

Leaderful Communities | Paul Born

Opportunities 2000 and Community Leadership

Opportunities 2000 and community leadership

How is this kind of community leadership relevant for communities today? The study of Opportunities 2000 and the community leadership role it is playing and can play in the future is an important point of beginning as we answer this question.

Opportunities 2000 was designed to evoke community leadership in order to focus the community's efforts to reduce poverty. It was felt that a linear program emphasizing direct service was not the answer. Regardless of how well such a program was organized it would do little to reduce poverty.

The respondents saw Opportunities 2000 as community action. It gave individuals a chance to make a difference by building the capacity of the community. It gave them a chance to express community leadership – to work together in collective purpose for the good of the community. Opportunities 2000 is not just a process for learning and talking about poverty. It is a place where people can do something about that which they believe in.

In the leadership roundtable, members can experience community and collective purpose. They come together to share and learn, to connect and network. The roundtable gives people a center point, a point of reference as they work to alleviate poverty. Without the leadership roundtable there would not be a way to define the values and goals of the project. To the broader community it is seen as the keeper of the purpose. It provides direction and guidance to the movement.

Opportunities 2000 has been able to make its mission accessible to the people. They understand and believe in that mission. The reason to have a mission in community leadership is to represent both the values of the organization and to define its vision, in other words to define the purposefulness of the project. It is clear that most, but not all, participants are engaged by the purposefulness of Opportunities 2000. There are those who struggle with it, who feel the purpose is arrogant or too narrow. These voices must be listened to if Opportunities 2000 wants to engage the full community in its work.

The defined roles of the leadership roundtable, staff and partners are well understood and for the most part consistent with actual behavior. Opportunities 2000 has found a way to engage many diverse people. It has found a place for all sectors of the community. People are generally positive about the leadership in Opportunities 2000. They think leaders in the organization are supporting rather than controlling the process.

People were able to define a future role for Opportunities 2000. This is a positive signal. It implies support for the performance of the roundtable. It also implies that people can engage in purposefulness around the issue of poverty in the Waterloo Region. In community leadership people must be able to see how their involvement can make their community better.

When asked what needs to be done to ensure that purposefulness will continue beyond the formal time frame given for the intervention, people were less concerned with the staff and structures of the project than with the partnership. The most important thing they felt needed to be done in the coming year was to broaden the partnership. In most cases this meant including people in poverty and business, parts of the community they felt had not yet been fully engaged. The second most important thing was to communicate and to tell the story of Opportunities 2000 in order to bring more people into the process and to spread the purposefulness and results of the project further afield. Third, people wanted to do more planning. They wanted a plan to ensure that they would remain organized and focused and that the work would be sustained. Once people sense the importance of living their values in common purpose, partnership takes on a critical meaning.

As noted above, community leadership cannot exist without community. It is the desire for community and the love of community that makes people act. A desire for community does not build community. Rather, when people interact with others in a purposeful or meaningful way, they sense they are “in community.”

Community breaks down when people feel alone and are surrounded by individualism as opposed to collectivism. It is by supporting each other that people experience true (caring) community. When they act through collective purpose for the collective good, people feel supported and cared for. They believe that if they work for the common good, the common good will work for them should they be in need.

This is relevant for communities today in that caring cannot happen in isolation. People must act not for their own good but for the collective good if they are to establish truly caring communities. In order to create community leadership, we must recognize that people's desire for community is at the heart of their involvement in a collective process to create a common good. Community leadership must provide the opportunity for collective action so that people can feel a sense of belonging in a community. Once people are involved, they can create caring partnerships with others. It is the very process of caring for and being cared for which builds community.

When expressed in community, leadership manifests a collective spirit in which the leader is a servant, in service to the community. Leadership is as often expressed as a process as it is by an individual. Either way, it must exemplify the best of the community. Leaders must lead not by position but rather by example and facilitation. Leaders should not only care for the situation which they are pursuing to correct but must have a deep caring for the entire partnership which they have engaged. The leader thus acts in service to others by facilitating a process in which people act and interact, where they care and are cared for.

This is relevant for communities today as they attempt to develop leadership that will build effective and caring communities. First, community leaders will need to learn that leadership is not about a leader taking responsibility for getting things done. Rather, it is about engaging the community to act. Community leadership develops when partners are encouraged and supported to gather in a common purpose to build their community. The primary role of the leader is to identify purpose that can lead to community. As one respondent put it, leadership is "listening to the rhythms and enabling people to move to

them.” Second, a community leader will need to learn that leadership by example is paramount to those within a partnership. It is the example of leadership that engages people. The community leader shares information about what others are doing and highlights these as examples of what needs to be done. Third, a community leader will need to learn that leadership is about facilitating connections. This connectivity creates a synergy of response and produces the desired results. A “mosaic of connectedness” occurs, as one respondent put it. Fourth, a community leader needs to learn that providing support to the people who have acted collectively is key to helping them act and to ensuring they feel the true sense of community and mutual support. Fifth, the community leader needs to learn the importance of values in motivating people to act.

Community leadership is values. There is no more profound way to express its fundamental nature. Values, expressed in the way people want to live together, enable community leadership to exist. Community leadership is the essence of such values in action. The values of inclusiveness, honesty, integrity, listening, openness, caring, understanding, courage, partnership, humility and vision are fundamental to an understanding of the place from which community leadership arises. The desire to see these values lived out in their community motivates people to take leadership.

This is relevant for communities that strive to solve local problems and build healthy communities. People do not fundamentally act out of self-interest but have a desire to see their values included in community development. When decisions are made for purely economic or political reasons, people will react negatively unless these goals are grounded in the values of the community. When community leaders want people to act, it is important that they relate the action or purpose to the values of the people they hope to engage.

Community leadership is also about collective purpose. A strong desire for the collective good leads people to action whenever they see or experience that which is contrary to the collective good. More importantly, what gives community leadership the legitimacy to act is when a community believes that the proposed response is for the collective good.

This is relevant for communities that try to engage citizens in civic society responses. Community leaders do not take leadership but are allowed to lead when what they are proposing is viewed as for the common good of the community. In a healthy community, people are not threatened by the common good because they value collective purpose. This is important particularly for political leaders who can severely hinder community process when they believe that the common good is defined by elections alone.

In conclusion, the nature of community leadership is found in a community of people engaged through their values in collective purpose for the good of their community.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for the future success of Opportunities 2000 arise from study findings and conclusions discussed in Chapter 4.

Broaden the partnership

Respondents to the study had no doubt that the partnership needs to be stronger and broader if Opportunities 2000 is to achieve its desired goal. Sixty-eight percent of respondents felt that broadening the partnership was the most important thing Opportunities 2000 should do in the coming year. The following initiatives would help ensure this will happen.

- Significantly increase resources to involve people in the project who have experienced low income. This is a fundamental desire of the partnership and cannot be ignored. The inclusion of low-income people in the leadership roundtable and sector working groups is critical, as is the expansion of the Community Action Team. If possible, a full-time staff person should be allocated to this effort. This staff person should have significant experience organizing low-income groups and preferably be living on a low income him/herself. This recommendation is made to give the overall network a sense they are part of a whole community rather than just a piece of the community trying to do good for or to others.
- Significant resources are going into recruiting opportunities from business people. This is critical to the partnership. The need to secure partnership agreements from these businesses cannot be overstated. Voluntary sector partners were required to sign partnership agreements in order for them to commit publicly to the work of Opportunities 2000. This same requirement should be made of businesses getting involved. This is a critical way to ensure that the business sector feels part of Opportunities 2000 and that the rest of the community accepts them as such.
- Increase the number of celebrations in the next year. These celebrations can focus on planning exercises, giving awards for opportunity makers, or providing a time for people to meet each other and network.

- Encourage leadership roundtable members to get to know each other better. A one-day retreat could facilitate this greatly.
- Ensure that partners are feeling supported. Find unique ways to offer this support such as a fundraising seminar for projects funded under HRDC. This could be held with the local funders committee in town. Frequently ask partners how we can help. Note their needs in the newsletter and consider forming a multi-sector working group which will address these needs as community issues.

Lead by example, facilitate action

The Opportunities 2000 partners have the ability to make many wonderful things happen with or without Opportunities 2000. The advantage of being part of Opportunities 2000 is that they are able to coordinate their efforts. The role of Opportunities 2000 is not to control the process but rather to facilitate the natural process of leadership among the partners.

- The leadership roundtable is critical to the future role of Opportunities 2000. It is a key symbol for leadership in the project. A decision must be made shortly as to whether the roundtable will exist after December 31, 2000, and in what form.
- What will be the composition and role of the roundtable?
- Who is the roundtable accountable to and how will the roundtable facilitate this accountability?
- How will the roundtable enact its role – through staff?
- How long will the roundtable exist and what will be its outcomes? If there are members who are not attending or contributing in a significant way they should be asked to change or to leave the roundtable. The example the roundtable wants to uphold is that of action, commitment and initiative.
- The leadership roundtable needs to tell its collective story to the community. Profiles and activities of leadership roundtable members should become a regular feature of the newsletter, as should a summary of the roundtable meeting minutes.
- Awards should be presented in a formal and public way as important examples of organizations taking leadership. If change is a priority for the roundtable, an

award should be designed for this. The opportunity-maker award could have various categories.

- The partnership is very large. The leadership roundtable must consider how it is going to support this large network. Currently staff perform a tremendous amount of work. Secondments are beginning to take on this function and may very well be the vehicle for full-time personnel support. This issue is the responsibility of the roundtable.

Promote community leadership values

The community leadership values discussed in Chapter 4 were extremely important to respondents. We must find ways to promote these as the values of the Opportunities 2000 community.

When writing profiles of projects, newsletters or stories of people taking leadership, questions pertaining to these values can be highlighted. We can make sure that when we document the project we look for stories that promote inclusiveness and integrity.

- The leadership roundtable should spend a day on retreat exploring their values in the context of community.
- The importance of inclusiveness to Opportunities 2000 cannot be over-estimated. This is a primary reason that the involvement of low-income individuals present at the leadership roundtable has become so important. The multi-sector aspect of this project promotes mutual responsibility in which partners see the entire community involved.

Promote collective purpose

The community has allowed Opportunities 2000 to exist and to take leadership on the issue of poverty reduction. Waterloo Region is a healthy and vibrant community that promotes and embraces leadership. It is important to recognize this.

Partners in Opportunities 2000 need to have a deep sense of collective purpose. This collective purpose is the key motivation for action and the glue that keeps the partnership together.

- The leadership roundtable should not simply continue on. Rather, it should become a new project with a new name, mission and mandate. People have bought into a vision that was slated to end in the year 2000. If the partnership is to remain committed, it must be asked to recommit. This will promote collective action and lead to a renewed sense of purpose.
- Involve the partnership in any decision to continue the project. A public endorsement will be critical to this continuity.

