



# COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

## Community Leadership Development Education (CLDE) Empowerment

by Kenneth Pigg

**E**mpowerment is a popular topic among those who are concerned about leadership development. This is largely because so many people in today's society feel powerless and alienated from the institutions of democracy and those who operate them.<sup>1</sup> At the community level, this may be less of a problem since most local officials managing these institutions are known to the public. They may be friends or neighbors, dentists or teachers, the local mechanic or farmer down the road.

Empowerment is, obviously, closely related to our understanding of power. Fundamentally, empowerment means giving power to another, but there is rarely any direct transfer of power. Instead, we can think about empowerment as transferring power resources to others. Except for those in institutional positions, community leaders rarely have a strong sense of authority. Rather, they influence based on personal skills, competence and networks of relationships that extend others' access to resources. Empowerment involves the ability to make choices, which means that empowered leaders have both the resources to act and the promise of success (Pigg 2002).<sup>2</sup> The necessary sense of efficacy refers to the ability

of people to define what they want and then act upon those desires, which includes a number of personal skills and/or knowledge.

For individuals, empowerment may result from personal actions, relationships with those who share their "power" and others' actions to remove structural obstacles (such as lack of education or language ability). When thinking about community leadership development education programs, empowerment can happen in various ways, e.g. sponsoring someone for a CLDE course or holding "graduation ceremonies" from the CLDE course. This discussion explores the concept of empowerment and how it may be achieved.

### Three Sources of Empowerment

Empowerment involves: (1) individual efficacy, (2) recognition by others and (3) knowledge of how to empower others (Pigg, 2002). Most leadership development programs exhibit little explicit understanding of power and empowerment. There is an implicit assumption that knowledge is power and directly produces action—that knowing what to do is the same as knowing how to do it. While personal skills are taught and practiced, efficiency in the broader sense is not often addressed. There are few curriculum materials that explore this area. Some leadership development programs address

1 Lerner, Michael (1996). *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism*. Redding, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.

2 Pigg, Kenneth (2002). "Three Faces of Empowerment: Expanding the Theory of Empowerment in Community Development." *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 33-1 (107-123).

empowerment indirectly by using nomination programs, sponsors for participants, formal recognition efforts, mentoring programs and appointment of a selection committee (Moore, 1988).<sup>3</sup> What seems to be missing is the understanding that empowering others involves recognizing the concept of shared leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 1987),<sup>4</sup> and there are numerous resources available in this area.

This last observation resurfaces the notion of empowerment. CLDE program organizers should never consider the formal program curriculum adequate by itself. Rather, there should be reinforcing actions taken with regard to the existing leadership and the broader community that will support participant empowerment. The selection procedure used to enroll participants is important, as is the way people are integrated into leadership roles after the program's completion. With the support of Ariel Armony's (2004)<sup>5</sup> argument that inequality is an important factor in civic engagement and William Wagner's (2004)<sup>6</sup> observation that civic capital is higher in cities with lower diversity are accurate, people of all races and income classes should be provided the necessary financial and professional support to make it possible for them to participate. Essentially, everyone should have equal opportunity to be selected as a participant in a CLDE program. Recognition of their newly developed capacity and their willingness to serve the community should be publicly established with coverage by local news media and representatives of local organizations in need of continuing leadership (Moore, 1988). Removing social and financial obstacles to empowerment is an important step beyond the specific educational program design itself (Pigg, 2002). Nevertheless, the design process is important and represents another opportunity for empowerment and civic engagement. The design of the CLDE established in your community should not be the product of external experts, but rather a collaboration of local leaders and officials, assisted by leadership educators. The design

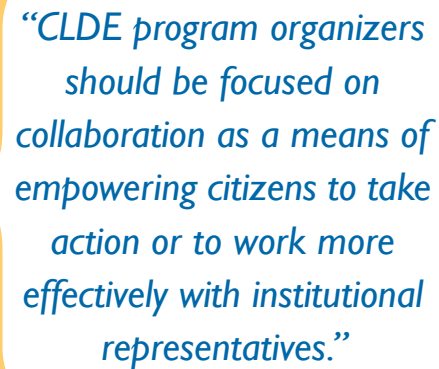
---

3 Moore, Carl (1988). *A Colorful Quilt: The Community Leadership Story*. Indianapolis, IN: National Association of Community Leadership Organizations.

4 Kouzes, James and Barry Posner (1988). *The Leadership Challenge: How to get extraordinary things done in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

5 Armony, Ariel C. (2004). *The Dubious Link: Civic engagement and democratization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

6 Wagner, William E., III (2004). "Beyond Dollars and Cents: Using civic capital to fashion urban improvements." *City and Community*, 3-2 (157-173).



“CLDE program organizers should be focused on collaboration as a means of empowering citizens to take action or to work more effectively with institutional representatives.”

process is a learning experience itself, and it plays an important role in leadership development.

## Empowerment: Knowing How

While learning about the technical aspects of community issues is important, being able to approach and act in certain situations requires different areas of knowledge and skill. As noted previously, CLDE discusses learning the elements of an issue and the different perspectives that make that issue complicated or debatable. One effective approach has been presented by David Chrislip and Carl Larson (1994).<sup>7</sup> CLDE program organizers should be focused on collaboration as a means of empowering citizens to take action or to work more effectively with institutional representatives. Collaboration, according to Chrislip and Larson, operates from the premise that “...if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the...community” (p. 14). While we might argue about who the “appropriate people” are in a situation, the notion that citizens can work together or collaborate to establish a satisfactory solution is central to this idea of empowerment.

Furthermore, in contemporary society, traditional forms of leadership and views of who constitutes the leader(s) are out-of-date and ineffective. The small group of influential people that previously controlled the community and held power unto themselves has become fragmented. Likewise,

---

7 Chrislip, David D. and Carl E. Larson (1994). *Collaborative Leadership: How citizens and civic leaders can make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



the global economy has both shifted the attention of most of these individuals to another arena and has diminished their local influence to control things.

The populist movements of the 1960s also contributed to the lessened power of the “old boys,” opening opportunities for greater influence from a variety of sources. Though the effects of these changes have made leadership more difficult, they have enhanced the nature of our democracy. These days, there may be no central authority figure or group to make a final decision. More often than not, communities become deadlocked in this situation, with no obvious resolution. In this case, the collaboration of citizens may be the most effective and empowering route.

How do people learn collaboration? Perhaps the first step is recognizing both the diversity of viewpoints in the community and how that diversity may contribute to a more effective solution. Many diverse ideas could generate more possibilities and help in determining the most efficient avenue of action. Another step includes learning more about how groups and organizations function in exploring and discussing ideas, determining desirable final solutions and organizing a course of action that will achieve their objective.

Additionally, learning how the community works, i.e. where the sources of political capital may be found and how to access that capital, is important. Sometimes this is as simple as learning the scope of legitimate authority each local institution may or may not have. It may also involve learning the norms of decision making, or what is considered “fair” in the community. Are hard-nosed

advocacy demonstrations and formal negotiations the way “we solve our problems here,” or is there another way that citizens typically think is more appropriate? Individuals who work in local institutions should also be observed. Learning what they think is important and how they prefer to tackle their responsibilities can empower citizens with the ability to frame issues and design courses of action worthy of institutional support.

## Empowerment: Knowing Who

Empowerment means recognition by the existing power structure and public acknowledgement by others as a “leader” in the community, including appointment to an agency board or election to a community office. While “the old boys’ network” seems to have diminished in power in our society, it still operates in many small rural towns. Even where such a network has been weakened, simply becoming acquainted with local officials and talking about local situations can lessen the intimidation citizens feel toward formal authority.

Joining a network of other empowered individuals, who have established an organized effort in the community, is resourceful and quite necessary. When you feel the urge to get involved, it is very helpful to know that others in the community are willing to join the effort. The members of your civic and social network possess important skills, knowledge or other resources to help advance the accomplishment of your common goal. Rasmussen et al (2011)<sup>8</sup> have completed research demonstrating the importance of social networks in civic engagement as part of a leadership development effort. This sort of empowerment can be difficult to achieve in one-on-one settings. However, approaching current networks, as well as building new ones through involvement in existing community organizations, could lead to increased empowerment.

---

<sup>8</sup> Rasmussen, C.A., J. Armstrong & S.A. Chazdon (2011, Winter). “Bringing Brown County: Captivating social capital as a means to community change.” *Journal of Leadership Education*, 10-1: 63-82.

## Empowerment: The Vision

Having a vision of what we want to become, as individuals or communities, is fundamental in engaging support and involvement. It can also empower calling for greater commitment, especially when dealing with really big challenges. For example, Greensburg, Kansas, residents responded to the total destruction of their community in a 2008 tornado by committing themselves to rebuild as a “green” community, inspiring and accomplishing goals no one in Greensburg would have thought possible before the tragedy.

On the other hand, our research shows that such a vision may not be necessary in all cases of civic engagement or community change efforts. In many instances, participants in CLDE programs recognize the importance of developing a vision, but often chose to act in response to purposes. These purposes can be as simple as improving the material quality of life for some sector of the community, demonstrating their commitment to the community’s well-being. They find like-minded people, mobilize necessary resources and proceed with their plan of action. In other words, they find empowerment from sources other than some grand vision.

## Empowerment: The Foundation for Action

In summary, as we think about developing leaders in our community for civic engagement, we need to explore good reference works in this field to generate appropriate and creative ideas. A coaching or mentoring approach would be a constructive way to fulfill this task, along with more direct efforts to develop leaders and the social relationships necessary for leadership.

As noted by Larry Dennis,<sup>9</sup> “Knowledge is only power when the individual knows how to apply it,” and applying

---

<sup>9</sup> Dennis, Larry (1993). *Empowering Leadership*. Portland, OR: Rising Tide Publications.



it takes courage, conviction, persistence, vision, and other characteristics of an effective leader. Empowerment is more than just knowing what needs to be done or how to do it. It involves confidence, self-efficacy and actions that lead to constructive change. Sometimes we can empower ourselves through learning and reflection. More often, empowerment is aided by the intervention of others, and leader development efforts can be successful in supporting civic engagement.

“Great leaders often inspire their followers to high levels of achievement by showing them how their work contributes to worthwhile ends.”

— Warren Bennis