

A Team of Leaders
By Elizabeth Kline¹ (2007)

Leadership continues to be challenging in our society. What does it mean? How does someone become a leader? What does it take? We elect or appoint leaders then chew them up if they do not do what “we” want them to do. Conversely, we may in fact “choose” leaders who are not suitable for leadership and the criticism is warranted.

Many people at the grassroots level shun leadership because of what they notice when they or others take on leadership roles: lots of work and responsibility; being the center of attention and, thereby, end up being criticized or unappreciated; exhaustion because of the amount of time and energy that is invested; and even problems with family relationships because of the time and attention spent elsewhere.

I have had experience in the practical application of the principles of leadership at the grassroots level and have been trained in leadership. I am interested in developing and growing new leaders, sustaining leaders and recruiting new leaders.

This article focuses on community leaders and leadership and proposes a new approach that can be effective in many settings.

The concept of a *Team of Leaders* emerged from applying and rejecting some aspects of traditional approaches as well as some of the current models of leadership.

Some of the following problems have been observed and/or described in books and articles about leaders in communities:

Burnout: Too often a person steps forward as a strong and impassioned leader only to burn out at some later time. The person then leaves; resulting in debilitating effects on the entire community effort as no other person is prepared or willing to step forward.

Reluctance: Groups often pressure people to be leaders even when they are not ready and are reluctant. Wanting to be helpful they agree. However, this situation does not work in most cases.

Problems with sustainability: There is such a challenge maintaining leadership over time.

Recognized broad representation in the leadership: One leader comes from one neighborhood, one race, one religion, one personality. A

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community effort needs to have broad involvement and broad representation to engage all facets of the community.

Talents and skills: Every effort to sustain leaders, either by the leaders themselves or by an entity trying to grow leadership at the local level, struggles with making sure that individuals have the necessary skills and access to resources. This is a big job and really burdens and frustrates leaders.

Growing new leaders: Although all groups acknowledge the need to “grow new leaders” to deal with turnover, few actually have the time and skills to do so. It often happens under crises when leaders leave suddenly because of burnout, family or personal problems, or some other immediate concern.

Who are the effective leaders in a community? What makes them effective? What cultural, political, social, and economic changes are needed in order to provide support, rather than resistance, to this model of leadership in order to enhance the likelihood that community improvement results will occur?

There are many different concepts of leadership. After experimenting with some of them, I (along with Peter Lee from the Massachusetts Healthy Communities Partnership) evolved a concept which we call *A Team of Leaders*. This concept acknowledges the necessity and utility of respecting, valuing, and relying on a variety of leadership styles, skills, qualities, and approaches to work together on building more healthy/viable/sustainable communities.

Its fundamental tenet was eloquently summarized by Barack Obama in a recent community meeting on public health held in Portsmouth, New Hampshire: “Ordinary people do extraordinary things when they are given the opportunity to participate in the major decisions that affect their lives.”

What follows are my preliminary thoughts about what *A Team of Leaders* means and how it can be implemented in communities.

- 1) *We are all leaders in some way. Rather than accept the notion that some people are leaders and the rest are not, A Team of Leaders recognizes that people contribute in their own way and that successful community results necessitate a combined effort of these various and distinctive ways.*

This may be considered a radical concept and, certainly, goes against common thinking. Yet, this concept of leadership is the practice in many successful communities (whether they are communities defined as

municipalities, villages, families, eco-regions, or people bonded by common interests.)²

In any group, organization, agency, institution, or business, there are people who are naturally good at certain aspects of leadership. For example, some people are visionaries who dream of what is not yet evident, but could be. Others are great at logistical details – they keep meticulous records, organize and ensure follow-up on commitments and promises, and have patience for the minutia. Still others are impatient and make sure that meetings are focused, debates produce results, and that vocal participants share the platform with others. All of these leader types are critical components of leadership. No one type can do it all: inspire, motivate, organize, align, guide, nurture, implement, evaluate, and celebrate. Together, they can lead.

Unfortunately, some leadership models convey the message that certain kinds of leaders are the “real deal” and others are followers or assistants. Charismatic leaders, for example, are touted at the expense (often) of the doers. So, someone who is a great manager is not considered to be a leader because she or he is not inspiring. However, motivational leaders cannot improve air quality, provide affordable housing or health care, or create jobs without the leadership of the pragmatists and implementers.

Charismatic leaders cannot, even, create realistic and implementable visions, goals, and policies without having some sense of how these ideas can or cannot be carried out. Their contributions are important, but not sufficient. Similarly, leaders who are skilled and experienced in aspects of implementation are essential and need to rely on creative leaders to dream the future and inspirational leaders to galvanize others.

Moreover, no one type of leader has or can gain the trust of and credibility with the wide variety of people needed to change policies, develop and implement programs, monitor, and evaluate results. We all have assumptions, prejudices, and biases that affect how we speak, to whom we turn for help, and even what are our priorities.

A Team of Leaders model presumes that desired community results are more likely to be achieved if many people are nurtured, encouraged, trained, and expected to be leaders AND if these leaders work together. People tend, naturally, to gravitate towards people who are more or less like them. So, why expect a few leaders to represent everyone's

² Defining a Sustainable Community by Elizabeth Kline, 1992 (out of print).

perspective? Instead, why not seek a fluid, broad, cohesive coalition of leaders working together?

- 2) *A Team of Leaders is made up of collaborators and team players.* They know the value of partnerships, sharing power, listening, delegating responsibility, and working cooperatively with others. They are not solo performers. They know that community results require many leaders working together – sometimes, at the same time and other times passing the baton back-and-forth. They implement a true form of collaboration, rather than the often misunderstood concept practiced by many coalitions whose funding requires some form of “collaboration.”

The model of THE leader, which potential leaders aspire to be, makes no sense in the real world. This concept, itself, creates a number of negative impacts. Those who feel that they do not measure up feel discouraged and may withdraw from accepting responsibility. Those who fit the mold can come across as arrogant, know-it-all, the chosen ones. In either case, there are lost opportunities that are gained by disregarding the solo performer model of leadership and replacing it with a *Team of Leaders* model.

Collaborations and partnerships are, for these kinds of leaders, much richer than working side-by-side or in parallel with one another. Rather, power is truly shared among participants and leaders. This approach is tricky as many leaders are used to being in charge and have difficulty letting go so that others can take over. Many “followers” are accustomed to deferring to “leaders”, and are not comfortable taking initiative and being responsible. However, for a *Team of Leaders* model to produce the greatest amount of community improvements, people need to shift their attitudes about power and recognize the value to them and to others of sharing it.

Shared power can reduce leadership burn-out, for example. The responsibility for “running the show” is not theirs alone. Moreover, resources are expanded as more people, organizations, institutions, agencies, and businesses pool together funds, person hours, technical assistance, and a host of other resources. They are, often, more willing to share if they feel some “ownership” over the process and outcomes. “Ownership” comes in many forms, such as feeling passionate about and committed to the mission; being respected and welcomed; having some control over the major decisions that affect their professional and personal lives. From my experiences, the sense of being listened to, respected, and heeded may be the most important ingredient in fostering

collaborations and partnerships. *Dignity* is at the heart of shared power relationships.

- 3) *A Team of Leaders derive their power from the community.* They believe that they are messengers of the people and it is fluid and dynamic; people can come and go. They continually talk about listening, respecting, hearing, and responding to the diversity of opinions, viewpoints, ideas, and needs of people. They draw their strength and sustenance from connecting to people – other leaders in the community, potential leaders, people on the margins (who are quiet), followers.

This orientation embeds leaders in their communities rather than apart from them. Power, to these leaders, comes from the people – whether from constituents if governor, from customers if CEO of a company, or from the public if director of a non-profit organization.

Derivative power is not rhetoric; it is heart-felt and serious.

Deval Patrick, the recently elected Governor of Massachusetts, and Barack Obama, the Senator from Chicago and a Democratic Party presidential candidate, are examples of political leaders who firmly believe that they are beholden to the public and draw their strength, as leaders, from the public.

They derive their priorities, shape their policies, develop implementation strategies based on qualities such as listening to people's opinions and suggestions; sharing power and responsibility so that the creativity and energies of many people can work together; delegating tasks to people who enjoy doing them rather than burdening someone who dislikes doing these activities.

The bottom-line for a *Team of Leaders* is that "the community" is the center of attention. Results are evaluated by criteria and measurements relating to community improvements, such as the number of people who find meaningful jobs which provide benefits or sufficient dollars to purchase basic benefits, or the number of people who get access to and use health care opportunities (such as substance abuse education, preventative measures, and curative programs).

- 4) *A Team of Leaders inspire, engage, and motivate others to join **with them.*** They reach out to people; motivate newcomers to participate; delegate; and share power. They are less likely to burn out because they do not believe that they can do it all alone.

The concept of "reaching out" into a community to gather supporters is a familiar one. I prefer to use the term "reaching in" to a community to

signify the importance of opening up beyond the first layers of people and groups to others who know different individuals and entities, thereby expanding perspectives, opinions, and resources.

This engagement process depends on a collaboration effort among leaders – those who can inspire; those who can motivate actions; those who can create, monitor, and evaluate the community-making and decision-making processes; those who can educate; those who can publicize; those who can fund-raise; and a myriad of other critical aspects of a collaborative partnership.

By working *with* people, instead of on their behalf (i.e., *for* them), people are encouraged and more likely to participate, take responsibility, share burdens, pool resources, and produce tangible results that benefit themselves and their communities.

- 5) *A Team of Leaders orient their focus, mission, goals, and results on community improvements, not on personal power or status.* They understand the value of power and are not afraid to use the tools of powerful people. However, unlike many traditional leaders, they want *power to do good*, and not for its own sake or for personal glory and wealth.

You can tell if a person is a *Team of Leader* type simply by her/his body language and words. They seem relaxed; smile often; are comfortable being silent, listening to other people with respect and curiosity, rather than out of courtesy; draw on the words (literally) and ideas of previous speakers in audiences; view the world as connected; promote hope, rather than discord and fear; convey the meaning behind what they seek and how they want to engage others. For example, they talk about hearing people talk about their lack of jobs or too expensive/inadequate health care coverage and they explain how their proposal will help produce jobs for these kinds of people or will provide access to services given their particular circumstances. There is a personal connection and others feel it.

Because a *Team of Leaders* approach focuses on community improvements rather than on gaining and sustaining their own power, position, authority, and benefits, these leaders measure their success on results such as universal health care, affordable housing, educational opportunities, and meaningful jobs rather than on their re-election, appointment, stature, salary, glory, or fame.

The definition of “success” and the measurements used are different from those commonly used now. Currently, many leaders feel successful if they are supported by a majority of constituents, consumers, customers, employees. They thrive on popularity, praise, and being center-stage.

In non-personal terms, they measure success in financial terms such as dollars and/or profits earned or spent; process terms such as the speed for delivering products or handling regulatory permits; military security terms such as the number of soldiers and/or weapons on duty to fight terrorism or the amount of dollars invested in weaponry; and societal terms such as the number of children immunized or the number of police hired and on the streets.

These are valuable measures of a kind of success. However, a *Team of Leaders* model is not satisfied with creating programs, distributing dollars, or processing permits unless these actions lead to significant community improvements. They care more about the results, the outcomes. Are people healthier because they are breathing safer air (versus the number of good air quality days)? Are teenagers graduating from high school and getting jobs with benefits afterwards (the number of drop-outs)?

The Healthy/Vital/Sustainable Communities movement has produced many good references on indicators.³

- 6) *A Team of Leaders are grounded in their own selves and, therefore, accept their humanness – their talents and skills as well as their shortfalls.* They do not see themselves as saviors; they know that they sometimes fail and make mistakes. These qualities make them comfortable with themselves and accessible to others. They are “the real deal”. They know what they don’t know and can’t do. These qualities make them good collaborators and team players.

Paradoxically, these kinds of leaders can be put on a pedestal by their supporters and admirers because they seem so authentic, credible, trustworthy, and engaging. When they do make mistakes, they can be more vulnerable to criticism and disappointment because of this personal attachment and high expectations.

The inclination to sanctify leaders is a remnant of the traditional in-charge leader. Despite what members of *A Team of Leaders* say about being

³ See, for example, www.sustainablemeasures.com and www.redefiningprogress.org/projects/indicators.

human, making mistakes, needing to be supported when things are not going well, the natural tendency is for supporters to feel let down by their “leader” as if this person is operating at some higher standard from their own actions and behaviors.

Ironically, when anointed leaders (i.e., elected and appointed political leaders, military commanders, CEO’s, government agency managers, committee chair, etc.) make bad judgments, mis-communicate their messages, and/or fail to involve affected constituencies before making critical decisions...these are the very instances when other leaders need to step forward. Others can question and debate the action; provide alternative perspectives and solutions; and point out the negative consequences of the leader’s mistakes. Certainly, it takes courage and persistence to challenge someone, but these qualities are aspects of effective leaders. In the *A Team of Leaders* model, some and not all of the leaders in a community need to be willing and able to play the role of challenger.

In summary, the *Team of Leaders* model and concept makes sense in communities where people aspire to have more control over their lives. It reflects a democratic type of governance, whereby “We the People” are responsible for the major decisions that affect us. Leaders draw their power and strength from their communities and work collaboratively and in partnership with each other. Everyone is a potential leader, whether or not she/he chooses to step into a leadership role at any particular time.