

#06

RESEARCH DESIGN
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THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNIZING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

The importance of recognizing community leadership

Public spaces provide the realm where individuals come together and the civil society is active; the areas create a space-time continuum for political discourse, where people can connect and interact in a communicative experience. To urban planners and democratic theorists, the foundation of a public space is the fact that it is somewhere that is “open to all, unrestricted” and community leadership is an integral part of fostering a sense of unity and increasing social networks between members of the community. This leadership arises in a variety of forms, from individuals to teams of highly involved community members. Often times, individuals are non-elected and informal leaders (Bénit-Gbaffou and Katsaura 2014). However, leaders exist in all fields, ranging from education (Gold 2003) to tourism (Simon Chili and Nduduzo 2017). Successful community leadership, while debated how to truly achieve it, often has several uniting factors that distinguish it from non-successful community leadership. For example, the Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) identifies three major types of leadership: 1) administrative leadership is hierarchical and controlling, 2) enabling leadership encourages creative problem solving, learning and adaptability, and 3) adaptive leadership is a dynamic that empowers change (Uhl-Bien et al 2007). The way leadership is approached is essential to its success, as trying to bring together a community from a hierarchical structure can lead to resentment and feelings of disvalue. In situations of hierarchy, some members striving to incorporate their opinion may feel as though they cannot make significant decisions and are rather just informed of significant decisions (Purdue 2007). CLT goes on to break down what successful community leadership looks like into seven factors:

1. Leaders are embedded in the formal and informal networks of a community
2. Decision making is shared with the community
3. Leaders are operating in an open system, engaging with others
4. Leaders have a vision about the future of the community,
5. Leaders have practical management skills
6. Leaders have planning in place for their potential successors
7. Leaders have commitment, persistence, and energy (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007).

Additionally, community leadership should expand beyond one certain initiative, in order to address general community concerns and unite the community with a shared sense of belonging. Strong community leadership facilitates united membership, and that all members are able to make a difference within the group. Then, community members feel comfortable meeting each other’s needs, while developing emotional connection and trust through shared places and experiences, such as joint history and time spent together (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Additionally, it is advantageous for community leadership to not only include members who are deepening their leadership roles, but also through training

new leaders and broadening the scope of leadership. This allows for both the diversity of the neighborhood to be reflected, as well as a diversity of opinions from different individuals (Purdue 2007). These factors together stimulate a community experience that celebrates all of its members, and recognizes the leadership work that strives to create the best experience for all.

STRONG COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP FACILITATES UNITED MEMBERSHIP, AND THAT ALL MEMBERS ARE ABLE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WITHIN THE GROUP

In recognizing community leadership, we highlight those that dedicate their time to the betterment of the universal community experience. Connective leadership, which is aimed at uniting, rather than leading from a hierarchical position, includes: 1) Helping individuals connect with their goals (establishing their roles), 2) helping members collectively to explore the possibilities and potential of connecting with a common goal (effective team working), and 3) helping to create and sustain a creative space where collective leadership can flourish, fostering collaboration and enabling different voices to be heard. Thus, leadership will not necessarily come from just one direction, but connects individuals at all levels to each other and to their mutual goals (Kirk and Shutte 2004). However, it is difficult to incite collective leadership in a community if there is no recognition of the work that it takes to make this happen. There are a variety of means for recognizing community leadership, both in the individual sense and in the group sense. For example, Leadership Everyone is an Indiana-based organization that “publicly seeks out and honors individuals, projects or organizations who make significant, collaborative contributions that improve and transform our community” (Celebration of Leadership). In order to foster this celebration, they recognize examples of outstanding community and public service in the Arts, Community & Neighborhood, Education, Government, Public Service & Environment, and Health & Social Services. They carry out this recognition in a variety of ways, from a yearly conference where anyone can nominate a local leader, to a community leadership program that helps give individuals the tools to sharpen their leadership skills.

Another example is the Local Initiatives Community Support Organization (LISC), which funds grants to local groups such as service organizations, arts groups, child care providers, local business associations, and youth recognition groups (Capacity Building 2016). Essentially, their form of recognizing community leadership includes financial support for change-makers across the United States. Lead agencies such as LISC focus more on social services, leadership development of lead agency staff, and relationship building between organizations and their local government. A complementary process to this is including grassroots leadership groups that bring in local community members and develop leadership skills of residents, promoting involvement in civic life, and partnering with external agencies in order to focus on “resident-inspired development” (Gonzales 2017). Recognizing a community leader may not necessarily require funding or a special event, but can be as simple as recognition in the community newspaper. We suppose that acknowledging the impact of one’s work within the press stimulates feelings of self-value, as well as serves as a

model for inspiring other citizens on what their impact potential could be, although further research needs to be conducted in order to confirm this assumption.

However, it is important to note that when National Community Development Intermediaries (such as the LISC), work on enhancing community leadership, there may be adverse effects. For example, if external groups focus on redevelopment and community work through a real estate lens rather than a community building perspective, then city-sponsored development campaigns may prioritize only certain members of the community, specifically higher-income residents (McQuarrie 2013; Taylor 2000). Going forward, we present varying suggestions for effectively acknowledging community leaders and celebrating their impact, based on our review of how to establish successful community leadership.

Suggestions

When recognizing community leaders, it is essential to explore the network behind an individual or team that contributes to the success of that community leadership. Leadership is holistic; it is the product of the work of many individuals establishing a network for creation, debate, growth, and inclusiveness. Therefore, careful consideration should be taken when choosing individuals or groups to recognize. Nominations from citizens are a great way to understand how community members perceive the leaders in their communities. Additionally, when hosting community events that bring people together (fairs, races, celebrations), take a moment to recognize the people that helped facilitate the event, as well as thanking those that participated as well.

Another way to recognize community leadership through funding that goes beyond grants to individuals, but rather awards grants to the project or organization. For example, an Ohio-based organization called NeighborUp awarded \$2,000 to the event titled “Celebrating Community event on the Shores of Lake Erie.” This award supports both the continuation of the event and all those involved, as well as acknowledges the hard work from the variety of people that it takes to put the event together. Beyond this, award ceremonies, recognition in the press, and an emphasis on community leadership programming, all helps to recognize the work that everyone collectively puts in. We suggest that highlighting both individuals and entire groups is essential, as each style of leadership has their own merit. However, current literature has not yet examined the sociological impacts of how celebrating community leadership impacts both those being celebrated and the general public, and we find that this is an important opening in research to explore.

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