



COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

The Vision Thing

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by Kenneth Pigg

Communities change for many reasons. The community's new direction can be left up to chance or, if used strategically, can be full of opportunity. If managed intentionally, you will need to envision a better and brighter future for your community. Without this vision, "any old way of getting there" might be deemed appropriate and satisfactory to move forward. More often than not, there is a group within the community that generally agrees upon a direction in which they want the community to go. Quite often, this group represents the business community and the direction is called "economic development." Generally speaking, this choice of a direction is known today as "developing a vision of the future." There is a growing amount of research that verifies the effectiveness of intentional efforts toward the development of a community vision. This can be accomplished using a variety of available processes.¹ It is important for community leadership development education (CLDE) efforts because the results express a sense of "shared purpose" (recalling our earlier definition of leadership from Rost, 1991²).

For CLDE program organizers, developing a sense of vision and shared purpose about the community's future can mean a number of things. Obviously, it can mean that CLDE participants learn to envision new possibilities for their community and can articulate a convincing vision that is attractive to other community members. CLDE participants

learn to do this with an authentic degree of optimism, meaning that the vision is not some bit of fiction dreamed up in a "flight of fancy," but rather something community citizens can envision as attainable and desirable. In addition to speaking optimistically about the future of the community, community leaders speak with a substantial degree of confidence about the capability of the community to meet the necessary goals. The only criterion for success is that other citizens unite with the same end goal in mind rather than start working toward some other, perhaps incompatible, set of goals.

What is Vision? Where does Vision come from?

The sort of vision under consideration here does not come from some psychedelic compound. Rather it comes from conversation and dialogue among citizens about what is important to each of them about the community, historically and for the future, what values they hold dear for the community, what institutions they feel are important in people's lives and need preservation and enhancement, what sort of civic processes are important to improve upon and so forth. In other words, the sort of "vision" we are concerned with comes about from discussion among residents that builds a shared sense of the future and a shared sense of purpose about attaining the sort of goals instrumental to achieving the desired future.

In part, this shared sense of the future is about developing a common language for expressing core values and diverse

¹ See for example N. Walzer, Ed. (1996) *Community Strategic Visioning Programs*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publications.

² Rost, Joseph. 1991. *Leadership for the 21st Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

ideas about where the community should be headed and what needs to happen to make it the kind of place that members want to live in together. These ideas may be very much alike but expressed in different ways by members of the business, education and health care communities or by those of African American, Latino and Norwegian ancestry. Developing a common language is hard work and often takes while. It requires frequent face-to-face meetings and honest expressions of ideas and feelings. Such an exchange requires a “risk-free” environment where no one fears retaliation, and a CLDE program can provide just that.³

While some CLDE programs include sessions of “community visioning” as part of the curriculum, others do not. Yet, all of these seem to produce alumni that have a shared sense of the future and a shared purpose that they did not possess when the program began. How do we account for that? There are many opportunities for the sort of discussion and dialogue necessary for shared purpose and vision to emerge, and it can happen even over refreshments during breaks or during discussions following a session on topics such as education, health care or law enforcement. Structured discussions can be organized by sponsors to encourage dialogue about what participants want to see happen in the future.

Sometimes we tend to think of community visions in the context of the production of a formal “community vision statement,” and such statements can be useful and constructive. The process of developing this type of statement may be as important as the follow-up actions necessary to make the vision’s elements become reality.⁴ Formal processes for developing vision statements are numerous and have been used successfully (and unsuccessfully) in many places. These processes typically involve a broad cross-section of the community’s residents and require a substantial commitment of time and local resources, especially when it comes to implementation. There are many public and private sources of assistance for supporting this kind of process such as the Cooperative Extension Service in many states. In lieu of or as a companion program to a CLDE effort, a visioning activity can be very helpful in overcoming existing obstacles, replacing a dependence on old, worn out solutions and generating new leadership for change. In fact, some localities report



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that the emergence of new leadership is one of the results of such a process.⁵

However, research has shown that CLDE programs can produce alumni that share a common purpose and vision of their community’s future with or without formal attention to the process. As noted above, this sharing seems to take place in informal settings through conversations as participants talk about their community, what is important to them about living there and what needs to be done in order to retain a high quality of life. CLDE sponsors can encourage these opportunities with some advance thought and planning.

It is interesting to note that CLDE programs usually only involve 15-25 participants while, in most cases, advocates of community visioning programs would argue for having many more community citizens involved in the process. Yet, research on CLDE outcomes shows that positive changes in the community do occur when led by former CLDE participants.⁶ These participants share a common purpose and have a vision of their community’s future even if it may be more limited than that which may have emerged from a broader representation of the community. One element of a CLDE program that could be extremely important in this context is helping participants learn how to effectively listen to fellow residents of the community, synthesize what they hear into something coherent and effectively “... articulate a consensus vision that sets a clear direction for the community’s future.”⁷ This kind of communication skill is extremely important for leaders, and it links closely to the sort of personal efficacy discussion in a previous issue of this

3 K. Pigg, et al (forthcoming). *Community Leadership Development Education: Citizen Empowerment and Civic Engagement*.

4 P. LaChapelle, et al (2010). “The pedagogy and the practice of community visioning: evaluating effective community strategic planning in rural Montana.” *Community Development, 41-2 (176-91)*.

5 C.A. French & M. Gagne (2010). “Ten years of community visioning in New Hampshire: the meaning of success.” *Community Development, 41-2 (223-39)*.

6 K. Pigg op cit.

7 M.L. Moss & W.T. Grunkemeyer (2010). “Building shared visions for sustainable communities.” *Community Development, 41-2 (240-54)*.



series. But, as David Procter has argued, the importance of communication that leads to a shared vision emphasizes ways of communicating that “...construct interdependence, shared identity, values and a code of behavior.”⁸

Just as you can’t dependably put “new wine in old bottles,” many advocates of visioning activities argue that you can’t get new visions from the same old leadership corps that has been in control of the community for the previous decades. So, they argue that these activities must carefully recruit individuals from a much different base, one that more widely represents the diversity of the community, with special attention to making sure invitations are extended to new and emerging leaders.⁹ Organizers should be aware that this process may include elements of Alinsky’s confrontational model as it relates to the existing power structure as its members may be reluctant to deal with new ideas as a challenge to their power base.¹⁰ Organizers of visioning efforts and CLDE programs (who may often face the same sort of obstacle) need to address this possibility early on through discussions with existing leaders, usually one-on-one. It is important to discuss with them topics such as their legacies, the leaders who will follow them and how they will be developed without their support, their perception of citizens’ satisfaction with the way things are, what sort of things they would like to see changed and so forth. In other words, organizers have to help existing leaders see that they can be part of the solution (even if they have been part of the problem before).

8 D.E. Procter (2004). “Building community through communication: the case for civic communion.” *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 35-2 (p. 55)

9 Moss & Grunkemeyer, op cit.

10 J. Mandell (2010). “Picnics, participation and power: linking community building to social change.” *Community Development*, 41-2 (269-82).

Why is Vision Important?

The creation of a shared vision or purpose has been shown to contribute to increased community commitment and, indirectly, to social cohesion and civic engagement.¹¹ For example, Chazdon and Lott (2010) report that communities that have developed a vision for their future also have strong bonding networks demonstrating commitment to their community.¹² Similarly, Janet Hammer (2010) reports that commitment is a major outcome of the process undertaken in the development of a vision for the community.¹³ What was once a situation in which each member of the community may (seem to) have had very different ideas about the future becomes a situation in which these ideas are shared. The differences are acknowledged and worked out to the point that there is not only agreement but also a shared language for articulating these ideas about the future. This produces a renewed sense of commitment to the common good. This shared sense of common purpose also releases new energy and ideas for how to accomplish things to achieve the elements of this vision that people were not aware existed before.

As CLDE participants recognize the important role that vision and shared purpose play, they also give great priority to inclusiveness and diversity. The participants learn that good ideas can come from many places, often from unexpected sources, and should be given opportunity for expression and consideration as elements of the future. Doing so brings new people and new organizations into the process and builds a more cohesive community. This is quite similar to Bhattacharyya’s argument that these processes should build solidarity, having shared identity and norms of behavior, as a central element of community.¹⁴ Social cohesion means that community residents recognize who they are as a collective, a social entity different from other social entities. They recognize what makes them “different” and/or “unique” compared to communities around them.

11 K. Pigg, et al, op cit.

12 S.Chazdon & S. Lott (2010). “Ready for engagement: using key informant interviews to measure community social capacity.” *Community Development*, 41-2 (156-75).

13 J.M. Hammer (2010). “Large group interventions as a tool for community visioning and planning.” *Community Development*, 41-2 (209-22).

14 J. Bhattacharyya (2004). “Theorizing community development.” *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 34-2(3-33).

More importantly, social cohesion provides a sense of empowerment that extends the “reach” of each resident and each organization across the community to a wider network of like-minded residents and groups who now share similar purposes and have acknowledged they do so.

Creating a shared sense of purpose not only increases community commitment, but it also enhances civic engagement as community members become effectively involved in public issues in ways that benefit the whole community and help achieve the collective vision. Creating change in a community is tough work, and many obstacles have to be overcome. One main obstacle is the intimidation many residents feel not knowing how to have an effect on things as they are or will be. Being part of a process which results in a shared sense of purpose means you know that there are others in the community who share similar ideas and are similarly committed to them. These are people you can count on to be supportive and helpful just as they can count on you. This collective sense of empowerment provides a renewed sense of being able to overcome difficulties and get things done together, to build the kind of civic partnerships necessary for community change and to be involved in the civic processes that exist in your community.

Shared Purpose is the Heart of Leadership

Perhaps most important to our discussion of the development of community leadership and increased civic engagement is the recognition that shared purpose is at the foundation of our understanding of what constitutes leadership itself. If you recall, this series uses a definition from Rost (1991) for leadership: “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and (*collaborators*) who intend real changes that reflect their mutual (*shared*) purposes.”¹⁵ Being engaged in the civic life of the community means taking up a role in public affairs and having your life open to scrutiny by other citizens in the community which is why it can be intimidating. It is also why it is important

¹⁵ J.C. Rost (1991) *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publications. (*Italics mine.*)

for people to understand that effective leadership is not about single individuals, but rather relationships built upon multi-directional influence and shared purpose. If CLDE participants can learn that it is about working together toward an objective that represents a core value in the community and will benefit the collective whole, then CLDE organizers will have achieved an important objective themselves and overcome significant hurdles in their civic affairs.

This shared purpose or vision comes from a comprehensive process involving many members of the community in an authentic dialogue about values, dreams, and desires for the future that includes themselves and the rest of their families and community members. It results from a dialogue based in diversity because these values and ideas are unlikely to be all alike, but each is to be valued for itself just as each individual is valued. Being inclusive means finding ways to make sure all of this diversity becomes part of the final product in some fashion so that each idea is respected and each participant feels like they have made a contribution. In doing so, they are more likely to make a material contribution when the need arises for implementation and action.

“Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual shared purposes.”
= J.C. Rost