



# DEVELOPING LEADERS

for Community Leadership and Civic Engagement

## Developing Leaders for Community Leadership and Civic Engagement

by Kenneth Pigg

*This series on Civic Engagement has been developed from a specific perspective derived from research conducted over the past twelve years and a growing literature on “community” rather than organizational leadership. Therefore, this series has emphasized the importance of context to leadership and its effects.<sup>1</sup> Further, while one of the pieces in this series is titled “Toward a Grand Theory,” there really is not a single theoretical perspective here, but rather a way of thinking about leadership that is structured by social and political elements of human interaction. So, you will not find any endorsement in these pages for servant leadership or transformational leadership or any of the other popular “theoretical” perspectives. What you will find is a perspective based on a definition of leadership as an influence relationship among citizens collaborating about shared purpose who intend to make some sort of change.<sup>2</sup>*

*However, there are some important things to be learned that were covered briefly by the specific topics of the individual elements of this series that deserve some re-emphasis here.*

<sup>1</sup> G.R. Hickman. 2010. *Leading Change in Multiple Contexts*. Los Angeles: Sage Publishing.  
<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Joseph Rost. 1991. *Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

### Leader Development Differs from Leadership Development

David Day has written convincingly of the difference between leader and leadership development.<sup>1</sup> He notes there are a number of psychological and behavioral, as well as skill development dimensions to leader development, but “...as leaders develop, there is an expected shift from individual- to collective-level identities ... [that results in a view of] leadership as a collaborative and relational process.” This perspective seems especially appropriate for community contexts where authority and power are often ambiguous or absent. If leadership is an emergent property of a particular type of relationship, then community leadership development education (CLDE) needs to address

<sup>1</sup> D. Day. 2011. “Leadership Development.” PP. 37-50 in *The Sage Handbook of Leadership* by A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson and M. Uhl-Bien (eds.). Los Angeles: Sage Publishing. (*italics mine*)

itself to creating such relationships which takes specific forms of interaction guided by a sense of community and future direction.

### Demographics Don't Matter. Cultural Difference Do.

Repeated analyses in my research demonstrate that the demographic attributes of CLDE participants do not affect the outcomes we have identified. Age, gender, educational and income levels, length of residence in the community, employment and so forth simply have little or no effect on the outcomes of CLDE participation at the individual level. Practically speaking, there is also not a lot of variation in the participant population of CLDE programs, but this result also demonstrates that it does not matter who you are; you can gain the same benefit from participation in a CLDE program as anyone else. Cultural differences are

a different matter, however, and educators need to pay particular attention to the cultures of Latino, Asian, Native American and other ethnic populations as they organize CLDE program offerings.<sup>2</sup>

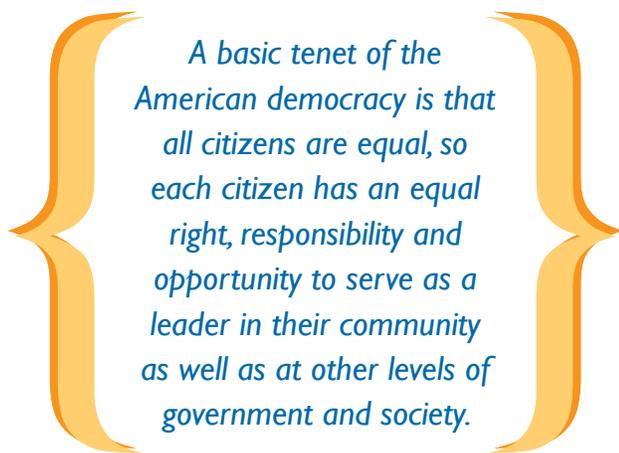
## Individual Outcomes are Related

As shown previously, the individual-level outcomes of CLDE participation are related to each other in a structured fashion. They form a model in which some of the outcomes interact to help explain how other outcomes behave. The most important outcomes seem to be Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion. This does not mean we should ignore the other outcomes, but we need to pay attention to the interrelationships and think about what they might mean and whether or not we need to do something in our program strategies to change the relationships.

## CLDE Produces Organizational Effects

The individual-level outcomes also have an effect on organizations in the community. The participants from CLDE programs re-enter the community joining organizations like those they were involved with before their CLDE experience as well as new kinds of organizations. They also take on new leader responsibilities so that they both broaden and deepen their involvement in these community organizations.

2 K.M. Gambrell and S.M. Fritz. 2012. "Healers and Helpers, Unifying the People: A Qualitative Study of Lakota Leadership." *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 19-3: 315-325; M. Martinez-Cosio. 1996. "Leadership in Communities of Color: Elements and Sensitivities of a Universal Model." *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 3-1: 65-77.



## Purpose of CLDE Needs Review

Most community-based CLDE programs build the capacity of community leaders for engaging in more significant community development work. However, if this were really the desired outcome, sponsors of these programs are destined to be disappointed. What seems to be occurring

is that 1) the primary outcomes at the individual level are civic engagement and social cohesion, results that seem to be driving participants in a somewhat different direction and, 2) the community effects that are occurring seem to be rather disjointed events that take place "in" the community rather than "of" the community. In other words, we see small groups of individuals leave these CLDE programs with their own agendas and interests, mobilize others who share those interests and start a project to make some sort of change in the community. Often they are successful. But, because there is no community-wide vision available to guide their actions, these activities are often the only of their kind and uncoordinated with other activities in the community. This does not mean the activity does not contribute something useful and benefit some element of the community. Indeed, the development of a halfway house for substance abusers or a shelter for abused children would be welcome most anywhere. But this project-driven approach is unguided by any larger involvement of community citizens in the creation of a common direction, a vision for the future of the community, and valuable resources are consumed in getting these unique things accomplished that people may later wish the resources were still available for other things instead.

## CLDE Educational Strategy Needs Revision

Since the individual level outcomes already include civic engagement and social cohesion changes, why not build on those to create a stronger civic infrastructure that will support the kind of development "of" community that is necessary for long term viability? Doing so would require only modest modifications to the existing program strategy and content of the educational elements to include more focus on "public work" of the sense that Boyte and Kari discuss.<sup>3</sup> In fact, modification of the curriculum of the 1960s Citizenship Schools organized by the Highlander Center might be worth investigating. However it may be done, a modified curriculum should focus on the political and social aspects of community change, the process, and the structural elements that affect the direction and outcome of citizen leadership efforts.

## Empowerment Underlies CLDE Efforts

One of the publications in this series addresses empowerment specifically. In that publication, it is noted that personal and associational or interactional elements were a large part of the empowerment process. In our studies, we documented the important outcome of CLDE efforts of increased personal efficacy and the positive effects of increased community knowledge. These outcomes certainly increase participants' sense of empowerment. However, it

3 Boyte, H. and Kari, N. 1998. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.



should be recognized that the whole educational strategy of CLDE programs is (or should be) about empowerment. There are aspects of participation that do not involve teaching but rather “experiencing” such as the expansion of personal networks of social and political capital as well as the increased knowledge of the diversity of human capital that exists in the community that also contributes to increasing empowerment.<sup>4</sup> “Leveling the playing field” between local and state officials and community citizens is important so citizens know these individuals personally and learn they are not that different than they are. Being nominated and sponsored by a local leader or business can be empowering to some participants. Receiving a scholarship from the community empowers participants and also creates a sense of civic responsibility to “repay” this support in some fashion—an act of reciprocity that is part of social cohesion. It is not enough to just tell someone that they are empowered after they have finished a CLDE program. They have to have experienced a number of material and symbolic experiences that communicate this sense of “I have power to accomplish significant things” as a result of their participation. It is up to sponsors and program organizers to figure out how many ways they can communicate this while, at the same time, transferring important substantive information to participants.

### Leadership is a Relationship

Leadership is a relationship, so it requires collaboration. As noted above, leadership is a relationship among citizen leaders based on shared purpose or mutual intentions. These citizen leaders agree upon a purpose and a strategy for getting that purpose accomplished. They agree upon a division of labor in order to get the work done and then get busy and do it. Occasionally, there is a formal decision about who is going to be designated the “leader” of the process, and sometimes a formal organization is created to sponsor the effort or activity. Usually this happens when there are resources to be accounted for in some formal manner. However, there are many occasions when a group

never has any sort of formal structure formed, yet the work still gets done because all the citizens involved are working together with a clear understanding of the direction they are all headed and the details of the work that need to be done. These are elements of the activity they have all agreed upon. If some difficulty arises, they meet together and review what they have been doing and revise plans and recommit to the tasks that need to get done. These citizens are practicing and demonstrating leadership, with each acting as citizen leaders by taking on responsibility for some portion of the collaborative effort.

It is sometimes difficult to mobilize this kind of collaboration. Citizens are often accused of being apathetic and unwilling to take action. As a friend of mine was once said, “people aren’t apathetic; they just don’t want to do what you want to do.”<sup>5</sup> So, it is important, even necessary, to have a fundamental agreement first about the general direction you want to go (the “vision thing”) even as you think together about specific activities you may wish to undertake. Getting people to undertake your agenda, may require that you agree to undertake their agenda as well. The collaboration necessary for leadership to emerge also directs us to think again about the importance of networks and that bridging form of social capital which is part of social cohesion. Knowing who is interested in what and who might have some resources that could be useful in solving a specific problem can be a critical part of convincing an individual citizen to become part of the process involved in a community activity.

### All Leaders, So No Followers?

Any citizen can act as a leader; do there have to be any followers? If any individual citizen can be a leader, then being a follower is a personal choice rather than a designated status. No citizen is required to be a follower. Just as there are no “born leaders,” there are no “born followers.” There are certainly individuals who do not want to take on the responsibilities of being a leader and would rather just do what they are asked to do and no more. We welcome the contributions of these citizens. However, what we would really like to see is that all citizens understand that, in order to preserve democracy in its fullest, most comprehensive sense, all citizens need to be engaged in community affairs, civic or public work.<sup>6</sup> Another basic tenet of the American democracy is that all citizens are equal, so each citizen has an equal right, responsibility and opportunity to serve as a leader in their community as well as at other levels of

<sup>4</sup> Rasmussen, C. M., J. Armstrong, et al. (2011). “Bridging Brown County: Captivating Social Capital as a Means to Community Change.” *Journal of Leadership Education* 10-1: 63-82.

<sup>5</sup> Donald W. Littrell. N.d. Personal communication.

<sup>6</sup> Boyte, H., and Kari, N. op cit.

government and society. To do so, they have to be engaged; they cannot sit on the sidelines and resort to being critics only. Followers contribute, but leaders contribute even more and even more fundamentally by strengthening the civic infrastructure of American society.

## Leadership Intends Change

Leadership intends change; it threatens status quo. This is more than an observation; it is an admonition to leaders and sponsors of CLDE programs. For community leaders, undertaking leadership in the community, as a relationship with other citizens intending to make some real changes in the community, means that these citizen leaders will be threatening the status quo. The status quo always has its defenders, those who have an interest in maintaining things just as they are or have been. Being a citizen leader requires courage, and CLDE sponsors who are encouraging citizen leaders to take up community challenges need to remember this and fully understand what they are asking of their participants.



For sponsors of CLDE programs, this is also important in another way as I have seen programs initiated that did not have the support of the local “power structure” that failed to attract any participants and never gained a foothold in a community. So, these programs need not only financial sponsors, they need “legitimacy,” or political sponsorship, from existing community leaders in public ways that communicate to other citizens that “this program is OK with us” and “we look forward to what it can do for our community.”

How does a program sponsor obtain this kind of political support? As a potential sponsor or program organizer, you need to do several things. One is to make sure that the existing leadership understands that the participants are being prepared as “the next generation of community leaders” and that their support will help insure their legacy

in the community. It is widely recognized that one of the failings of most rural communities is that no attention is being paid to leadership transitions from one generation to the next. A second thing to do is to invite existing leaders to be part of the planning effort to make sure that the program design and what participants will learn will address community needs. Third, invite existing leaders to have a prominent role in sponsorship, from helping to select participants to making the inaugural speech at the opening session to making the presentation of “graduation” certificates at the closing. Still another thing to consider is inviting the existing leaders to serve as mentors to the participants. There are likely other ways you can think of to convince existing leaders that these new citizen leaders are not to be considered a threat but rather potential partners for getting things done in the community but for which there is insufficient leadership to accomplish.

## Community-Based Programs Are Effective

A community-based CLDE program is one that is planned and executed at the community level using mostly community resources. Most often, a planning committee of existing leaders concerned about the future of the community and the lack of sufficient leadership is formed to plan the program. There are various models that can be referenced to assist in this process that should be used as a set of general guidelines.<sup>7</sup> External experts are unnecessary, but they can be of limited use when the community curriculum might want to deal with highly technical issues. Most often, the community itself retains all the requisite expertise it needs to identify the issues and the options for addressing those necessary for establishing the opportunity for dialogue and leadership. In a community-based CLDE program, the community’s citizens retain control of the curriculum as well as the program’s resources and are not obligated to follow any externally imposed or recommended approach. This retains a focus on specific community needs and interests and builds on local resources and networks for solutions rather than relying on external solutions (the empowerment thing again!).

Making it all work takes work and can be expensive. However, a surprising number of small communities have made it work for them and have found ways to make CLDE affordable. You can too!

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: <http://extension.missouri.edu/excel/>.