

# **Leaderful Communities | Paul Born**

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**Focus Group Results**

## Focus Group Results

In October and November of 1999 the researcher conducted three focus groups to understand the issue of community leadership and, in turn, to help form recommendations for the leadership roundtable of Opportunities 2000.

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 8.0 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.

#### *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

## *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 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.

### ***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 (like Opportunities 2000) 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.
- 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. Phrases like “draw diverse groups together” and words like “everyone” were often used.
- Facilitation was a common theme. 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.

- In one drawing, 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 another drawing, the respondent draws a picture which 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.

### ***Opportunities 2000***

A second set of questions was asked of Opportunities 2000 partner agencies as well as of leadership roundtable members (25 respondents). These questions related directly to the role and performance of Opportunities 2000 to date and a vision of the community leadership role Opportunities 2000 could play in the future. These questions were designed to help the researcher prepare specific recommendations to the leadership roundtable for a community leadership structure beyond the year 2000.

What does Opportunities 2000 mean to you?

- 48% Community action
- 24% Poverty alleviation
- 20% Creating Opportunities
- 20% Better future for people
- 12% New ideas

Participants were once again asked a series of meaning questions to establish a base of understanding.

- For the majority, Opportunities 2000 meant community action that was described as “a chance to make a difference” or “to enhance and build the capacity of the community.”
- For others it meant “working together with different communities” or “communities supporting each other to accomplish a goal.”
- When asked what the Opportunities 2000 staff meant to them, respondents used very positive words such as, supportive, helpful, dedicated and committed.
- They saw staff as organizers and partners in that development of ideas and projects.
- When asked what the leadership roundtable meant to them, they said it is a place to share and learn. They described it as a connection and a broad network of community members who provide guidance and direction for Opportunities 2000.

What does the leadership roundtable mean to you?

- 40% Share, learn
- 32% Connection, network
- 20% Guidance, direction
- 8% Caring community

Respondents were read the following Opportunities 2000 vision:

We envision the people of Waterloo Region who are living in poverty working with people from all sectors of the community to create opportunities which will reduce the region’s poverty rate to the lowest in Canada and in so doing generate learnings and set an example for all Canadians.

They were then asked to rate the appeal of this vision from one to ten.

- They rated the mission with a mean of 8.1. This is considered an excellent rating.

- When asked why they gave this rating, respondents most often said because it was an appealing goal. “I can’t think of a better goal for my peers in this community!” stated one participant. Another said, “it makes you think, yes this is good, this is possible, it is clear and succinct.”
- About 30% of the respondents had mixed or negative feelings about the mission statement. Some of these respondents stated that the vision did not address sustainability. Others questioned whether the mission was even possible or realistic.
- Harsher critiques stated that the mission was a bit arrogant, that we should not assume we could influence the whole nation. Others felt that it promoted competition.
- When asked to suggest improvements to the mission, respondents gave contradictory suggestions from expand partnerships and broaden the scope to shorten and clarify the vision statement and narrow the scope.

Respondents were then asked to define the primary role of the partners, staff and leadership roundtable in fulfilling the Opportunities 2000 vision.

- The partners role was most often defined as working together to create action and results and to build awareness of the project in the community.
- The primary leadership roundtable role was to provide leadership, coordinate and direct. Other roles mentioned were, “to mobilize and motivate the community” and “to facilitate by supporting initiatives making connections and filtering ideas.” Some mentioned that it was the leadership roundtable role to track progress and evaluate the project.
- The role of staff was to support the partners by providing them with assistance where needed, information and administrative support. Respondents also felt that staff were charged with “making it happen” by developing an action plan, doing the leg work and keeping the momentum going and vision focused. For some, staff were to act as facilitators and coordinators by creating linkages and coordinating the work needed to fulfill the mission.

The primary role of the leadership roundtable in fulfilling Opportunities 2000's vision?

- 64% Leadership, coordinate, direct
- 36% Mobilize
- 28% Facilitate
- 20% Track, evaluate

Staff, partners and the leadership roundtable were asked to rate the performance of the Opportunities 2000 partnership.

They were asked to rate performance on a scale of one to ten. Respondents gave the project a mean of 7.1. This is a satisfactory rating.

- When asked why they gave this rating, they most often said, "the results produced by the project had not met their expectation." Some mentioned, "a need for more tangible results." Others said, "our goals are in sight but still too early to tell."
- An almost equal number of respondents felt that they were doing a great job. They defined this as "personally you have inspired me to respond to your call and have provided excellent support."
- Others said the partnership "has given our organization excellent support." It has done "excellent work with community based organizations but we need to now concentrate more on other sectors." It is "doing a great job but now we need to connect with existing infrastructure to ensure sustainability of vision."

When asked to make suggestions as to specific performance improvements Opportunities 2000 could make,

- Most often respondents stated that it must provide more of a voice for low-income people. This was to be done by effectively integrating low-income people into the leadership of the project and by listening more to people in poverty.
- A number of other suggestions were made including getting results by creating more opportunities for people that would lead to a reduction in poverty.
- A long-term plan was seen as important to some as were more links to business.

Respondents were asked to draw pictures that would describe their ideal visions of the community leadership role Opportunities 2000 could play. The pictures were filled with many inspiring colors and often in patterns.

- In one drawing, entitled “Creating a Mosaic of Connectedness,” vibrant colors and interlocking grid patterns are evident.
- In another drawing entitled “Think and Act,” one sees a different pattern but a similar theme.

When asked to describe their ideal vision for the community leadership role of Opportunities 2000, respondents mentioned the themes of connectedness and partnerships.

- They defined this as “ linking many different backgrounds and solutions in the mutual goal of community building,” “being a connector/paving the way to solid partnerships,” “inviting others to become involved and bringing all parts of the community together to tackle poverty.”
- Others had a vision of mobilizing and facilitating described as “mobilizing the community/business/services/ to take action,” “being a source of motivation and nourishment for a more humane community,” “rolling up sleeves and leading by example.”
- When asked for words to describe the feelings and emotions evoked by their drawings, respondents used words like cooperation, togetherness and unity. Others mentioned security, determination and commitment.

Participants were once again asked to place themselves in their pictures and to describe their roles.

- Most described their roles as “contributing,” which they viewed as “making a better community for my family and my community peers,” “being one of many hands,” “involving business in Opportunities 2000,” and “being a team player.”
- One respondent said “I am a partner, a part of the solution, a contributor.”

- For others the roles of facilitator and connector were mentioned and defined as “a recruiter, one of the linkers...maybe illustrating this for others,” and “a positive connection.”
- Some described themselves as leaders and as a community leader.

Respondents were asked what major issues their vision would help overcome.

- Almost everyone stated it would reduce poverty, hunger and homelessness.
- Others hoped it would create further opportunities and improve tolerance and inclusion.

Respondents were then asked to state what were the most important things Opportunities 2000 could do in the coming year to work towards the ideal vision. This question was the first of three future-oriented questions which would allow participants to give input into priority activities for Opportunities 2000 that would position it for sustainability.

- The majority of respondents stated that Opportunities 2000 needs to broaden its support. It needs to “get involvement from public-at-large,” “create possibilities and responsibility for the business sector,” and “produce tangible results that can inspire more organizations to take action and perpetuate the Opportunities 2000 vision.”
- The development of a sustainability plan was mentioned. We need to “provide a permanent structure and develop a sustainability plan” and “work towards some form of sustainability.”
- The importance of communication was highlighted by respondents. We need “more talking/sharing of ideas/visions on how to reduce poverty rather than just relying on projects,” “more program evaluation, more shared learning and sharing information with all.”

Most important things to do in the coming year:

- 68% Broaden support
- 20% Communication
- 20% Sustainability plan
- 3% Create jobs

Participants were then asked, “Given that the Opportunities 2000 campaign is scheduled to conclude December 31 in the year 2000, what is the most important thing Opportunities 2000 can do in the coming year to ensure it will continue 3 years from now.” The question was then repeated for 10 years hence.

Most important things we can do to ensure Opportunities 2000 will continue 3 years from now.

- 64% Committed partners
- 20% Education, tell the story
- 16% Strategic plan
- 12% Results

Most important things we can do to ensure Opportunities 2000 will continue 10 years from now.

- 28% Leadership
- 20% Partnerships
- 20% Develop a model
- 16% Legislation
- 12% Education

- The respondents were clear -- “to ensure the continuation of the work Opportunities 2000 has begun, there is a need for committed partners.” Many suggestions were made as to how this could happen, including the following: “develop a leadership roundtable-like structure including a funding component for the long term;” “relinquish ownership and pass it back to the community, make it truly community based;” “develop the leadership base of participants, foster leadership and partnership within and between the partners;” and “ensure sectors are well connected and have formed a strong, committed partnership.”
- The importance of education was highlighted. “Develop a document telling our story.” “Inform the larger community, province, and country of your efforts.”
- A need for a strategic plan was mentioned by some. “Create an action plan for all stakeholders and get committed people who plan ahead 3 years” and “develop a strategic plan for continuation, define plan for next 3 years.”

When asked to focus on the long-term (10 years), respondents gave the following suggestions:

- The importance of the partnership was once again highlighted, as was the development of leadership and a leadership structure to maintain the momentum.
- Some respondents suggested that a model be developed which would, “expand the mandate across Canada” and “develop a model of community building that is unique, effective and easily transferable to other communities in the country, internationally.”
- The importance of legislative change by governments was also highlighted.

## **Preliminary Conclusions**

### ***Community***

Community was something respondents did or received in contrast to somewhere they lived. Community was most often defined as involving “working together” and “mutual support.” Interaction with others in a purposeful or meaningful activity creates the sense or feeling of community for people. This feeling is most pronounced when people are either able to receive or give mutual support. This is in contrast to the way people experienced community breakdown. Community breakdown means isolation or individualism. People experience loneliness and little collective purpose. Eighty-two percent of respondents defined a caring community as people supporting each other. Twenty-four percent defined it as inclusiveness and the sharing of opportunities. It is through people being together, working together and providing support for one another that community is formed.

To build a caring community is to first create an infrastructure in which people feel they are cared for and supported. Respondents saw this as “capacity building” or “building an infrastructure of support systems.” This is critical if people are to work together and build relationships that form community.

These findings are significant. They make it possible for the researcher to better understand community leadership. Community leadership can only take place where there is community. When people are feeling isolated and there is a deep sense of individualism they do not wish to work together for the common good. For community leadership to develop, it is imperative that people work together and support each other. This is the essence of community. It is the heart of community leadership.

### ***Leadership***

The meaning of leadership provided by the respondents was striking. For 47%, a leader leads by example and by being a role model. Another 40% said leaders are good facilitators. This is a far cry from the picture that is so often provided to us of the

charismatic, self assured knight on a white horse riding in to solve problems. The leader as a role model was seen as someone who has a deep empathy for the well being of others, who puts the community first and who serves others. Facilitation, especially as defined in the context of community, is a primary task of leadership. The leader must share information, make connections and energize the community to act. To build creativity, the leader has to be a good listener and encourage and value the ideas of others.

The respondents have provided valuable insights into the role of leadership in the development of community leadership. The leader is not someone who has all the ideas or someone who people follow because he or she is charismatic. Rather, the leader is someone people are engaged by. He or she leads by example and has a deep caring for the needs and wants of others. Leaders have the ability to involve many stakeholders and help them find a common direction or purpose that makes them effective. This understanding of leadership is consistent with the researcher's understanding of building community. Leadership is something that supports people in community and has an essential role to play in making it possible for people to work together and support each other in their activities.

### ***Community leadership***

Community leadership is observed most often when people take collective responsibility for the common good. This was again highlighted by respondents when they were asked to define civic society. Civic society meant community control and collective responsibility for outcomes.

The most important values in community leadership were both affirming of and consistent with respondents' views of both leadership and community. The values of inclusivity, honesty and integrity, listening and openness, caring, understanding, courage, partnership, humility and vision were all expressed. Respondents provided many thoughts and feelings in their comments on values and community leadership. This in itself is

important because values are at the heart of community leadership. Respondents implied that they “followed” values more than leaders.

The pictures drawn to represent the role of community leadership and those representing the vision for community leadership provide important insights into respondents’ understanding of the fundamental nature of community leadership. The following list of the titles of pictures supports this point. (View the pictures at [www.tamarackcommunity.ca](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca).)

Important insights into the fundamental nature of community leadership:

- Listen to the rhythms and enable people to move to them.
- Connect and encourage people.
- Be inclusive, tolerant and affirming.
- Bring diverse groups together to address problems and opportunities.
- Provide equal opportunity for all.
- Foster an atmosphere of change.
- Share. Have citizens from many sectors at the center.
- Connect. Bring together resources, mobilize and energize.

These insights show us how community leadership really works in communities. They express patterns of connectedness and reciprocity that are mixed with actions and deep values. They are often messy and yet surprisingly organized. They are complex and yet simple, similar and yet unique. Together they help us understand the fundamental nature of community leadership.