

COMMUNITY BUILDING

EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

More often than not, strong healthy communities are those who have effective leaders at the helm. The rapid and profound changes affecting our communities today call for a new type of leader to guide them into the next century. Characteristics of these new leaders include inclusiveness, empowering others, visionary, agents of change, learning by doing, committed, inspirational, collaborator, team player, view leadership as a process, and, shared decision making.

The new functions of community leadership include responding to change, identifying and mobilizing resources, and developing networks and relationships within their community and with neighboring and other communities in the region.

These new leaders help the community define reality for itself, distinguish whether an issue is an opportunity or a threat, and devise strategies for addressing them. In this context, the primary function of a leader is to bring the community together to define a vision for itself and create a plan to get there, and encourage and empower others to act. They facilitate the process of leadership rather than being an individual leader.

Effective leaders don't actually do all the work - they recruit and empower others to help address the situation. They engage community members so the community has buy-in on the project and therefore "owns" it and the results. As facilitators, these leaders can't do it alone - the community must be ready and willing to act. They continually recruit new members to join in the work, get people excited about the work and then hand it over when there is a willing body.

The new leaders recognize the interdependency of the many issues and systems in a community, and develop ways for the community members to dialogue and deliberate about how to address them. They are open and receptive to input and involvement from community members in the policy setting and decision making processes. They practice shared and democratic decision making. They advocate for a community culture of open communication, neutral public dialogue, trust, respect, active listening, diversity, and active participation and involvement in decision making.

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They recognize the driving force behind many engaged community members is self-interest. Therefore they work to recognize the common issues behind the myriad of self-interests and to empower individuals to work together for the collective good of the community. Though they might not personally like individuals, they put aside their differences to work toward the common good. Effective leadership puts community interests above personal differences.

As collaborators and change agents, the new leaders ask questions, conduct research, learn from others, and apply information. As team players, they learn from the experiences of other leaders, individuals, and communities - they don't reinvent the wheel. And they share the credit for success broadly.

To be effective, leaders must continually develop their skills such as communication, human relations, perception, reflection, learning, question-framing, and thinking.

Strong communities recognize the need for, value of, and strength in a broad, inclusive, multilevel leadership structure. Here, decision making is performed by a broad based representation of engaged citizens, empowered by a cadre of skilled leaders, and ultimately guided by a common vision created by the community.

Resources:

Building Communities from the Grassroots - Community Development Academy, University of Missouri. Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community. Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr. Kettering Foundation, 1999.