



COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

Understanding Your Community

by Kenneth Pigg

Being successful as a community leader in any civic activity requires knowing something about your community, its history, its culture and its political structure. Every community is different, so learning about your particular community is important.

This learning can be achieved in many ways. Libraries are good places to start as they may have special sections devoted to local history. Local history organizations may use the library as a meeting place where you could learn firsthand what others in your community may already know. The local newspaper is an important source of current community activities and issues that also provides a way to identify local leaders with issues of interest to you. Other sources are more informal such as long-time residents of the community and professionals or business people who work in the community. Here is where social networking becomes an important part of learning to lead as joining local organizations and meeting people gives you a chance to learn how citizens view the community and its goings-on.

But, what do you need to know? The following discussion introduces some of the basics.

Local History is a Good Starting Point

The history of the community sheds light on its current status. Identifying its most significant events, both those for which the community is proud as well as those they would rather forget, can be helpful. In many rural communities, historical background is a cultural asset and often attracts visitors as the centerpiece of a tourism development program. Local schools or other public buildings may be named after historical figures people want to remember as good examples of civic leadership. Knowing why those people are considered important in the community may provide a good example to follow in

encouraging new activity to improve the community.

Local history is also a way to learn about the cultural roots of the community. Many rural places were settled by one or a few families who may have come from similar backgrounds as immigrants years ago. The cultural heritage they brought with them may still be present in various ways in the community today. For example, communities with a strong German heritage are often known to be progressive and very civic minded as well as having certain religious preferences depending on what their



specific background may be. The heritage may be related to occupations that were important locally when the community was established such as farming or mining. Communities with such backgrounds are usually known to be inhabited by hardworking people who demand respect related to their occupations. Elders may also expect young people to continue in these occupations and carry on family traditions. The values early community members placed on education, social services, civic engagement and public safety can often be determined by examining local historical sources and observing what is going on today. community needs.

Community Culture Norms are Mirrored

How communities are governed is strongly linked to the culture of the community. Culture means those ideas, values, relationships and behavioral norms passed from one generation to the next. For example, a strong value placed on individualism and personal responsibility may make organizing collective action more difficult. The idea that relationships and recognition should be based on status rather than achievement is another value position that could affect how people collaborate. So, if governance is related to collaboration and cooperation in the community, a strong sense of individualism may be an obstacle to such participation. Elements of culture that become embedded in persistent and generally accepted patterns of behavior are referred to as norms. People are expected to conform to these norms which are considered the “glue” holding people together in the

community and produce a sense of “order” in community undertakings.

Another element of culture is related to the inclusive nature of social relations. Contrary to the connotation of “community” gatherings as being a welcome environment for peers amongst the community, many citizens perceive these public gatherings as being only for “certain people.” As such gatherings are important social events where civic ideas are often discussed, the perception of inclusiveness is important. These gatherings are also valuable means for integrating new residents into community affairs and often provide settings in which relations and interpersonal trust can be established.¹

Attending these gatherings is a very good way to learn more about the community’s culture. When attending, think about how many such events are available to citizens each year, whether many people are involved in the organization of these gatherings, whether the nature of the conversations are purely social or involve civic topics, the social characteristics of those attending (vs. the characteristics of all citizens), and whether community leaders attend.

Citizen perceptions and prioritization of the community’s needs are also important topics for new leaders to explore. Communities may statistically fall into similar categories, yet each one prioritizes its problems and solutions differently. For instance, similar poverty rates in two communities may be viewed very differently. Perhaps in one, a recent factory closing has led to higher numbers while in another community a recent influx of immigrants may be contributing to the rate. Depending on how communities view these two different situations, citizen priorities and responses may be vastly different. Thus, asking questions and listening to other citizens is an important way to learn about the ways in which people interpret and value various aspects of the community.

¹ For more on this idea, see The Harwood Institute, 1996. Public Capital: The Dynamic System that makes Public Life Work. Retrieved 5/15/2011 from <http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/index.php/index.php?ht=d/DoSurvey/i/861/TPL/puborder/pid/13453>

The Way in Which a Community is Organized

Ideally, communities are organized to accomplish collectively agreed upon goals. Therein lies potential problems. If only a small portion of the citizenry shares a particular vision, the present social organization does not work very well to benefit the whole community. Competing views of what is important often exist. But more often, different groups work on differing agendas without much regard for others. For example, a group of business leaders may want to focus resources on economic development while a group of concerned parents want to focus on education. Knowing the various agendas of community groups can help create a better understanding of how the community works and where future opportunities and challenges may exist.

Another aspect of community organization is the concept of “social control,” especially where the allocation of resources is in question. Often the largest organization(s) in the community hold the greatest influence on resource allocation. Sometimes, organization size can be offset by the status of the members in another organization. Understand the size and relative influence of each local organization can thus be a valuable insight for leaders.

The diversity of local organizations in the community presents a potential resource as well as a potential source of conflict. The diversity represented by numerous religious or cultural organizations can provide innovative viewpoints to aid in generating problem-solving ideas. On the other hand, these differences can also be the source of community conflict if community actions appear to favor certain organizations’ interest over others’.

Informally organized groups in the community may also be valuable information sources. Conversations over morning coffee in the local diner may provide invaluable insights to the informal structure of the community. The informal structure may consist of relationships of a social nature, including social groups and gatherings that can offer more relaxed dialogue than a traditional business environment. Over time, these informal interactions can provide an accurate sense of how things are accomplished in a community.

Such informal organization is often based on status—

people associating with others they view as having equal status. As is often heard it is not “... what you know but whom you know and who you yourself are...” that matters. Status may be determined by gender, race, nationality, economic position, occupation, length of residence and/or family background. This is why immigrants may find difficulty becoming integrated into a community, especially a small one where their differences (skin color, language, dress) may be more noticeable. Strong leaders seek to recognize these differences, understand what they mean to local citizens and work to identify agendas that are relevant to the different groups in order to mobilize the necessary support for success in community endeavors.

As noted by a well-respected sociologist years ago,²



“Since in every community there is already an established way of getting particular things done, we must use as far as possible the existing setup in order to achieve the best results.”

“You’re Not From Around Here are You?”

Leaders may often hear this question directed at them when they express ideas that do not conform to local values or express themselves in ways that are acceptable by local citizens. The question may be the “ultimate put down” in the community as it separates the individual from everyone else living there. One of the more difficult characteristics to learn about a community is how the community at large pressures others to conform to existing norms. These forms of social control may involve a range of responses from very overt tactics to simply leaving someone out of the communication loop when a decision is being made. “Outsiders” typically have no credibility and are considered to lack

² Sanders, Irwin T. 1953. *Making Good Communities Better*, Revised Edition. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.

the same stake in local decisions because they have not lived in the community long nor developed the same social network that long term members have. In response to this dynamic, new leaders may find value in understanding these particular perspectives and then seeking to transcend them by linking ideas to other values that are important to the community. Also, developing relationships with those in the community that have attained social status in the community may help build necessary bridges.

A Systematic Viewpoint is Essential

Finally, understanding the community as a holistic social system is important for leaders in the community. In every community, many “patterns” will define acceptable behavior. These patterns may even be contradictory or conflicting in some fashion. Successful leaders realize that actions benefiting the whole community in the long term are of greater importance than those related to narrow self-interests. Likewise, success in community leadership requires recognizing that the material welfare of their own institution, business or profession is closely tied to the welfare of others and that progress made in one area at the expense of another is not really a community benefit.

Further, many observers have noted that a healthy community is a “whole” community where problems are being solved with broad involvement and dialogue, where citizens have a strong sense of loyalty to the community and each other, and where people are confident that any disagreements can be settled without overt conflict. Healthy communities listen to all points of view and work to find ways to take them into account. Healthy communities know that leadership can emerge from different sources at different times to meet community needs.³



SRDC Series: Leadership and Civic Engagement

Publication #268

³ Sanders, op cit. 4

⁴ Wheatley, Margaret J. 2011. *Walk Out, Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.