

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

Training for Community Leaders

What Does Leadership Really Mean?

The definition of leadership has changed dramatically in the last quarter century.

Before, leadership meant knowing all the right answers. ***Today, it means asking the right questions.***

Once, leaders were people who announced decisions they had already made. ***Now, leaders are expected to involve many others in the process of making decisions.***

In the past, leaders were pictured as older, as white, and as male. ***Today, leaders increasingly are young as well as old, people of color as well as Caucasians, women as well as men.***

For leaders of an older generation, some of these changes are difficult to accept. They were accustomed to others looking to them for leadership. Others were accustomed to looking to them for answers. In the community setting, these changes are no less important than they are in the world of business, or government, or education.

It's common to hear leaders described as people of vision. Today, what we mean is that leaders will help a community of people picture together what kind of community they all want in the future.

It's common to hear leaders described as people of wisdom. Today, what we mean is that leaders will help a community understand the implications of the increasing rapidity of change in the world that surrounds them, and then guide the community through a process of making wise choices that reflect community values and build on local strengths.

It's common to hear leaders described as people of action. Today, what we mean is that leaders will help others feel comfortable in assuming responsibilities for getting things done, in concert with a deliberate plan for action that specifies goals, establishes schedules, and evaluates progress.

Some Ideas on How Leaders Behave

In the community setting, leadership today is more often a team activity than an individual task. That is not strikingly different from other settings. The so-called Japanese management model, which is built on worker cooperation in a team setting, originated in American management theory and is slowly finding its way into business and government operations throughout the industrialized world. The reason is that people feel better about themselves, make better decisions, remain more loyal to overall objectives, and produce better quality products and services when they work in a cooperative atmosphere...as part of a team. Each individual has the chance to see how her or his contribution fits into the whole.

Healthy communities today operate in much the same way.



Thomas Cronin, a political scientist who writes extensively about political leadership, compares today's leaders to the role of **coach, orchestral conductor** or **film director**. In each case, he points out, the person in the lead role has to get others to work together as a team. Only then will the job get done.

Perry Smith, an American military leader who has written about leadership in large organizations, describes leadership in terms of "fundamentals." Those fundamentals, translated into community terms, include:

- trust and respect for others
- problem-solving skills
- communication skills
- trust in their own intuition
- skill in running meetings
- understanding of how organizations work
- being open-minded and approachable
- ability to combine substance and style
- exuding integrity

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, after studying 90 leaders in business and other enterprises, concluded that these leaders used five "key skills." In their book, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, they describe those skills as:

- the ability to accept people as they are
- the capacity to approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past
- the ability to treat people close to you with the same courteous attention that you extend to strangers
- the ability to trust others, even if the risk seems great
- the ability to do without constant approval and recognition from others

What's most important about these characteristics is that they go beyond what leaders *think* and *believe*. They also reflect what leaders say and do. Someone with leadership potential who does not behave like a leader will not be perceived as a leader. People who are perceived as serving themselves, rather than others, are not leaders.

Roles and Responsibilities of Community Leaders

Community leadership is similar to many other leadership roles. But it has its unique aspects, as well. It is more public. As it is often not compensated, it comes with fewer tangible rewards. It is subject to greater political pressure. It must satisfy a much broader and more diverse constituency.

Thomas Cronin describes what he terms three "stages" of leadership that are relevant to the community setting. On those stages, Cronin sees:

- In Act I, the *troublemakers*, who "stir things up" and "get things going"
- In Act II, the *movement organizers*, who "set agendas" and "organize others to push causes"
- In Act III, the *power brokers*, who exert significant influence through reputation or position



The role and responsibility of community leaders takes on greater complexity in times of volatile and unpredictable change. John P. Kotter, author of *The Leadership Factor*, writes in the *Harvard Business Review* that “**management is about coping with complexity**” while **leadership “is about coping with change.”** Says Kotter, “...doing what was done yesterday, or doing it five percent better, is no longer a formula for success.”

Though Kotter is writing about leadership in business, his advice is also relevant to communities that find themselves, like businesses, surrounded by a vastly more complex, dynamic and competitive marketplace or environment. “Major changes are more and more necessary to survive and compete effectively in this new environment,” Kotter says. “More change always demands more leadership.”

The community leader today plays a different role than in the past. In many ways it is more difficult because of the times in which we live. Change is now a constant; modern transportation and communications have transformed a far-flung globe into one highly interdependent marketplace; the patterns of society and economy that once predicted the future no longer work even to explain the present.

In this age, community leaders must assume responsibility for these major roles:

- Helping their community, through processes open to citizen participation, *articulate* and then *communicate* a vision that most citizens can embrace with enthusiasm.
- Matching community *needs* with available community skills and accessible internal and external *resources*.
- Specifying *realistic strategies* that can be undertaken today to move the community in the direction it must go to transform today’s vision into tomorrow’s reality.

Finally, people facing the challenge of community leadership should remember that what we’ve learned about leadership in the last quarter century turns the old adage upside down. Leaders are made, not born. That means that leadership can be learned. It’s not something you just have. It is something that many people can acquire.

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