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Making Communities More Viable: Four Essential Factors for Successful Community Leadership

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Abstract: A recent study was undertaken to compare two particularly successful rural communities, focusing on the importance of leadership within the community. Four significant factors set these successful communities apart from those less viable-effective communication, development of social capital, community engagement, and collaboration across and within communities. This article describes each component and provides specific suggestions for improvement. Ultimately, these factors could be used as focus areas to improve community leadership through the development of community-appropriate curricula, seminars, and workshops.

It has been said time and time again-leadership is important within any setting, across any context. Effective leadership within the community field is necessary in order to assert successful community action, encourage social well-being, and improve community viability. But how does one encourage effective leadership within a rural community?

A recent study was undertaken to compare two particularly successful rural communities, focusing on the importance of leadership within the community (Ricketts, 2005). Four significant factors were determined to set these successful communities apart from those less viable-effective communication, development of social capital, community engagement, and collaboration-across and within communities. The study determined that the following components could be used as areas of focus for professionals interested in developing and improving leadership within their community.

Effective Communication

Effective communication can be seen as the cornerstone of any functional community. Within many rural communities, communication may border on the extreme-it may leak appropriate information (too open) or be hoarded as a function of the struggle for power. A further consideration for leaders within smaller communities is the interface (translate: ease of access) with community members; generally, communication

access to local leaders in smaller venues is much easier than in larger, more populated places.

Within both communities, leaders expressed the need to be open and honest with their constituents, albeit not necessarily totally revealing. For leaders to be successful within small, rural communities, it is important for them to be able to make the choice between passing on necessary information (through the right channels) and maintaining confidentiality when required. Developing a community Web site or newsletter, having regular community meetings, and communicating with other community organizations (e.g., Rotary, Kiwanis, churches, etc.) are all helpful ways to improve communication channels.

Leaders-Have an "Open Door Policy"

An effective way to keep communication channels open is by developing an "open door policy" between the leader and his or her constituents. Communication within rural communities can be complex. From the ease of access between community members and their leaders, to the limited number of leaders within a community, and the direct influence locally made decisions can have upon constituents, it is important for rural leaders to listen to their followers-and get the whole story. In addition, having an "open door policy" builds trust and credibility between leaders and their constituents. Sometimes, all it takes is developing a climate of trust within a community or organization to move in the right direction.

Provide Access to Appropriate Information

In order for community processes to function at their most effective, it is important for community members to be accurately informed. Information is the key to good decision making and problem solving, and more active civic engagement. When community members are given appropriate information and allowed to invest themselves in suitable decision-making opportunities, they are empowered and much more likely to work for the good of the community.

Effective ways to communicate essential information is to have regular, well-publicized community meetings or town forums, share the information with key people (e.g., Extension educators, head of the chamber of commerce, local pastors, etc.), or relay it through local media. Finally, for new local leaders, it should be noted that the "rumor mills" in small communities are alive and well, but aren't considered by most to provide valuable information.

Development of Social Capital: Community Building

Developing resilient social capital within a community came out of the study as one of the most important contributors to successful community leadership. By definition, social capital is the relationships and networks within a social structure where individuals contribute to the common good (Flora, 1998). Leaders within the study felt a strong sense of social capital within their communities, as well as the desire to build more. The presence of social capital within rural communities affects a variety of community aspects, from effective decision making, to developing beneficial relationships, to advancing trust among leaders and community members. Even further, the more trust community leaders share with their members, the more likely the community will move toward a shared vision-and ultimately positive community change.

So how do local leaders encourage strong social capital within their community? Effective communication, information access, encouragement of young leader participation, and all of the other concepts mentioned here contribute in their own way to promote the development of social capital. The overarching reality is that if a leader truly cares about his or her community and works to contribute altruistically to the community, social capital will automatically be encouraged.

Community Engagement

Encourage Young Leaders to Participate

In order for rural communities to perpetuate themselves, there must be a younger generation of leaders ready to take over. These future leaders should be aware of the unique problems found in rural communities, as well as knowledgeable about fundamental leadership principles. By encouraging young leaders to participate in important community functions, contribute towards decision-making processes, and ultimately become more civically engaged, you are taking a grand step towards future community viability. These processes also help to create a "buy-in" for young leaders and often encourage future civic engagement.

Understand Your Public Has Unlimited Access to You

Community engagement is a great thing; however, it can be a little overwhelming. Being mentally prepared to be able to be an effective communicator, good role model, and a servant leader at all times is a constant challenge-one (current rural leaders stated) that you get used to, but never master. It can be both a curse and a blessing when so much of your work and personal life overlap under the guise of leadership within a small town setting. Mentally preparing yourself for this aspect is the best way to address the issue, and ultimately setting some boundaries (even if they're more personal than professional) will help you to feel as though you still have some control.

Collaboration-Across and Within Communities

Build "Bridges" Across Communities

Collaboration is a buzzword these days, but it's also a necessity, and rural communities need it most of all. A great way to stretch resources as well as develop a type of synergy that would benefit both groups is by cooperating across communities, even across counties. Cooperating chambers of commerce, community groups, and even various churches are all examples of groups with similar interests that could easily combine forces and collaborate. Ultimately, the benefits to collaboration are endless-sharing resources, developing new friendships, creating novel groups and associations-as well as assuring the viability of both communities for years to come. Additionally, community action is often promoted through collaboration.

Develop Networks Among Community Leaders Within Diverse Fields

An important final consideration relates to the leadership structure within a community. Throughout the study, it was noticed that within each community field (e.g., medical, spiritual, judicial, etc.) certain individuals were recognized as leaders. Once these leaders were interviewed, they often again mentioned individuals within their field-not outside of their field.

Unfortunately, as people today become more focused within their individual fields of interest, their leadership follows suit. Leaders are much more specialized today, and thus it is important that current and future leaders learn how to develop networks across community fields. This can be best encouraged through the interaction of leaders in social community groups and gatherings, including community meetings, local social events, and church gatherings. As leaders learn to get outside of their personal field of interest, they are more likely to develop these cross-community ties.

Conclusion

Individually, each of these components contributes to the overall success of rural communities. Whether you have the opportunity to encourage radical community change and address them as a whole or have to tackle them one at a time, being aware of these components is an important first step to improving community leadership.

References

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