

Community Leadership

By Rick Beauchamp

Leadership is one of the most discussed, and yet the least understood, disciplines in both the corporate and public sector worlds. Anand Khare, Senior Vice President, People and Processes, Kale Consultants, points out that leadership needs to be looked at holistically. It's not just about people leadership. Leadership is being a visionary, being able to forecast variables which are not visible to others, being able to change/alter the course, having true market/environment intelligence, commanding respect from followers, being able to take people with them, and being able to stand alone, when required, with conviction.

What makes a person a leader in their community? Were they born with such traits or did they develop them over time? How can you actively develop strong leadership for your community? These are questions often asked by members of the community. Early research on human behavior was directed toward finding inherited traits that would distinguish between leaders and non-leaders. Most researchers have concluded that inherited characteristics are not crucial to becoming a leader. Instead, they have focused on leadership as an ability, a process and a product.¹

Servant leadership is an increasingly popular management model that can be used in describing community leadership. Servant leadership is based on the idea of serving others – clients, employees, customers, or the community – as the first priority. Leaders have two responsibilities: to have “concern for tasks” and “concern for people.” Servant leaders are more centered on people than tasks. They start by wanting to serve and then come forward with the desire to lead. This kind of person is distinctively different from one who is a leader first, perhaps because of a desire for power or money.²

What are some of the key attributes of effective “community/servant leadership”? There are many commonalities with corporate leadership but there are some distinct qualities that are unique to leading from the grassroots of communities. Let's explore some key elements that separate “effective” from “mediocre” community leadership.

Focus on Community

Building a healthy, sustainable community should be the primary task of any community leader. Developing an organizational culture built on joint interest of the entire community, is vital in establishing a clear vision for the community.²

Listening

Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Listening should be instinctively applied by community leaders. It has been said that people will only believe you if they think you understand them. Leaders have traditionally been known for their decision- making and communication skills, but must also focus on careful listening to understand their community.²

Courage and Conviction

Community leaders are faced with tough decisions on a regular basis. An example is the common theme of applied pressure from groups within the community that can be very convincing and forceful. When considering matters before them it is important for community leaders to have the courage to make the best decision for the community at large and have the conviction to follow through on their decision and not flip-flop through special interest pressure.

Act with Integrity

It is important to take responsibility when things go wrong and to be honest in all your dealings with the general public. Fostering high integrity in the corporate culture is a good way to demonstrate the importance of high ethical standards being instilled in the minds of both political and appointed leaders in the organization.³

Foresight

Having the ability to anticipate outcomes help community leaders understand experiences from the past, assess the present, and look into the future to foresee the likely results of a decision. Leaders with these characteristics are perceptive, anticipative, and proactive.²

Treat People Fairly

It is important to value differences knowing that diversity creates new ways of considering issues. Know the community's traditions, history, and values and show fairness and respect when having to make decisions that may not always be accepted by all members of the community.

Keep Promises

One of the easiest ways to lose trust, is to renege on promises. It is important for community leaders to strive to make informed decisions and not to make commitments that cannot be delivered. The desire to try and please everyone all of the time has no place in effective community leadership.

Seek New Things

It is important to be open to new experiences and new ideas. Understanding that change is constant and that what worked yesterday may not be the right approach today. Having an attitude of being open to feedback is a gift that will help support and make better decisions by leaders. The need to look at better and more effective ways of delivering services in communities require leaders to look elsewhere for advice and examples.³

Value Volunteers

It has been acknowledged by many that the heart and soul of healthy, sustainable, complete communities are the volunteers. Too often volunteer support groups within communities go without proper recognition. The value of volunteers needs to be encouraged and recognized by community leaders.

Partnerships

It is of paramount importance for community leaders to look beyond their inner circle and explore local and beyond partnerships with other organizations to provide for more diversification of service delivery. Shared services provide for greater flexibility and opportunity to expand to new, unchartered areas.

Express Appreciation

Say “thank you”. People need to be appreciated and community leaders should not miss an opportunity to acknowledge those who show an interest in their community. It does not cost anything to thank someone for his or her help, advice or support.

Conclusion

Community leadership is an evolution being tested by Federal and Provincial government downloading and demands being placed on communities to provide more hard and soft services while trying to maintain the social fabric necessary for complete communities. We have explored some key attributes that will help develop effective community leadership.

One of the distractions of community leadership has been the lack of training. We are seeing marked improvement in this area with more opportunity available for leadership training at the local level.

We need to understand that community leadership development is of equal importance to that of the high level corporate or public sector development.

How community leaders manage change and transition of leadership trends using people skills rather than tasks to meet their objectives will be required to meet the true test of developing healthy, safe, sustainable communities we can all be proud to live and work in.

The following quote emphasizes the importance of community leadership.

“There are men who, by their sympathetic attractions, carry nations with them, and lead the activities of the human race” . — Emerson, 1860.

References

¹ Carole R. Bloom, “Developing Community Leadership”, *Planning Commission Journal*, Spring 1995

² By Archie B. Carroll, “ Servant Leadership: An Ideal for Nonprofit Organizations”. Reprinted with permission from the *Society for Nonprofit Organizations*. This article first appeared in *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 23, No. 3

³ Excerpted with permission from the March 2005 issue of *Public Management (PM)* magazine published by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), Washington, D.C.