

Community Leadership PDF Resource

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COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

By Mark Creyton

There has been growing interest in and discussion about the importance of community leadership in effecting community renewal and social change. A great deal of the leadership writing, however, is focused on traditional leadership roles within the profit or non-profit sector. While the recent discussion has shifted toward valuing collaboration, emotional intelligence and emphasised the 'so-called' soft skills of facilitation and effective communication, there have been few attempts at examining the role and requirements of leadership outside formal organisations. In this paper I consider why community leadership is so important and then identify and discuss some key concepts around which community leadership can be considered.

The importance of leadership within the community.

From my experience of working in the field of community development, there has been a reluctance on the part of practitioners to focus on the importance and place of leadership. There seems to be a fear that leadership will be imposed on communities and / or will reflect a top down approach. Leadership is often confused with authoritarian approaches, with hierarchical structures and with directive approaches. Yet we require a particular type of leadership in communities within Australia to address the challenges we face, i.e. a type of leadership which is about facilitating and enabling people to act. Effective social action, community renewal and community development rely on leaders from all spheres and levels of the community. The work of the Industrial Areas Federation and similar community renewal projects in the US has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of such approaches.

It is necessary to identify, recognise and support community leadership within civil society. Civil society is that set of associations, organisations, informal networks and social movements in which people meet together, by choice, to work on issues of common concern. Volunteers play a fundamental role in sustaining civil society. Volunteers are engaged in all aspects of civil society: mutual aid and self-help; philanthropy and service to others; participation in the governance process of organisations, communities and government bodies; and advocacy and campaigning (Davis-Smith, 1999). Volunteers play leadership roles within neighbourhood centres and self-help/support groups, in community development projects, at cultural and sporting activities at the local and national level, as management committee members, as activists and campaigners in the rights and environmental movements, in providing community and health services and many more.

There are several reasons for focusing on leadership in this sphere. Firstly those in civil society often have greater scope for more innovative and exploratory approaches, as they can be less limited by organisational constraints, job roles and demands. Obviously they are only able to do this, if they have sufficient power and authority and are adequately resourced. Voluntary leaders may well be able to work across a range of spheres and organisations to elicit broad community action.

Secondly civil society is best placed to identify issues of public concern and facilitate action to ensure these are placed on the public agenda. Civil society has a proactive and critical role to play. This means it seeks to identify issues relevant to the whole of society, challenge government or the market about the impacts of its practices, change public opinion and propose possible solutions. Social action groups and those actively involved in campaigning and public awareness raising are important examples here. If we are to develop more equitable societies we need effective leadership to instigate those changes.



Thirdly civil society provides a venue for many leaders within its vast networks of associations, groups and more formal organisations. It provides a place for those least able to access leadership opportunities in the corporate or government arena to develop their skills and abilities. This has been particularly true for many women (Baldock, 1998). Such broad-based networks of leaders have the capacity to facilitate a wide range of community building and renewal. Michael Walzer (1983) has suggested that through providing a greater range of people with opportunities for leadership within different spheres of society, we also have a greater sharing of social goods and a more just and effective democracy.

Unfortunately although corporations and government have instituted a range of leadership programs, civil society is least resourced or structured to support community leadership within its sphere.

Some Key Concepts

The usual approaches to discussing the requirements of leadership are either to centre the discussion on a key concept (e.g. collaborative leadership or learning leaders) or to list a set of competencies or attributes for successful leaders. Often there is a mix of normative and more practical attributes for leaders. My approach, however, is to suggest some key issues and concepts that should help frame our discussion of community leadership. These should be regarded as points for discussion and debate rather than any prescriptive list or ideal characteristics.

The first issue is the need to do away with traditional notions of hierarchical leadership and one leader for all. If it is still to be a useful concept leadership needs to be reconceptualised. Like all concepts, our ideas of leadership are contextual and have changed over time. I would argue that at present community leaders are those who can facilitate effective action, those who can voice concern, those who can build effective networks, and those who can find common ground in the community while maintaining certain values of fairness and social justice. They are people who are willing to take initiative and make a difference. Perhaps the greatest challenge of redefinition is to move our concepts away from public figures and recognise leadership at all levels. We need to be wary of tight definitions that may well exclude those who approach their leadership from different perspectives. There is much to be learnt about alternative approaches to leadership from indigenous communities from social movements and from groups who have consciously set out to challenge existing power structures.

Leadership is often defined as the power of creating, capturing and promoting a collective vision. Having a purpose, and a passion for that purpose, is certainly essential, yet communities appear to be seeking practical visionaries. Visions may be grand, innovative and splendid but are they grounded in reality? Can they be acted upon? Leaders must recognise the complexity of the problems and the conflicts and challenges which exist within our communities and be realistic. The work is indeed often tedious and mundane, more about dialogue and consensus seeking, networking and community education. This is not always the most heroic type of visionary, yet a key learning from the last century is that totalising answers, simple solutions and utopian projects rarely work and often lead to far worse situations. Unachievable visions often disempower and disillusion those who work toward them.

If we are to create sustainable and just communities, it is time to consider values in our actions. Values will need to inform our visions and how we reach them. In the economic rationalist and efficiency driven approaches of the past twenty years we have seen a focus on instrumentalism, i.e. the ends justify the means. The central code of values has been money. Decisions have focused on outcomes devoid of a life code of values. Life values are those which preserve or support our fundamental quality of life through providing the basic necessities, supportive communities, sustainable environment and appropriate living and learning conditions (McMurtry, in Sumner, 2000). The first stage in this process is deciding what we value, what are our principles, what are we unwilling to sacrifice. Central to these considerations will be issues around social justice, equity, access, meaningful participation and fairness. But endlessly talking about our values is not the point; finally it is how they inform our actions which determines their importance. Leaders are inevitably role models. People judge you on what you do. It reminds us of Ghandi's famous words, "If you want to change the world, be that change."

There is currently a great focus on collaborative approaches to community problem solving and capacity building. Complex community change requires collaborative effort and we need to involve all those who can impact on that change and/ or who are impacted by it. Communities are webs of involvements and connections– some complex, others more superficial. They provide many of us with our sense of belonging, of who we are. In community we are constantly challenged with issues of inclusion and meaningful representation. How does everyone have an opportunity to participate if they wish and how do we deal with differences of many levels and types? How do we engage these broader communities? A concept with much to offer is the notion of common ground. Common ground is searching for that which we genuinely share. It considers both the process we use and the outcomes. It is not seeking the lowest common denominator or compromise. It requires commitment, openness and innovation. Essential to achieving common ground is dialogue. Dialogue is more than discussion; it based on trust and respect. It is a way in which we can deliberate on problems and reach consensus or agree to disagree.

We must also realise some interests may not be able to be accommodated. There are some individuals and institutions who are out to exploit others, who are unwilling to engage in dialogue, who seek only win/lose solutions. In any effective change or community effort there will be a number of strategies that will need to be used. We may need to consider strategies of public pressure, resistance or even confrontation to achieve our goals while ensuring we remain true to our values. One of the most critical issues is to come to terms with the use of power. Power is not a dirty word but it is a much disputed and complex term. Are effective leaders those who can let go of the sole use of power and enable people to do it themselves? Is the root of this new power, empowerment? We must, however, be careful to consider the very nature of politics and power, of interests and influence, of authority and control if we are to effect change. We must not be naïve about the use of and misuse of power.

Central to many of these concepts is a focus on capacity. The capacity of the individual, the group and the community. Traditional approaches to leadership have often focused on the needs of the community rather than on the capacity of the community to solve those problems. This has led to a costly service-oriented environment, creating clients out of citizens and setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy of social exclusion and client neighborhoods. It has led to a paternalistic concept of helping. Of doing for! Yet effective and sustainable communities will need to recognise and utilise all its people's capacities. We require a strengths based approach. People can act on their own behalf, but they may need support, time, resources and assistance along the way. The expert becomes a resource the community can use, not the one who sets direction or tells us what to do.

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of learning in creating effective communities, both as individual learning and social learning. We are now hearing more about learning cities and learning communities. A key requirement for leaders is the need to be critically reflective learners, to be willing to critically question our own assumptions as well as others and to move outside of convention. To question the obvious answers as well as answer questions. The issues which impact on our communities will need innovative approaches., We need to think outside the box, challenge traditional assumptions and consolidate our learnings from many areas. We will need to develop effective networks to share these learnings, and build a resource base to record our successes and what we can learn from our failures. How leaders can promote community education is a central question that deserves consideration.

Finally I would like to suggest that leadership is most importantly about making a difference. One model for this type of leader was Henry Spira. Spira was an animal rights activist who was able to achieve more in two decades than the many animal rights organisations had achieved in a century. He forced cosmetic companies to fund research into non-animal testing, he stopped many bizarre and unnecessary research projects on animals, he took on the fast food industry and the multinationals and achieved significant victories which reduced the suffering of millions of animals. His campaigning style was focused on many of the concepts we have discussed including collaboration, practical vision and values in action. His final rule however was always" Will it work?"(Singer, 1998)

In this article I have attempted to argue for a focus on community leadership within civil society and to commence a discussion on some of key issues around community leadership. I look forward to your responses.



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