

Community Leadership Focus Group Results

In October and November of 1999 the researcher conducted three focus groups to understand the issue of community leadership.

Respondents were limited to those able to attend the sessions.

- Thirty-eight people participated in the focus groups (learning circles).
- 8 or 21% represented the learning consortium.
- 11 or 29% identified themselves as primarily representing the leadership roundtable.
- 4 or 11% were staff.
- 5 or 39% identified themselves primarily as partners (some were also leadership roundtable members) in Opportunities 2000.
- The respondents were well educated with 89% having some form of college or university education.
- 87% were employed full time with 68% saying they were in some form of management position.
- 71% were under the age of 50 and 63% of the respondents were women.
- The researcher was only marginally successful in securing input from those living in poverty with 61% of respondents reporting a family income over \$65,000 and only 8% under \$30,000.

Focus group satisfaction:

Given that the researcher had hoped the focus groups would provide a forum for mutual learning, the respondents were asked to rate their experiences from one to ten and then to explain why they gave this rating. Of those who responded to this question the mean was 8 out of 10. This is considered to be a high level of satisfaction. Respondents used the following phrases to describe the process:

- Surprisingly effective at surfacing my views about leadership.
- Forces us to think about how we organize and why.
- Includes room for creativity and discussion.
- It's a shame more people were not there; a lot of critical discussion.

- Inspiring, self reflective, energizing.
- It enabled me personally to see that keeping “on track” and keeping focused produces results; helped distill my thoughts.
- The process/the facilitated journey helped to focus my mind and build on previous answers, very good to animate...to think about action.

Meaning Questions:

Meaning questions are asked to establish a base of self-understanding for the participants and second to help the researcher identify the key meaning systems of participants. Seven questions were asked of all participants. Five others were asked of those not part of the leadership roundtable. In addition, a variety of definition questions were asked to surface more detailed responses about leadership and community leadership.

Note: When data is compiled it is not intended that the tabulation add up to 100%. The answers are quantified by the number of times key words or phrases are mentioned by participants. One participant may mention two or three phrases when answering a question. The responses are tabulated as a percentage based on the number of times people mention the phrase, word or concept. When the percentage frequency distributions are calculated, the denominator is the sample or the number of respondents. The numerator is the number of times a particular phrase or theme is mentioned. Because they are open-ended questions, respondents can provide more than one answer to a question. Therefore, the sum total can be greater than 100% to a particular question. For detailed responses see Appendix 7.

1. Community:

Respondents were fairly unified in their understanding of community as working together or providing mutual support.

- Working together was described by respondents as “everyone working together to make a better place to live,” “sharing on an equal level with all voices included,” and “everyone working together to make a better place to live.”
- Mutual support was suggested to be “an organized group of people who care for each other,” “understanding and acceptance, people who care for each other,” and a “support system.”
- The breakdown of community was said to occur when people are feeling isolated and alone, when there is a lack of caring and support.
- This is in contrast to a caring community in which people are supporting each other and there is a sense of inclusiveness and sharing of opportunity.
- Community is built by increasing a community’s capacity through “services of equitable support systems that develop or help people and promote effective living, such as building relationships that create connections for people,” or through “creating the capacity for harmonious and healthy living.”

What does community mean to you?

- 42% Working together
- 32% Mutual support
- 18% Geographic area
- 18% Common good
- 16% Belonging

What does community building mean to you?

- 42% Increase capacity, infrastructure
- 26% Working together
- 21% Building relationships
- 10% Educating the community about community
- 10% Leadership and goal setting to build on strengths

What does community breakdown mean to you?

- 55% Isolation, individualism
- 34% Lack of caring and support
- 29% Conflict and hostility
- 18% Poverty

What does a caring community mean to you?

- 82% People supporting each other
- 24% Inclusive, sharing opportunities

2. Leadership:

The most common responses to the meaning of leadership were as follows:

- Leaders set an example and are role models. A leader was described as someone who was “committed to the well being of others” or had a “commitment to serving others” and as a “willingness to be first in.”
- A leader is someone who is willing “to come forward with ideas and champion them” and “to make choices and make the vision a reality.”
- Leaders know how to facilitate -- “sharing of information,” “being able to engage the community,” and “being able to make connections in order to mobilize and energize people and process.”
- A leader has unique vision. S/he inspires people, and takes responsibility by “directing the process and people.”
- Participatory leadership was defined primarily as “people working together as a team” and “being inclusive by empowering others and soliciting their involvement.”
- Multiple leadership was seen as shared leadership. “People working together with more than one person leading” was often mentioned, as was team work and collective or consensus decision-making.

It is interesting to note that when people were asked, “What is the main role of leadership in communities?” their responses mirrored their meaning for leadership:

- Leading by example, inspiring and facilitating.
- Mobilizing of people and resources. This was often described as “acknowledging needs and mobilize resources to address them,” “building a movement,” “galvanizing support for issues and being the connective tissue which brings people together.” This concept is significant as it mirrors a key element of community leadership -- mobilizing people around broad-based issues of community concern.

Respondents were asked a series of questions to further the understanding of leadership.

- The role of leadership in building creativity is primarily to listen and encourage; this was mentioned by 50% of the respondents.

- Creativity comes through listening and valuing the ideas of everyone and by encouraging people to act on those ideas and to take risks while providing the tools to get things done.
- Leadership develops a vision through facilitation. (40% of respondents.) Facilitation was defined as “lays some planks that others can build on,” “facilitates a holistic picture,” and “involves multi-stakeholders.”
- The role leadership plays in instilling values was most often described as leading by example and facilitating a values journey.

Respondents were asked to describe the main community role of followers.

- The majority (26%) said followers support leaders by providing input and building up other followers.
- 24% stated that to be a follower is to be a full partner by working alongside, to participate fully, and eventually to become leaders themselves.

3. Community Leadership:

The meaning of community leadership for respondents was most often seen as people taking collective responsibility for the good of a community. This was described as follows:

- “Engaging all members of the community in a process such as the working together of the business, government and voluntary sectors.”
- “Putting the community at the center of the work in order to build a better future.”
- Having the ability to inspire, engage or empower a community to take action.

What does community leadership mean to you?

- 61% Collective responsibility
- 21% Put the community first
- 18% Inspire, guide

Questions of multi sector participation and civic society were asked of select respondents as a way to further people’s thinking about community leadership.

- People saw a civic society as one that builds community and has democratic control.
- This would be evident when people are facing or dealing with issues collectively, caring for each other and taking responsibility for the outcomes of society.

The community leadership role in managing change was perceived by respondents to involve:

- facilitating and encouraging participation;
- “bringing people and ideas together in order to create linkages which will foster change.”

When asked for examples of community leadership,

- 68% provided examples which denoted community action such as
- kitchen table meetings in which people are planning the betterment of their community or
- multi sector roundtables or community members organizing around an issue.

Respondents were asked to state the most important values for community leadership and then to share how these values are practiced in their communities.

- The most often stated values were inclusion (respect for others) (47%) followed closely by honesty and integrity (45%).
- In addition, respondents valued listening and openness, partnership, caring and understanding, courage and commitment.
- 32% of the time participants said these values are not practiced in their communities. Respondents stated that they often did not feel heard and that there seemed to be very little respect for diversity in their communities.
- One respondent shared her pain when she said, “There is not much of anything other than a vision of increasing profit for select few worthy citizens. I don’t see the receptiveness and sharing too often.”
- 32% of respondents said people had the opportunity to do things together. They saw “a collective of good intentioned people” and “a sense of common purpose and a generous spirit.”

Important values in Community Leadership

- 47% Inclusive
- 45% Honest and integrity
- 34% Listening, openness
- 27% Caring, understanding
- 24% Courage and commitment
- 21% Partnership
- 11% Humility
- 11% Vision, motivation

Respondents were asked to draw a picture that would describe the role, purpose or function of community leadership.

- A common theme in the pictures was that of people working together, often symbolized by circles or people joining hands. Drawings 1 and 2 are good examples of this.
- Words to describe these pictures most often focused on bringing people together (45%) for a common purpose and creating connections to make things happen.
- Another key theme was that of inclusiveness (see drawing 3). Phrases like “draw diverse groups together” and words like “everyone” were often used.
- Facilitation was a common theme. Drawing 4 is a wonderful visual description for the types of facilitation respondents are seeking. The consistent message is “facilitation that will grow people and communities.”

Respondents were asked about the feelings and emotions evoked by their drawings.

- Respondents used words like harmony, togetherness (37%) and hope, optimism, pride, and achievement (18%).
- All the words used to describe the emotions evoked by their drawings were positive.

Select respondents, those attending the learning consortium focus group, were asked to draw a picture that would describe their ideal vision for community leadership.

- Drawings 5 to 8 are good examples of the kinds of images drawn.
- In drawing 5, entitled “let’s all dance,” the respondent describes her vision for community leadership as “listening to the rhythms and enabling people to move to them.”
- In drawing 6, the respondent draws a picture that highlights citizens in the center with a shared multi-sector collaboration connected to them.
- Respondents used words such as collaboration and working together to describe the pictures.
- The words most often used to describe the emotions evoked by the drawings included community, solidarity, joy, and happiness.

Participants were asked to place themselves in the pictures and then to describe their role.

- The role of facilitator was once again mentioned, as was the role of advocate.
- Words and phrases such as encourage participation, sensitivity to all, building relationships were mentioned to define facilitator.

When asked what key social or economic problems their vision would address, most mentioned that the basic needs of all people would be met such as food, shelter, clothing, employment, emotional and spiritual well-being, and housing. In other words, there would be no poverty.