

What is Leadership?



Adapted from Article by Clark Anderson www.communitybuilders.org

Leadership is arguably the most important ingredient to building a strong Community.

And yes, there many other factors that help or hinder progress, but it is leadership that makes everything else that goes into creating a great community possible; leadership is the indispensable element of success.

Leadership comes in many forms. You don't have to be elected to the local municipal council to be an effective community leader. Indeed, many leaders never hold office or work in any type of official leadership position, but they manage to bring ideas and people together and make things happen.

I've seen communities that have all the cards stacked against them find ways to buck the odds and overcome the challenges of their situation to become great, thriving and prosperous places because they had great leaders. And I've seen places with endless opportunity squander their assets and potential because they lacked effective leadership.

What's more, the places with great leaders tend to create more of them, because leadership is contagious. Great leaders raise the bar of their community; they bring others into the fold and create a culture of leadership. This is a good thing, because leadership is to communities as chocolate chips are to cookies: the more the better. Places with strong and widely shared leadership know how to work together and get things done, while places with only a few dedicated leaders see slower progress, and people often burn out.

Moreover, I believe local leadership is only becoming more important. Among several reasons, two stand out: the increasing craziness and polarization of national politics, which are preventing anything from getting done, and changing economic and fiscal realities, which are changing how and where dollars are spent and will force most communities do more with fewer resources.

So... leadership is the critical foundation for community success, and effective leadership is going to become more important in addressing challenges and seizing opportunities.

What makes a great leader?

There are any number of books, articles, seminars and websites dedicated to the subject, but instead I asked that question of people who are, themselves, striving to become effective community leaders. Here is what they said:

Good leadership: knowing what you don't know and expanding knowledge as needed; seeking diverse opinions to inform decision-making; good communication and listening skills; putting community interest over personal agenda; strength to make difficult decisions; thinking long-term.

Poor leadership: focus on individual agendas; single-minded decision-making; do not consider different ideas or perspectives; cannot take criticism; not well informed; and do not plan beyond their tenure.

What does good leadership look like?

- Ability to build bridges and bring different people together.
- Political will – the ability to resist special interests in and make decisions for the larger community.
- Puts personal biases aside.
- Always understand they are a public servant first.
- Seeks broader perspectives and is open-minded – ability to change their mind.
- Listen to the community and invite different perspectives to the table.
- Challenge the norm or status quo (visionary) but can balance it with practicality.
- Explores all options and focuses on those that are achievable.
- Understands personal limitations – know what they don't know and pursues learning in areas of weakness.
- Makes good decisions for today, but plans beyond their tenure.
- Good listener – ability to guide people to consensus.

What does poor leadership look like?

- Focused on personal agenda.
- Single-minded (single issue focus).
- Making decisions for personal gain.
- Ego-driven; power trips.
- Makes emotion-driven decisions.
- Does not communicate.
- Defensive, cannot take constructive criticism.
- Focused on the past; backwards looking; “that’s the way we’ve always done it”.
- Micro-management.
- Uninformed; particularly those that think they know more than they do.
- Inability to make a decision or fear of making a decision.

Do you recognize any of these traits in yourself or your local community leaders?