



COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

How Committed to the Community are Your Leaders?

by Kenneth Pigg

Community members can quickly detect leadership attitudes that are less than fully committed to the community and its future. If leaders are not committed, they should not expect others to be committed either. Such commitment (or lack thereof) is contagious and supports an action agenda and vision. Generally, people who are committed to the community express a sense of ownership for what happens in and a sense of belonging to the community. They demonstrate this by being involved in various ways, but especially by way of those organizations and activities that benefit the whole community. These people give of their time, energy and, often, their wealth to improve the community and provide support for local business and other elements of the social, cultural and economic aspects. They do things that get the attention of others and the media as well as the “little things,” such as staying late to clean up after a meeting is over. They are also the people who can be counted upon to hang in there when things are difficult.¹

If these are the characteristics of those who are already committed to the community, it should be easy enough to identify them and involve them in various efforts as leaders. Often, more leadership capacity is needed for activities aimed to meet existing and future community needs, but it is more difficult to increase this kind of commitment among residents. How can this commitment be achieved?

¹ Some of the content of this publication is adapted from material available from the Community Tool Box at <http://ctb.ku.edu>.

Identifying the Candidates

While everyone has the potential to be a committed community resident and a leader in their community, some are more likely candidates than others. Research has generally shown that people already involved in community organizations, especially those already contributing to community well-being in some fashion, are good candidates.¹ Other good candidates are people who

have older children and likely to be concerned about the nature of the community in which they are raising their kids—what sociologists call a “life cycle stage”—as opposed to those with very young children who are just beginning families and careers. Older adults whose children have left home are also good candidates. Other research has shown that participation in community organizations is a good indicator of positive sentiments toward the community, likely resulting in community commitment. There is some evidence that, in certain circumstances, residents with long tenure in the community are likely to be more committed to

¹ See Stinner, W.F., et al. 1990. “Community Size, Individual Social Position, and Community Attachment.” *Rural Sociology*, 55-4 (494-521); and Beggs, J.J., Hurlbert, J.S., and Haines, V.A., 2010. “Community Attachment in a Rural Setting: A Refinement and Empirical Test of the Systemic Model.” *Rural Sociology*, 61-3(407-426).

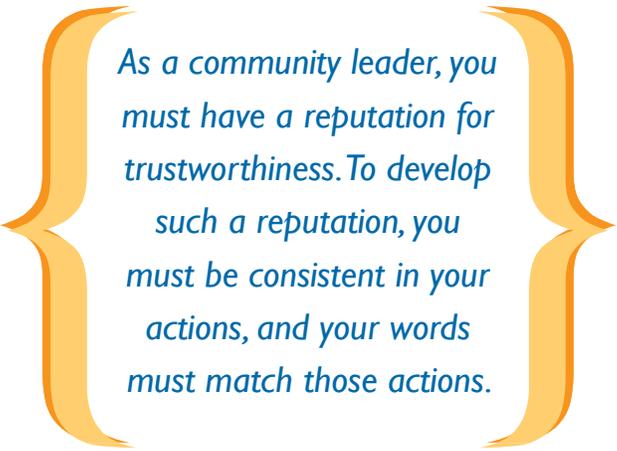
the community, and those with higher levels of education and income are also likely to be more dedicated. However, this is not always the case; therefore, depending on these characteristics to guide the recruitment of potential leaders for the community is not very reliable. Often it is better to use your networks and the networks of those whom you know are already committed and work to integrate and collaborate with whoever shows up and expresses an interest in what is going on. You never know who that may be, and they just may become the most committed and valuable leader you could ever imagine!

Increasing the Level of Commitment among Resident Leaders

Isn't recruiting committed leaders enough? Look around. Take note of the number of people you do not see in the leadership circle in your community anymore that were there just a few years ago. Community leadership is difficult and very time consuming. It is easy to get discouraged in community work since there are many obstacles to overcome, and it often takes a long time to see positive results. Often, community leaders face lots of criticism from other residents who feel progress is not being made fast enough or that priorities are not in line with community values (read: "their values") or that the project is costing too much. If all it took was a minimum level of commitment, many community residents would be involved in improving the community.

So, how do we increase commitment? Here are a number of ways you can consider sharing with community leaders and working with them to implement.

- As a community leader, you must have a reputation for trustworthiness. To develop such a reputation, you must be consistent in your actions, and your words must match those actions.
- As a community leader, you must be in frequent communication with others involved in the same activity or organization, and the communication should be direct. Such communication should help convince others of your own intentions and that, by contributing to the collective effort, they will enjoy some sort of personal benefit as well. This sort of communication also provides an opportunity to hear from others what needs to be done about solving problems that others may see in the community or the organization itself. Eliciting commitment from



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other participants requires convincing each one that he or she is a critical partner in the effort and that you, the leader, are committed to advancing his or her individual interests.² Thus, as with any advice regarding good communication, listening is an important dimension too.

- As leaders in any community organization, you should be welcoming new people into your organization—this is part of the empowerment process—and getting to know them personally, introducing them to others in the activity or organization, finding out what their specific interests may be in joining and beginning to develop a relationship that can continue into the future. This should be part of the culture of the group. In larger groups, there is often a "buddy system" or a mentoring process to aid in making newcomers feel welcome and finding a role for them quickly.
- As a community leader, it is one of your tasks to help insure that everyone is on the same page about the goals and objectives of the group. This is especially effective when it is done as a group activity rather than by one individual. This allows everyone the chance to participate in the process and become invested in the outcome. This sort of participation not only increases commitment, but it also increases understanding of what is to be done and what the mutual expectations are about the outcomes.
- As the goals and objectives become clear to everyone, it is easier to identify those things that need to get done in order to achieve these goals and to insure that everyone involved has a way to

² Tang, S.Y. 1994. "Building Community Organizations: Credible Commitment and the New Institutional Economics." *Human Systems Management*, 13: (221-232).



contribute. As a leader, one of your tasks is to make sure that everyone has found a way to contribute and feels like they are making a difference with that effort. Sometimes, if what they are doing seems mundane, the leader needs to make sure that they understand that even if the task seems unimportant, it all fits together into a whole and every piece is necessary if the goal is to be accomplished. It can be especially important for you, as a leader in the community, to help people see how this work they are doing now contributes to improvements in the community now and/or in the longer term.

- It can also be important, especially for new people in the organization or activity, to find things for them to do that brings them into contact with others in the group so that new relationships develop and new appreciation for each other's skills and abilities is established. At the same time, do not put someone in the position of attempting things they may not be capable of doing. It is useful sometimes to stretch people's abilities and encourage the development of new capabilities—with adequate support and encouragement—but doing this too often or to a great extreme can discourage a person if they fail too often, and they will no longer become a participant in the activity. Most people enjoy a challenge, but only if it is one they can see themselves achieving successfully and meaningfully.
- As a leader, you should set an example for appreciating and respecting the contributions everyone associated with your organization or activity is making. People need to feel respected even when disagreements arise—and they will—in

order for them to stay committed. So, you should be setting the example and modeling the kind of appreciate and respect for others and their efforts that you expect those around you to exhibit too. Expressing this appreciation openly sets a very good example. Take special note of what is going well and acknowledge what needs improvement.

- To develop and sustain the commitment of leaders in your community, they will need support from people like you. Even if a person is not now acting in the role of leader but you think they have the capacity to do so, they need your support and encouragement. As a leader yourself, you can think of every community resident as a potential leader and serve as a coach and mentor to them. As they learn to take more responsibility for various leadership tasks in the community and continue to receive encouragement and support, their commitment to the role and the community grows along with their capacity. The capacity for leadership comes in many forms; learn to recognize that diversity and encourage it because that is at the core of building overall community capacity and commitment.
- Just as was noted in the Southern Rural Development Center publication in this series on empowerment, celebrating the success of an activity and the role of each person in that activity helps strengthen commitment and leadership. Recognition, especially if it can be arranged to come from someone in a formal position of authority, can be very empowering and build commitment in a hurry.

Commitment is Based on Relationships

The kind of commitment to the community that is required of leaders requires the sort of persistence and doggedness that can be difficult to maintain if the leader is acting alone. However, a support system or network of individuals who share similar values and goals for the community, those who are willing to pitch in and assist one another and share the burdens of the leader role, make the commitment much easier to maintain over time.

So, it may be important to introduce new participants or new residents to community members whom you know are very committed to the community so that they can become models for the newcomers and show them “the way we do things around here.” These community leaders can then introduce these newcomers to other people who are similarly committed, and, soon, the newcomer has a network of supporters they can recognize as committed to the community. In these people they will learn what values are important to the community, what norms guide interpersonal behavior as well as civic behavior, and “how to get things done in the community.” They will learn which organizations are civically engaged and which tend to mind their own business as well as those that work for community betterment and those that are more interested in preserving the status quo. The newcomers will learn what specific agendas engage the resources of different organizations so that they can select those that fit their own interests and abilities best, thus finding the best fit for themselves. Most of all, when things get difficult, they will know where to turn for advice, encouragement and help to get things changed.

Commitment is Personal

In the end, however, it may be true that the nature and degree of commitment is very personal. Each person determines the degree to which they will be committed and the term over which that commitment will last. For some, this commitment may ebb and flow with events in their personal lives like the level of a lake over the seasons. For others, community commitment may be a lifetime affair with little variance over time.

The motives for being committed to the community may also change. For some, their commitment may be based on historical family connections to the community—a heritage, so to speak. For others, it may be based on a material investment they have made and do not want to see endangered. For still others, it may be that they have recently become residents, and, because they are raising



children in the community, they want to make sure it reflects the values and resources they feel are necessary for a good life for their family.

Finally, there may be simply a very personal joy in sharing the commitment that leads to accomplishment. As noted by one well known social scientist, “the sudden realization that I can act to change society for the better and, moreover, that I can join other like-minded people to this end is in such conditions pleasurable, in fact intoxicating, in itself.”³ It probably does not matter in the end *why* people become committed to the community. What is important to leaders and those engaged in the development of leaders in the community is increasing the commitment of residents so that the hard work of community change can happen and leadership capacity can be expanded.

³ A. O. Hirschman. 1982. *Shifting Involvements: Private Interests and Public Action*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 89.