changes that return a community to some earlier status or prevent a progressive change.

As Joseph Raelin (2003)² notes, leadership is not serial or individualistic. In his book, *Creating Leaderful Organizations*, Raelin argues that we should even abandon the notions of “leaders” and “followers” as these roles are “interchangeable parts in the conduct of leadership” (p. 36). Raelin also notes that “Leadership is being seen more as a plural phenomenon, something that the entire community does together...People in the community assume leadership roles when necessary, and through this collective action, leaderful practice occurs” (p. 113). Again, the emphasis is on the relationship among the individuals in a collective action based on shared purpose, with no need to distinguish between leaders and followers.

Finally, this perspective distinguishes between “leader development” and “leadership development” in a way similar to that of David Day (2001)³ or Rasmussen, et al (2011).⁴ Other publications in this series explore both ideas more extensively.

In order for leaders to learn effectively, active and collaborative learning methods should be implemented in a risk-free environment. Research demonstrates that effective learning opportunities, often termed “community leadership development education,” or CLDE, can change participants’ sense of personal efficacy and their knowledge about the skills necessary to exercise leaderful behavior. CLDE influences participants’ knowledge of the community in which they live and their commitment to that community, understanding of the importance of shared purpose and social cohesion, and willingness to become engaged in the civic life of the community. These advantages of CLDE can be linked directly to the experience shared in a CLDE program (Pigg, et al 2011).⁵

In a recent book, Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield (2009)⁶ conclude that leadership “is a relational and collective process in which collaboration and shared understanding are deemed axiomatic to getting things done.” They describe in detail how famous individuals, generally considered to be leaders, “learned” those skills from both formal and informal activities. These researchers focus on the specific skills leaders need to learn to be effective when called upon to act as leaders. They summarize these skills in a list of nine tasks:

1. **Be open to the contributions of others**
2. **Reflect on one’s own practice**
3. **Support the growth of others**
4. **Develop collective leadership**
5. **Analyze experience**
6. **Question oneself and others**
7. **Learn democracy**
8. **Sustain hope in the face of struggle**
9. **Create community**

Raelin, Preskill, and Brookfield all agree that devising ways of teaching or helping others learn these skills and attributes is central to improving or increasing community leadership capacity in general. Of course, experience is

2 Raelin, Joseph A. (2003). *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to bring out the leadership in everyone*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

3 Day, David V. (2001). “Leadership Development: A Review in the Context.” *Leadership Quarterly*, 11.4: 581-613.

4 Rasmussen, C.M., J. Armstrong and S.A. Chazdon (2011). “Bridging Brown County: Captivating Social Capital as a Means to Community Change.” *Journal of Leadership Education*, 10.1: 63-79.

5 Pigg, Kenneth, Stephen Gasteyer, Ken Martin, Kari Keating, Godwin Apaliyah (2011). “Community Effects of Leadership Development Education Programs.” Final Report to USDA, CRIS. Project No. 06-662-35401.

6 Preskill, Stephen and Stephen Brookfield (2003). *Learning as a Way of Leading*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

not discounted, but minimum active reflection is necessary for experimental learning to be really effective. Research confirms that, while community leaders do learn from experience, those who participate in structured learning environments learn more quickly and efficiently.

The importance of providing a risk-free environment in which effective learning can take place is critical. While participants in a CLDE program are often initially committed to community leadership, they may become intimidated as they learn what could be involved in the future. Thus, it is very important to provide an opportunity for participants to develop relationships, discovering their similarities and differences. Many programs select a neutral setting away from the community to hold events, which makes the experience for participants more private and confidential. This type of risk-free environment should be maintained over the entire course of the learning activity.

Community Leadership: Public or Civic

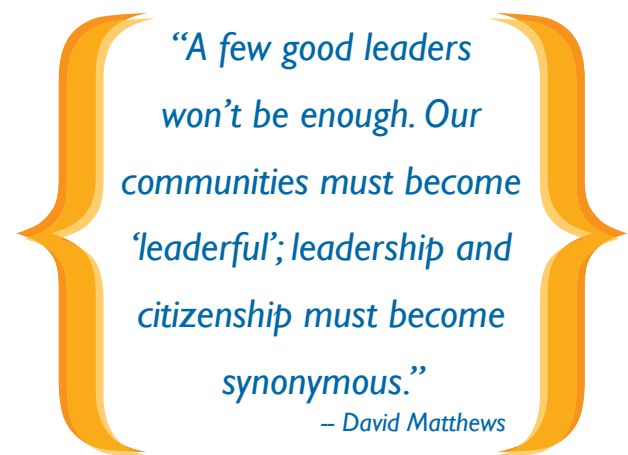
In modern society, citizens have a tendency to think about community leadership as the responsibility of public officials, especially those who are elected to public office in their communities. As Terry Jack notes, this perspective represents a significant change in the way citizens understand what “public” means. Jack explains, “a vigorous public (not just a cluster of interest groups, but a discursive community capable of thinking about the common good) is absent from our public life” (p. 58).⁷ Thus, our concept of “public” takes on a very narrow meaning, “so narrow...that we can assume that only through the process of government can the public be created” (p. 58). This perspective, of course, turns the American ideal upside down since government is an “instrument of the people.”

If the notion of a public is central to community and local politics, how does a public come to rediscover itself, or how do individuals transform themselves into a “public?”

7 Jack, E. Terry (1996). “Philosophical Foundation of Citizen Leadership.” *The Journal of Leadership Studies*, 3.5: 54-60.

Adapted from Jack’s research, here are several suggestions:

- Strangers, e.g., community residents, must be able to meet on common ground, having the ability to share common space and struggle with common problems while acknowledging the rights of “the other” in public affairs.
- Public interaction helps to overcome the fear we have of “strangers,” or other citizens of the community that we do not personally know, thus eliminating the apprehensions we may have about dealing with strangers.
- Community conflict is something most citizens avoid if at all possible, and conflict is more likely to occur when strangers interact. However, interactions with different types of people acclimate us to conflict and force us to acquire deliberative skills necessary to adjust, compromise and find courses of action that are mutually acceptable.
- In public, we begin to learn that we share the responsibility for outcomes and processes. Such mutuality is the foundation of a successful community.



*“A few good leaders
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communities must become
‘leaderful’; leadership and
citizenship must become
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– David Matthews

David Matthews of the Kettering Foundation has written extensively about the public nature of community leadership and how closely connected to politics it must be.⁸ For example, Matthews notes that “public” to him means “a diverse body of citizens joined together in ever-changing alliances to make choices about how to

8 Matthews, David (1999). *Politics for People, 2nd Ed.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

advance their common well-being” (p. 1). He emphasizes the importance of establishing a shared sense of purpose and a collaborative alliance made up of diverse individuals. Matthews argues that “a few good leaders won’t be enough. Our communities have to become ‘leaderful’; leadership and citizenship must become synonymous” (p. 2).

Community Leaders Enact Change

Though people want their local governments to make the important community decisions, elected leaders often have limited power of authority to act as an official body. Thus, citizens must take matters into their own hands by organizing themselves, mobilizing resources, influencing local officials and acting to achieve the results they desire. Citizens may respond to a variety of issues, ranging from human resources to environmental affairs to economic development strategies. By working together as a collective whole, their authority arises and leaders emerge. In this sense, leadership is a form of political capital and a source of influence that can be leveraged to gain access to other resources, whether human, social, financial or cultural. Acknowledging that their authority may be limited, citizens should continue to band together in order to enact desired changes. Such collective actions are completely synonymous with democracy, which provides the people with final authority, due to their willingness to act in accord with their own values and beliefs.

Citizens should also know how a community “works” in the decision-making process. Inquiring about the logistics of community processes introduces them to various elected and appointed local officials in different institutions that serve the community. Through open discussion about local issues, resources, capacities to act and obstacles to achieving success, citizens reach a better understanding of how they can help make improvements in their community.



Certainly, citizens who do not want change to occur could create disagreements and opposition. Powerful oppositional leadership can hinder the enactment of changes. However, as Matthews explains, ongoing communication concerning political issues in the community and the consideration of alternatives in public settings encourage compromise. The solution may not be technically superior, but it will usually be one nearly all participants can support and pursue.

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