

# COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

## Community Leaders: Confident and Competent

by Kenneth Pigg

*Research has proven that community leaders have a certain sense of confidence and competence in their abilities to handle various tasks within the community. This competence is important in civically engaging individuals, developing personal efficacy and maintaining the confidence in one's capacity to perform as a leader in different situations in the community. Many residents, who feel they lack skill and confidence, are reluctant to take charge, but the overall success of communities depends on the development of both current and potential leaders. Specific items used to measure personal efficacy or competence, which reflect the abilities most useful to community leaders, include public speaking skills, working with different kinds of groups and needs, problem identification and analysis, consensus building skills, and commitment to personal growth. While other abilities may also be required, these provide an excellent starting place for leader development and education.*

### Public Speaking

Oftentimes, community leaders engaging in civic affairs are expected to speak in public settings, such as organizational meetings, institutional lectures advocating and educating about a specific course of action, or informal discussions with elected officials about concerns and solutions. For some people, speaking in public seems to come “naturally.” Without any special training or preparation, they exude confidence when speaking in front of large groups. We may envy such “native speakers,” but most have the ability to develop similar skills with a bit of training and practice. Leader education should include some degree of communication coaching, as well as practice opportunities in low-risk settings.

Many available resources focus on developing good communication skills through knowing the subject matter, organizing thoughts, using clear language and other technical aspects. However, different kinds of communication are important for leaders as well. Leaders have a sense of moral authority because their followers pay close attention at all times to what their leaders do and say. Example-setting is a form of public “speaking” rarely addressed in most technical works. Such moral authority comes from authenticity and requires that individuals know themselves, their ideas, and their values and beliefs, which then must be expressed in simple, clear terms.

Another dimension of public speaking for leaders is story-telling. Noel Tichy, coauthor of *The Leadership Engine*, suggests there are three basic types of stories leaders must know how to tell in order to engage their audiences.<sup>1</sup> First, the “who I am” story draws upon personal experience to emphasize selected points. Second, the “who are we” story historically connects residents to contemporary events and situations that define the community and the people who live there. Lastly, the “where we are going” story, which may be the most important, combines the leader’s own ideas and values with those commonly shared, creating a sense of direction and promise for future success. Essentially, personally relating to residents is vital for effective community leaders.

## Building Group Capacity

Relationships and interaction with others define leadership.<sup>2</sup> Leaders act within groups that collaboratively share a common purpose. This kind of interaction is the subject of many books on “group process,” including the well-known guide about groups “forming, storming, norming and performing,” and there is a great deal of experience and scientific investigation about the way in which groups function and how to make them “high performers.”<sup>3</sup>

Community leaders generally operate in two arenas, the small group level and the broader community level. Leaders are frequently most active in small groups organized to accomplish common tasks. Shared leadership and close collaboration is the general pattern of behavior for the members of concentrated groups, which normally operate informally with few written rules or rituals (other than eating together, which seems to be a very common practice in America). In this setting, leaders function as good friends, sharing ideas and responsibilities because everyone believes in what they are doing. In larger,



more formal settings, such as civic groups or cultural associations, leaders must follow stricter guidelines. Members elect group leaders according to certain rules, such as Robert’s Rules of Order, and abide by rituals at each meeting. Knowing and executing procedures promotes effective group action and helps leaders be more successful.

The broader community arena is a bit different from small group settings. For example, in a community meeting convened by the city council, established general rules determine who may speak, how to gain the right to speak, what topics will be discussed and which topics are off-limits. Organizing a large portion of a community to achieve an objective requires more than just knowing the logistics of group process. Tropman suggests seven principles to turn community leaders into “meeting masters,” including having a clear and specific purpose for the meeting, carefully preparing material, eliminating reports and new business to focus on decisions at hand, brainstorming new ideas as necessary, and making good decisions efficiently.<sup>4</sup> Also, following up on decisions to assess progress is the hallmark of good decision-making and effective leadership in community organizations.

1 Tichy, N. and Cohen, E. 1997. *The Leadership Engine: How winning companies build leaders at every level*. New York: Harper Business.

2 Rost, J. 1993. *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.

3 Tropman, J.E. 1997. *Successful Community Leadership: A Skills Guide for Volunteers and Professionals*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers.

4 Tropman, 1997. *Ibid.* (58-63)

## Problem Identification and Analysis

Identifying community problems is often like the story of the seven blind men and the elephant. Each has a different perspective on the elephant, so each “defines” it as something different — a rope, a tree trunk, a hose, etc. This same phenomenon often happens in our communities because situations are perceived or experienced differently depending on residents’ interests and positions in the community. For instance, to one neighbor, the local park is simply an open space for nature and play, while another sees the park as a “development opportunity” for low-rent housing in the community. The leaders should acknowledge these differences in perception, find common ground regarding the purpose they are trying to achieve and then negotiate a compromise, such as limiting the use of open space for housing and preserving a portion of that space for a park. Being able to negotiate and compromise helps leaders better serve everyone in their community.

*The Kettering Foundation  
has developed a means  
for resolving complicated  
problems – community  
issues forums.*

While identifying problems may be generally agreed upon, finding a solution is often the more difficult process. Modern community problems today are very complex because people’s values and beliefs play important roles in the decision-making process. For example, using a former brownfield site as a school location may be cost-effective for school officials, but parents consider the site a threat to their children’s health. They would advocate for a different site or demand that it be cleaned up to make it safe, which may actually be an impossible task. The Kettering Foundation has used such conflicts to develop a means for resolving complicated problems – community issues forums.<sup>5</sup> Peter Block also suggests starting with “problems” is an ineffective way to achieve progress toward desired goals.<sup>6</sup>

5 See: [http://www.kettering.org/media\\_room/publications/naming\\_and\\_framing\\_difficult\\_issues](http://www.kettering.org/media_room/publications/naming_and_framing_difficult_issues).

6 Block, P. 2008. *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler

## Dealing with Differences

Community decision-making often causes conflict and difference among residents. How leaders deal with different opinions that create potential conflicts determines the success or decline of communities. Developing a consensus on which action can be taken is the usual way of handling differences; however, this often requires settling for a less-than-optimum solution and making compromises that cause everyone to lose something important to them. Leaders need to start any decision-making process with an explicit acknowledgement that being successful means working together to find a solution, despite obvious differences. Crosby and Bryson call this “copromotion,” a process that encourages people to help achieve all or most of each other’s objectives, while also adhering to their most important values.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps more important than negotiation skills, creating constructive conflict (what Burns calls “constructive dissonance”)<sup>8</sup> gives way to more policy options and creative problem-solving techniques. Copromotion also increases mobilization and sustains commitment to the broad vision that all people involved presumably share.

## Personal Development

Developing the sort of personal efficacy described is a continuous process of learning and personal development. Preskill and Brookfield (2009) note the importance of learning how to first acquire power and then use it to improve the lives of community members.<sup>9</sup> Leaders gain power by serving those who, although not as powerful as individuals, can be organized to advocate for change. They also argue that wisdom comes from listening to and learning from the stories of co-workers and followers. They state, “It is only through an exchange of narratives — an exchange of life experiences, really — that a leader can get in touch with where people are and use what is learned to decide where to go next as a group” (p. 215). Continuously listening to others ensures that the shared vision remains clear in peoples’ minds as the guiding factor for action.

---

Publishers.

7 Crosby, B.C. and Bryson J.M. 2005. *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

8 Burns, J.M. 1978. *Leadership*. New York: Harper Torchbooks. p. 410.

9 Preskill, S. and Brookfield, S.D. 2009. *Learning as a Way of Leading*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.



Preskill and Brookfield also stress that, while leading involves creating community among followers and co-leaders, it is complicated by our society's emphasis on individualism. They note that community leaders and followers alike must give up some portion of their individual identity in order to collaborate with the whole, often a difficult task for leaders more familiar with corporate models of leadership behavior. While leaders are not expected to refrain from offering personal ideas or stories to the collective, they should be willing to give up any direct identification with an idea the collective chooses to act upon. This is the development of ownership and responsibility that leaders should strive to achieve in groups.

*Learning as a Way of Leading* identifies nine learning tasks in which leaders must become proficient and stresses active learning and constant interaction with others.<sup>10</sup> Research shows that community leaders do learn from experience, just not as much, nor as fast as in guided, more formalized learning experiences. Perhaps most importantly, understand that the confidence and capacity for leadership results from spending the necessary time in continuous learning. Learning to lead is a journey, not a destination. Leading is not a fixed set of skills or a particular knowledge base. Rather, it is an interactive relationship based on influence among individuals who are all committed to the same purpose and willing to share their ideas and skills collectively in the community.

---

<sup>10</sup> Preskill and Brookfield, *Ibid.*