

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

Of Heroes and Citizens

WHERE ARE THE BARN RAISERS WHEN YOU NEED THEM?

by Kenneth Pigg

America is a nation that loves its individualistic roots. It cherishes its heroes, some of Olympic proportions and some of comic book heritage. Americans relish the freedoms and rights granted to the individual in its Constitution, have fought international wars to protect them and conducted massive social insurgencies internally to secure them (e.g., Civil Rights Movement). Much of our individualistic thinking today has been reinforced by our growing reliance on professionals and experts and technocrats to solve our problems while we sit on our individualist couches and bemoan the inability of political leaders to work together to resolve pressing issues.¹ Unless you are some fictional super character, barn raising is not done by single individuals.

Social cohesion represents a concept similar to community identity, a sense of belonging to a collective bigger than a single individual. A cohesive community, one that works together to get things done, is more likely to be successful than a divided one. Divided communities are filled with conflict that acts as an obstacle to success and building a consensus to support action. This idea forces us to examine how leaders think about diversity in their community; the importance of building relationships with others, building a support base among diverse groups and being willing to listen and respond to the diverse views of different

population groups in the community. The idea is central to good community leadership originating from interaction among citizens who care about what happens in their community and the direction in which it may be headed. While some people think of social cohesion as a process,² this discussion treats it as an outcome of community leadership development efforts, one which is important in linking individual effects of participation in such efforts to community effects.

Cohesion as a Basis for Action

Social cohesion can be associated with what Putnam has called “bridging” social capital or the forms of association that are inclusive rather than exclusive, outward looking networks of people and groups that encompass citizens across diverse social classes. Bridging social capital is useful for linking to external assets and sharing information. These sorts of linkages are helpful in areas like finding jobs, assistance in problem solving, sharing of material goods like tools, or even child care in emergencies. Putnam also argues that bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity among citizens.³ Social cohesion in this context is related to networks of diverse individuals and organizations, each of which is part of their own network with the entire structure providing access to information

1 Dick Flacks. 1990. “The Revolution of Citizenship.” *Social Policy*, 21-2: 37-50; Green, A. and J. G. Janmaat (2011). *Regimes of Social Cohesion: Societies and the Crisis of Globalization*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

2 J. Jenson. 1998. *Mapping Social Cohesion: The State of Canadian Research*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

3 Robert Putnam. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

and resources of various kinds that can be mobilized to support citizens taking action in their community.


Social cohesion has also been defined in relation to an individual's sense of community, their attachment to a specific neighborhood or community and neighboring behavior.⁴ Neighboring behavior strengthens social cohesion. It has also been shown that participation in various kinds of organizations and civic groups strengthens social cohesion.⁵ Here, social cohesion is not about "glue" that holds people together (that would be more like Putnam's bonding form of social capital), but the social "lubricant" that makes it easier for people to navigate the complex and sometimes tricky relationships among citizens that are necessary in order to get things done.

As a basis for action, social cohesion represents those resources or assets that we need to get our problems solved but may not have direct access to ourselves. So, we turn to others in our networks for assistance. Those individuals know we will reciprocate when asked to do so if we are able. We know that each person in our network will trust that we have spent time "earning our civic spurs." This is achieved by becoming involved in community activities, by assuming the responsibility of a leader when it seems appropriate for us to do so, by being an active participant in discussions about political issues that affect our community and so forth. In other words, we have shown that we are attached to our community by our behaviors, that we acknowledge that there are different views about what should be done and differences in how specific events might be interpreted, but that our psychological connection to the community is strong enough to encourage us to stay and remain engaged rather than throw up our hands and walk away from the problem. Social cohesion is the basis for mobilizing community assets for acting upon problems that we face as a collective as well as individually.

So, since it is difficult for single individuals to organize the resources to make a significant effect on community conditions, it is usually necessary to ask for others in the community to help. These may be friends or acquaintances, but usually it involves people that you know share similar interests and have a network that includes access to some resource that may be important to the project's success. Often these individuals may be very different from you.

4 Wilkinson, D. 2007. "The Multidimensional Nature of Social Cohesion: Psychological Sense of Community, Attraction and Neighboring." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 40-3: 214-229.

5 Speer, P. W., Jackson, C.B. & Peterson, A. (2001). "The Relationship between Social Cohesion and Empowerment: Support and New Implications for Theory." *Health Education and Behavior*, 28-6: 716-732.



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They may be newcomers to the community (relatively speaking). They may have technical knowledge you do not have. They may have different values that guide how and in what they invest their time and energies. They may be of a different ethnic or religious background. However, they usually share the same kind of identification or attachment to "this" community and want to make it a better place for every citizen and they share the same sort of moral commitment to collective action and benefit rather than recognizing only what may be an individual benefit.

Mobilizing this sort of group for community action is a strategic activity because you do not just choose your "friends" as they may not be the people who can really contribute something to the endeavor. You get to know who to ask through your interaction with others in the community in various settings—the "great good places" in the community where people meet casually for talk—in church groups, in civic and youth organizations, in your bowling league, and so forth—since it has been shown that participation of this sort contributes positively to social cohesion.⁶ Again, many of these people will have different political and social views, economic status, or cultural backgrounds and so have different values than you do or different ideas about how a problem should be resolved. But, this sort of interactive process underlies the social nature of our communities and is what distinguishes socially cohesive communities from those that tend to be exclusive of differences.⁷

6 Oldenburg, R. 1989. *The Great Good Place: Cafe's, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through The Day*. New York, Paragon House; Speer, op cit.

7 Albert Luloff and Louis Swanson (eds.). 1988. *American Rural Communities*. Boulder: Westview Press.



Social Cohesion is Central to Community Leadership

A brief reminder is in order here about what is meant by “leadership.” You may recall in another of the elements of this series that leadership was defined as a “relationship,” not as an attribute of any single individual. Leadership is a relationship among people who are collaborating with the intention of creating change in their community, and so they share a common purpose. Leadership emerges from this interactive process; social cohesion makes the process more likely to be successful in achieving its purpose. This “relational” perspective of leadership does not mean that individual leaders do not need to possess attributes such as an attitude that welcomes and acknowledges the contributions of diversity, a psychological sense of community and belonging to a collectivity that is as important to them as their own individual interests, and a willingness to engage with neighbors and other community members in various activities and discussions about common interests or concerns. These attributes, skills and behaviors are important for leaders to possess if they are to engage other citizen leaders in leadership activities. A social network with trust and reciprocity is central to social cohesion. From this, we have a basis for effective leadership to emerge.

Developing Social Cohesion among Citizen Leaders

Social cohesion can be developed through educational experiences that are offered to citizen leaders, but these experiences are only a part of the solution to creating inclusive communities composed of networks of trust and reciprocity. Besides educational activities, various supporting activities have been demonstrated to assist in this process.

Educational activities that work best are usually those that involve collective processes. Such activities are known as collaborative learning. They involve self-assessments that are shared and discussed with others in the group as participants discover things about themselves and others they may not have known before. Participants learn to recognize there may be attributes of individuals that are valuable but not readily revealed in ordinary interactions. Self-assessment tools such as the Myers-Briggs or True Colors instruments are particularly useful in this process.⁸ Using the instrument, allowing time for each participant to interpret the results for themselves, and sharing what they have learned with others can be a powerful process for embracing our differences. Other activities—such as storytelling, where individual participants share particularly important or memorable things that have happened in their lives—can also open doors to getting to know one another better.

Using educational settings to develop trust among the participants is another good strategy as long as the approaches used are easily translatable to everyday life. Team building activities that involve collaborative problem solving help build trust among participants.⁹ But, a simple and effective way is to involve participants in the routine activities of the educational programs themselves such as bringing refreshments to organizing site arrangements and arranging for speakers or external participants to join a panel discussion. These simple actions demonstrate that these participants can be trusted with responsibility.

Another strategy for developing cohesion is to encourage community leaders to broaden their networking activities by joining different kinds of organizations in the community and looking for ways to link them together. Our research shows that this can happen as a result of participation in leadership development programs.¹⁰ Often one organization in the community is doing something innovative that other organizations can find helpful themselves. They can offer support to accomplish a shared goal, yet these organizations often do not know what the other is doing.

⁸ These can be found at <http://www.myersbriggs.org> and <http://true-colors.com>.

⁹ For ideas about collaborative learning exercises, see Peter Senge, et al. 1994. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. New York: Doubleday or the *Community Tool Box* (University of Kansas) (online at <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/SearchResults.aspx?IndexCatalogue=Site+Index+EN&SearchQuery=collaborative+learning>).

¹⁰ Keating, K. 2011. *Training Civic Bridge Builders: Outcomes Of Community Leadership Development Programs*. Champaign-Urbana, IL. PHD Dissertation. University of Illinois.

Since community leaders often find themselves operating without any sort of “support system” when it comes to a new venture, why not try a version of “speed dating” for community leaders? Invite citizens in the community to come to an event where the only agenda is to meet other citizens who have ideas about things they would like to do in the community. Everyone, one-on-one, face-to-face across a small table gets five minutes to introduce themselves and state what they want to do and what they can contribute to the overall goal. In two hours, every single individual could meet as many as two dozen others in the community and possibly find several with similar interests and compatible capabilities to form a powerful team of citizen leaders that, from within their respective networks could recruit another small group of people to assist in constructive ways to achieve success. Repeating this exercise every six months or so could represent a powerful force for community action and change.

Developing bridging social capital that increases cohesion and promotes inclusiveness is not really that difficult. It can even start with garage sales and neighborhood picnics only if citizens take the time to stop and talk with each other to learn a bit about their neighbors. It can happen in farmers’ markets or community festivals or other public gatherings. Social cohesion is one of the critical elements of a civic infrastructure. If citizens with different values cannot



talk seriously and civilly with each other, while trusting each other to have the collective good foremost in mind as an outcome, then our politics quickly degenerates into “who gets what and how much” rather than “action for the common good.”¹¹ This requires that we “know” each other beyond the superficiality of a passer-by on the street or at least recognize the intrinsic value of other human beings; they may have important views and values we may share. This means we cannot be “couch citizens” but will have to get up and get out to interact with our neighbors in meaningful ways.

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¹¹ Boyte, H. and Kari, N. 1996. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.