

Community Leadership

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Recently, a group of ladies - mostly grandmothers - at Town Park Village in the Overtown area of Miami were concerned about safety and related drug activity in the neighborhood. They determined through a series of study circle dialogues¹ that they could work together to address these concerns by starting with improved lighting. They organized to prepare a proposal to secure funds from some public and private sources and they held weekly fish fries to raise additional money. The group was successful in raising funds and getting the new lighting installed. The lighting has contributed to an increased sense of security for them and other residents. They shared their success with other communities and have remained together as a leadership group to build on this success and take on new challenges for the benefit of the neighborhood. (D. Levine, personal communication, October 6, 2010).

We think and talk about leadership in a variety of contexts: organizations, neighborhoods, communities, and societies. In neighborhoods and communities, we hope for local individuals who are willing and able to assume some responsibility for community betterment by being “out front” to ignite and facilitate action (Chaskin et al, 2010). The modest example above highlights some basic assumptions about community leadership that I will outline in this brief position paper. First, community leaders are agents of change. They want to make a meaningful difference on the social issues that are important to them and the communities in which they live. Second, community leaders are driven by a set of core ideals and principles of community action. Third, having or acquiring technical leadership skills or a formal position is not enough to make one an effective and transforming leader in communities. Fourth, leadership in communities is more complex and beyond the efforts of any one individual charismatic leader. Lastly, community leadership is *praxis* – action informed by practical wisdom and theory that is consciously reflected on in order to generate learning and new action. Throughout this piece, I draw on examples and stories provided by a number of community partners and colleagues working in communities² to build a humble model of community leadership for consideration.

The Purpose of Community Leadership is Social Change

The purpose of community leadership is building power for social change; change in human or community conditions, social structures, dominant cultural beliefs, or prevailing practices (Hickman, 2009). It is a collaborative, values-based process in which people first recognize a gap between what “is” and what “should be”, then take purposeful action. Like the women from Town Park Village, people take on leadership roles in communities because they see that something must be done. They don’t like what they see and want to change it. Leadership in this

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¹ A *study circle* is simply a small group of people who meet multiple times using a structured format to discuss a public concern and plan action. Visit <http://www.everyday-democracy.org> for more information.

² Special thanks to Daniella Levine, Christine Bird, Elena Christy, Geoff Nelson, Brian Christens, Isaac Prilleltensky, Bob Newbrough, Rebecca Toporek, Tod Sloan and John Murphy for providing insightful examples and ideas for this paper.##

context is a collective effort to intentionally modify, alter, or transform the world around us. Whether it is the first “small win” (Weick, 1984) of bringing better lighting to a low-income neighborhood, the creation of new channels for community voice, or the transformation of an entire school system, community leadership is “a creative and generative act – literally bringing new realities into being through collaboration with others” (Couto et al, 2002, p. 2).

Community funding agencies and private sector leaders often wish that grassroots community leaders were better followers who refrain from making them uncomfortable with their social change agenda. But community leaders are agitators and instigators of change. Community leadership is not about maintenance of the status quo. They want transformation in societal institutions, and the emancipation of individuals and groups from disadvantage, exclusion, and oppression through citizen action within participatory democracy. Community leadership promotes participatory democracy through people power, in which an ever-increasing majority of ordinary citizens becomes involved in addressing critical social problems and leading social change (Moyer, 1990). Community leadership is about building power and civic capacity for change in communities. Civic capacity exists in a community when a residents can influence important decisions made by external public and private sector actors and when they can access economic and other resources to achieve its own agenda (Saegert, 2006).

Core Ideals and Principles of Action

Community leadership is a value-driven enterprise. Many community change efforts are led by a cross-sector group of leaders who come from all parts of the community and hold a range of viewpoints. However, community leaders are connected by the values of *social justice* (including promoting equality and fairness, as well as a respect for social difference), *social inclusion*, *social self-determination*, and *social solidarity* (Butcher et al, 2007). These shared values are at the forefront of community leadership and inform desired ends as well as the process used to get there.

Community leaders take action using processes guided by principles of critical consciousness, empowerment, and collective action. Critical consciousness is an understanding or awareness of one's social and political context, an increased sense of one's power to shape that context and a heightened disposition toward exercising that power. Community leaders work with others to "enter more fully into their reality, know it better and transform it" (Freire 1970, p.56). They seek change through organizing people with the aim to educate and activate as many of the participating interests as possible, give away as much credit as possible, and remain as invisible as possible as the community acts together.

Cuoto (1995) uses the term “citizen leadership” to describe leadership that facilitates organized action among people and groups traditionally underrepresented in official decision-making processes. It takes as its premise the dignity and worth of each individual regardless of race, age, gender, income, or any other factor. Community leadership through organizing is a platform for the development of collective power, shared identities, mutual respect, political will, and the capacity for collective action (Speer, Hughey, Gensheimer, & Adams-Leavitt, 1995; Warren, 2001).

Technical Skills are Necessary but not Sufficient

Leadership development in communities often prioritizes the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge by community residents. Indeed, a community leader is someone who is able to facilitate communities and groups to identify assets and needs and work toward meeting their goals. They help the community identify and make the most of their internal resources and acquire needed external resources. In order to do these things, leaders need many skills including interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills, they need to be able to define objectives and maintain direction, provide and maintain group structure, facilitate group action and task performance, and represent the group to external audiences.

Technical skills are important, and necessary, but not sufficient. If what we hope from community leaders is that they drive collective action, attention must be paid to the substance of community leadership (Warren, 2001). One feature of substance is that they are able to imagine alternative social arrangements. One critical role of community leaders involves “communicating imagined futures and creating new meanings that inspire action” (Hickman, 2009, p. 25). They energize persons, inspire confidence, demonstrate cultural competence, and illustrate how resources can be allocated in new ways that solve problems, build on strengths, and meet needs. (Murphy, 2010). This requires the ability to help others come to political judgment, that is to weigh alternatives, negotiate differences, analyze power dynamics, and strategize a course of action together (Warren, 2001). They are attuned to issues of power and able to map the political terrain to achieve their goals. They examine the politics of resource distribution in the community with an eye toward exercising power in the interest of greater equity (B. Christens, personal communication, October 4, 2010).

A current example of the substance of community leadership is the initiative undertaken by Dave Lawrence in Florida to create a Children’s Movement (<http://childrensmovementflorida.org>). Lawrence developed a social marketing strategy to bring attention to children’s issues in Florida. He created a bi-partisan movement, informed the public about the dismal state of affairs for children in the state, gathered support from media, and hopes to influence the legislative process by making children a priority in the state. He has a vision for what could be, he spoke out, organized opinion makers, developed clear goals, identified priorities for children, advocates for policy changes, and energizes action (I. Prilleltensky, personal communication, October 4, 2010).

Dave Lawrence is motivated by a concern for children and his community. The ladies of Town Park Village were motivated by a concern for the safety of other residents and particularly the local children. Community leaders are motivated by a concern for the community and “cold anger” at the injustice that its people suffer in communities (Warren, 2001). This motivation is backed up by commitment. Leaders are willing to employ their talents in ways that benefit others and the community and that encourage others to play an active role. (Chaskin et al, 2001) Many community leaders endure heavy personal sacrifice to do this work.

Community psychologist and activist Tod Sloan alludes to this commitment and sacrifice when he shares another important quality of community leaders he calls “ubiquity”.

They show up for every event that might be relevant to their main issue. They volunteer to do everything from grunt work to strategic planning, while shying away from taking on centralized leadership roles - although they may have one or more of these. They understand that others need to see that all levels of work are important and valued, and they demonstrate this directly and with good spirit, using these opportunities to educate and motivate others. It is important to note that ubiquity has a down side: possible burnout. But the ubiquitous community leader also knows how to have fun and engage in restorative practices, so one will see him or her at fun and entertaining community events, dancing, singing, in costume, etc (Personal communication, October 6, 2010).

This leadership quality makes me think of one of our community partners Daniella Levine, President and CEO of the Human Services Coalition in Miami. Daniella is everywhere; she's at every meeting and community forum related to the public concerns of her organization, she speaks in classrooms, at events and rallies, she shares resources and information on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, and she's often quoted in news articles and featured in opinion pieces – ubiquitous indeed!

Community Leadership is a Shared Practice

David Johnston, recently installed as the new Governor General of Canada, describes leadership as the “recognition of the total dependence on the people around you”. (The Globe and Mail, 2009, July 27, 0:22). Community leadership is a shared activity that requires a strong network of close, trusting relationships. It is a process, not a position, and is inclusive and accessible to all people with the motivation and commitment to action. Community leadership requires attention to a network of actors and the other contexts in which a leader's influence efforts take place (Hickman, 2009).

Hickman (2009) points out the importance of “invisible leadership”: the “shared leadership processes in which peers lead and influence each other to achieve group goals, including decisions about who among them can or should provide visible leadership on behalf of the group” (p. 204). He uses the example of the civil rights movement and how, though Martin Luther King Jr. and other ministers were the visible leaders of the movement, there was a cadre of invisible leaders - many of whom were women - who were the ones who initiated protests, formulated strategies and tactics, and mobilized other resources necessary for collective action (Barnett, 1993).

Community leaders recognize that their role in creating change is not a way to increase personal power but rather a means to increase the number of their fellow-leaders in the interest of collective power (Warren, 2001). The efficacy of community leaders comes from helping to shape a field in which others may participate (Wheatly, 1992). Burns (1978) uses the term “transforming leadership” to describe engaging with others in such a way together they “raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 20) so that fellow-leaders are engaged in collective purpose linked to social change. Like the women from Town Park Village, they share credit in the group, rather than having designated official leaders. Sharing leadership and building fellow-leaders is the key to sustainability in community action for change.

Leadership, at least initially, is important to inspiring and directing a community. But if growth is really going to emanate from below, leaders must be both organic to communities and unobtrusive. That is, these persons should be neither outsiders nor given special positions reserved for experts or other elites. Through true leadership the need for leaders disappears, as communities recuperate their ability to become self-directed. (Murphy, 2010, pp. 2-3)

A colleague of mine shares a similar notion of leaders “disappearing” when describing the director of a local community center in Madison, Wisconsin - a person he considers a community leader.

This particular leader often fades to the background as the people that he is developing take on more prominent roles. In other words, his leadership role is less about his own visibility and more about catalyzing community leadership, more broadly. (B. Christens, personal communication, October 4, 2010)

Unfortunately, this framing of community leadership is sometimes complicated by the fact that many communities have been conditioned to look to outsiders and experts for help. Over time, their skills needed to achieve autonomy have atrophied due to years of exclusion, marginalization and neglect. This is exacerbated by the fact that in many current forms of community development, leadership is thought to best originate "from above" because a belief that local citizens lack the necessary talents and ambition (Murphy, 2010). Unfortunately, this belief can get propagated throughout communities so that residents become unable to see their own assets and power. A former student of mine shares a related experience of this working in Kenya:

When I travel overseas to work directly with the community I see my role more as a colleague and an equal however the community tends to put me more in a leadership role. I am approached for advice in areas I do not always feel equipped to advise. The leadership role is partly cultural, as it appears many villagers think that people from the West have all this knowledge that can solve a lot of their problems. (E. Christy, personal communication, October 8, 2010)

There is a potential role for so-called experts or power-holders in addressing social problems with community. Warren suggests we need both “authority leaders” and ‘salt of the earth” leaders in order to make a dent in the wicked problems our communities face (Warren, 2001, p. 213). Both can work side by side, learn from each other, share responsibilities, burdens and credit. David Lawrence, meet the women of Town Park Village.

Community Leadership as Praxis

Finally, community leadership requires ongoing learning and flexibility as leaders work together toward a desired goal. Former Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) director Edward T. Chambers suggests that the action taken by community leaders has a two-fold significance: 1) effecting results and 2) learning and growing in order to deal with increasingly complex issues and to win more substantial victories (as cited in Warren, 2001). Not action alone, but *praxis* – theoretically

informed action that, in turn, is consciously reflected upon in order to learn, grow, and plan new action. Learning results from “acting with feedback” (Harman, 1998, pp. 193-194) - continuously reviewing and reflecting on action while questioning and reviewing the action and underlying assumptions in light of new knowledge from experience and theory (Butcher, 2007).

The ladies of Town Park Village celebrate, take stock, and learn from their victory, but we can be certain that they are not content to stop at better lighting in their neighborhood. There are bigger fish to fry; they want bigger changes. They are working together to build collective power for continued action to make their community better. They are community leaders – that’s just what they do.

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