

Learning to Be a Community Leader

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY LEADER? ARE YOU ONE?

Community leaders take responsibility for the well-being and improvement of their communities. Are you a community leader? Are you interested in becoming one? Try answering the questions in this leadership quiz. Are you someone who:

- Wants to improve your community?
- Has something to contribute?
- Doesn't wait around for someone else to get the job done?

If you have answered "yes" to any of the above questions, you are most likely a community leader already, or on your way to becoming one. You don't have to run for office or be given a title to be a leader. All you need to do is decide to take responsibility for some corner (or bigger chunk) of your community.

Community leaders are often self-appointed. Even people who run for office first make a decision that they want to be a leader. You can probably take as much responsibility for your community as you are willing to.

Many community leaders learn by trial and error. That's not a bad way to go; people mostly learn from experience. Nonetheless, flying by the seat of your pants can be a bumpy ride. So why not get some help along the way?

WHY SHOULD YOU BE A COMMUNITY LEADER?

Why should you be a community leader? Leadership can be good for you. In fact, many people enjoy leading. You don't have to lead out of obligation. You can choose to lead and participate in ways that energize you and help you grow, instead of leading in ways that drain you. You can choose to work on issues that you care about. You can take on challenges that are fun, rewarding, or interesting. It's up to you.

Let's take a closer look at what you can gain from being a leader:

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Do you ever daydream that you are the one to save the day? Perhaps you are the passerby who dives into the water to rescue a drowning child. Maybe you are the person who deftly persuades the terrorist to put down the gun, just in the nick of time. It is human to want to make a significant difference in the world. And you can.

The day-to-day acts of community leadership are usually not as dramatic as described above, and they usually don't inspire a chorus of recognition. Still, as a community leader, you can make a profound contribution. Establishing a day care center, increasing job opportunities in your community, getting rid of a toxic waste dump, or empowering others to lead are all activities that are heroic in their own way.

When Isis Johnson of New Orleans was four years old she saw a news report about starving children in Ethiopia which made her feel the need to act. At five, with her grandmother at her side, she went knocking on doors asking for food donations for poor people in her community. When she was six she collected 1,600 items to give to people in need. The next year, she collected 4,000 items. When Hurricane Andrew hit she collected 1,648 pieces of clothing to send to people affected by the storm. Shortly after the hurricane, Isis's grandmother suggested she start a foundation. With the help of her grandmother and a lawyer she established the *Isis Johnson Foundation*. Isis was then eight years old. (from Karnes and Bean, *Girls and Young Women Leading the Way*, 1993.)

We may not all establish our own foundations by the time we are eight, but we can make a significant difference if we put our minds to it. Doing so can be infinitely satisfying.

YOU CAN GROW

Often, people lead because it helps them grow and expand their lives. There is almost nothing as challenging as leading groups of people. As a leader, you may need to communicate to large numbers of people, negotiate, and handle dicey situations. You will become more confident in yourself and in your world if you take action to lead others around you.

Many successful leaders started without confidence or skills. Some people that are leaders today once had a hard time saying anything in a small group. If you are a shy person, take heart. You're not alone. You can figure out how to make your voice heard. It just takes some practice.

Leadership skills are built step-by-step. No matter what your skills are right now, you can become a better leader if you work at it. You may find yourself doing things you never imagined you would!

WE NEED MANY COMMUNITY LEADERS

There is room in this world for more community leaders. The model of one leader at the top with everyone else at the bottom just doesn't work for communities. One or two leaders can't possibly solve all the complex problems that our communities face. With more community leaders, our communities will do better.

The more people become leaders, the more problems we will solve. We need community leaders to think about and organize around many issues: youth development, economic growth, substance abuse, crime, the environment, health care -- the list goes on and on. Each issue will require a troop of skilled leaders to handle them. We need leaders who are women, young people (we were all young once), people of color, low-income people, immigrants, people with disabilities and many others that have been told that they should follow others, not lead. We need leadership from all walks of life in order for ours to be a truly democratic society.

How will all those leaders work together? That is a skill that community leaders need to learn. We all have to learn to cooperate. We all need to put aside longings for turf, status, and power in order to achieve goals that benefit everyone.

Here are some community leadership examples:

- A citizen speaks up at the city council open meeting. Her words reveal the key issue regarding a local problem; the resulting discussion leads to a workable solution
- A few people in the neighborhood successfully organize to protest the cutting down of trees by the city
- A family member generates a plan to help a loved one to stop smoking, enlisting the support of other family members
- A young person organizes a kick-the-can game after dinner on the block

Of course, having a title can be useful, at times. The following are some examples of community leadership carried out by leaders who have formal positions or titles.

- A group of ministers creates an anti-drug initiative in the community
- A teacher periodically invites his students' parents to a potluck dinner to talk about school issues
- A member of the city council proposes a task force to provide services for homeless people
- The president of the high school drama club organizes students to do a play that addresses racial conflict among teens

What is true about all of the examples above is simply this: One or more people took responsibility for their communities.

WHEN SHOULD YOU LEAD?

You can *always* lead. As we've said earlier, you can "lead" whether you are the designated leader or not. You can always think and act like a leader.

For example, while you are sitting in a committee meeting you can think about what will help move the group forward. Does the designated leader need some encouragement? Do people need a nudge to follow through? Do you need to take an unpopular stand on an issue?

People are *hungry* for others to help. If you take initiative to improve a situation, you will almost always delight, relieve, and surprise people.

You don't have to take over someone's leadership role in order to help things go well. In fact, one way of helping a group function better is by supporting the official leader. You can do this by organizing others to help with the work, by listening to the leader, and by encouraging the leader when she or he feels discouraged.

HOW DO PEOPLE LEARN HOW TO LEAD?

DO YOU HAVE TO BE A "BORN LEADER" IN ORDER TO LEAD?

No. People learn how to lead. Even the people who seem to do it naturally had to learn the skills of leadership. They might have learned by watching their parents, teachers, or clergy. They might have been given a lot of responsibility when they were young and might have been expected to take charge. They might even have taken classes in "leadership development."

The point is this: If you don't feel that you are a "born" leader, don't let that stop you. You can become a leader by:

- Jumping in and practicing
- Observing others lead
- Finding a mentor
- Taking a class or workshop
- Reading books about leaders and leadership
- Remembering that people who are now successful leaders, once weren't leaders at all

Below is a list of what community leaders do. You don't have to be able to do all of these things right now. But most likely you are already doing some of them. You can pick up other skills as you go.

DREAM BIG TO CREATE YOUR PERSONAL VISION

Maybe you didn't think that day dreaming was part of being a leader. Well, it is! In fact, day dreaming is one of the first things you need to do as a leader.

If you are going to be a leader, it is necessary to dream big for yourself and for what you want to accomplish.

Lili Fini Zanuck, a film director and producer, said, "Nothing happens without a dream. The daydreaming mind will wander to something greater than the conscious mind could ever have imagined. The more you visualize your dream, the more you understand it. That's how you begin. Soon you're on the road to realizing your dream."

Young people often have big hopes and dreams for what they can do to improve their worlds. If each one of us could remember our dreams as children, we might recall that we had some ideas too.

Try these exercises:

- Interview a young person. Ask him or her what they would do to change the world if they could. Ask them what they wish were different.
- Try to remember when you were a teenager. What did you want to change in the world?
- Put aside practical considerations and fears. Brainstorm a list of dreams you would like to see come true.

SO HOW DO YOU TAKE YOUR DREAM AND MAKE IT A REALITY?

You can start by creating your own personal vision statement. You put your dream into words that communicate to others a picture of what you want to do. Organizations have vision statements; and you, as a leader, can have your own vision statement, too.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Now that's a vision statement!

Now it's your turn. Write out a few sentences of how you want some part of your world to be. Your vision statement will remind you of where you want to be going. As you wade through the day-to-day tasks of community organizing, sometimes without recognition or encouragement, remember to, "keep your eyes on the prize."

LISTEN TO PEOPLE

Listen to what people have to say. You need their thoughts and input. They will grow in confidence and become more engaged if they know their opinions are valued.

Even the most difficult people have some important things to say. We just have to learn to listen well enough to find the kernels of truth among all the chaff.

DECIDE THAT *YOU* ARE THE PERSON TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

You have to make a *decision* to lead and view yourself as a community leader. No one else can contribute what you can. You have a point of view that no one else has. You have a set of skills that is unique. Your corner of the world will be different if you decide to act on its behalf.

SET GOALS

Give your vision a sharper image. Turn up the focus. Set some long-term and short term goals. That is how you carve a real path to your vision.

For example, if your vision is: "*To create a community where every person can enjoy city parks in safety,*" then you might set goals like these:

Long-term goals:

- Create more city parks
- Reduce crime in city parks

Short-term goals:

- Find out where the city parks are, who uses them, and what the crime levels are
- Establish good working relationships with community police officers and park officials
- Identify what actions might reduce park-related crime
- Decide whether it will be preferable to start a new organization or work through existing organizations

THINK ABOUT THE INDIVIDUALS IN THE GROUP

As a leader, you need to think about how each individual is affecting the group. Are there individuals whose talents are not being well used? Is someone acting in a way that is divisive or is draining the group of its energy? Is there a person who needs some help learning how to work in a team?

THINK ABOUT THE GROUP AS A WHOLE

Someone has to think about the group as a whole. Is the group cohesive? Do people in the group have a shared vision? Is there trust and a sense of mutual support? Does the group need some training to help it function better? Are there some policies the group needs to strengthen it?

PROPOSE PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Groups need direction and policies to keep them moving towards their goals. You don't have to be a dictator to make proposals. You can make proposals, then listen to people's responses and then make appropriate changes. Someone needs to take responsibility for moving the whole group forward.

GET THE WORK DONE

Someone has to wade through the mud and do whatever it takes. This includes getting others to help, and making sure that all the bases are covered so that the job gets done right; when need be, it also means printing out labels, cleaning up the kitchen, making those extra phone calls, staying up late, or getting up very early.

RECRUIT AND TEACH OTHERS TO BECOME LEADERS

Last, but not least: One of the central and long-term jobs of a community leader is to develop other leaders. Developing leaders is how we build a strong community of individuals that can work together to achieve goals. It is the basis for how a democracy works.

Developing leadership is a way you can have a legacy behind you – people who will continue to advance your cause and your goals after you have left the scene.

Community leaders should spend a good chunk of their time recruiting, encouraging, training, mentoring, and supporting others to become leaders.

Here are some steps you can take:

- Find people who have leadership potential. There are people all around you who would love to be invited to lead something.
- Help people view themselves as leaders. You can do this by helping them notice the informal leadership they have already taken in their lives. Are they parents? – that is *certainly* a leadership position.
- Help people identify the reasons they want to lead. Listen to people talk about what is important to them and what they wish they could change.
- Assist people to choose leadership goals that are attainable and that will help them build their confidence. Nothing succeeds like success.
- Support people while they work to reach their goals. Listen to them talk about their successes and their feelings of discouragement; appreciate them and encourage them to keep going.
- Support people when they make mistakes. Everybody needs help when they make mistakes. Help them get on the right track and encourage them to stick with it.
- Challenge people to take the next step.

Leadership development is a long-term investment. Often community leaders have to put the development of other leaders ahead of achieving short-term goals. For example, it may be more important to take the risk of

letting a relatively inexperienced person chair a small meeting and acquire new skills. If the meeting gets messy, perhaps that is not so bad. Leadership development is not a tidy endeavor.

So now we have a preliminary job description for a community leader. Does it seem overwhelming? Remember: You don't have to know how to do all these things when you start. You have the rest of your life to master them.

WHAT ARE SOME QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY LEADERS?

You don't have to be a perfect human being to be a community leader, either. That's good, since none of us are. But it might be helpful for you to know a few of the characteristics that successful community leaders often have:

- **Integrity:** To trust you, people have to know that you say what you believe and act accordingly. If people trust you, they may follow you to the ends of the earth.
- **Courage:** It's okay to shake in your boots, but someone has to go slay that dragon, and it might as well be you. Leadership means that you show others the way through the dark, scary, forest. Go ahead and speak the truth--even when it's not popular.
- **Commitment:** You have to stick with a task through the good times and the bad. Your commitment will serve as a model.
- **Ability to care about others:** People will follow you if they know you care about them and about others. The greater your ability to care about all types of people, the more confidence they will have in you.
- **Creativity and flexibility:** Every situation will call for a different response. Be ready to change and come up with new solutions.

Those are a few qualities of successful leaders. What are other leadership characteristics that you think are important?

GETTING AND GIVING SUPPORT AS A LEADER

All leaders need support from others to help them keep growing and get through the fears and discouragement they face. Also, leaders sometimes feel isolated in their jobs; they need others to listen to their thinking, and they need to listen to others' ideas.

You can develop relationships with people for sharing your leadership successes, discouragement, and for processing the pile of information you are exposed to in your leadership role. You can set up a regular time where you and another person or group of people can talk about being a leader.

This process can be informal and unstructured. However, sometimes a little structure in a leadership group can be helpful.

Here are some suggestions for leadership groups:

- Start the meeting with each person having a chance to talk about what is going well – this starts you out with a positive tone.
- Give each person a chance to talk about their leadership without being interrupted and without being given advice. Five to ten minutes works well. (This provides people a period of time to follow their own train of thought from beginning to end.)
- At times you might use the following questions to help each person focus: (again, let each person answer them without being interrupted)
 - What have you accomplished in the last period of time? (week, month)
 - What is the state of your group or organization?

- Where do you have difficulties as the leader?
- What are your goals during the next period of time?

A WORD ON EMOTIONS

All humans that live in the modern age get stressed out now and then. And the demands of leadership can pile on even more stress.

Leaders have to figure out how to handle emotions due to the stress of their jobs. You might feel crabby after a day of dealing with a myriad of problems. In fact, the more challenges you take on as a leader, the more emotional fallout you may experience, and it isn't surprising that it becomes harder to think straight.

Under stress, we may all become frozen or confused in our fears, worries, and discouragement. When that happens it is easy to react without thinking. Sometimes our feelings cause us to avoid taking actions when actions are called for. Sometimes our fears drive us to act in ways that are unworkable.

It is not unusual for people in leadership positions to deal with built-up emotions by hurting themselves. We all are familiar with people who take drugs or alcohol, overeat, smoke, get sick, etc., when stresses get too overwhelming. Most of us have struggled with these issues ourselves.

But you are too important to let bad feelings damage you. Your own well-being is at least as important as the causes and people you are fighting for. Don't wait until you are in trouble before you deal with your emotions.

So, what do you do when stresses build-up? One thing you can do is unload them. Find someone you can talk to about what is going on. Tell someone what gets hard for you. If you get some good attention, then you can cast off some of the weight that hangs on you. You may feel renewed in your commitment and more able to think afresh about those difficult problems.

Talking helps. So does crying and laughing. A good cry or hearty laugh with a coworker or friend can clear a space in your brain to sort out some of those knotty problems.

And chances are, if you can tell someone else what is going on for you, they will be more than happy to come to you when they need some help. In fact, when you ask for help you are modeling effective leadership.

Here is a more formal version of the listening exercise described above:

- Find a friend or coworker you trust.
- Ask your friend to listen to you without giving advice or interrupting. Ask them to not judge you for your feelings.
- Ask them to keep your conversation confidential.
- Take a specific amount of time to talk.
- Ask the listener if they would like a turn to talk when you are finished.

Setting up listening exchanges may feel awkward and embarrassing at first. Listening well to what people have to say is different from everyday conversation. The exercise above will take some practice, but it will definitely help you to think more clearly and feel more positive about the work you are doing.

IN SUMMARY

It's just possible that community leadership is a job that is made for you. Remember, you are the one, and the only one, who can decide what kind of responsibility you would like to take to make sure things go well in your corner of the world.

Go ahead and dare to take hold of your dreams and do the work that is meaningful to you. You have the ability to make significant changes in the lives of the people with whom you work, live, and play. Don't deny the universe your unique contribution.

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Online Resources

Biography of John Gardner and **John W. Gardner Center** provide information and links related to a great teacher of leadership.

10 Concise Qualities of Great Community Leaders is an Infographic by Mother Nature Network.

Four Types of Community Leaders contains short descriptions of each type and what they have to offer, by Covering Communities.

A thorough **Guide for Conducting Community Leader Interviews**, compiled by New Jersey Library Trustee Institute.

The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership provides resources for understanding the principles and practices of servant leadership.

The Leadership Challenge is a learning community with discussion forums that incorporate activities to analyze your own leadership experiences and style.

The Leadership Learning Community is a national organization of people who run, fund, study and provide service to leadership development programs. "Knowledge Pools" and Learning Circles are offered in addition to resources.

CIO Magazine has a helpful article on "**Total Leadership**."

Print Resources

Axner, M. (1993). *The community leadership project curriculum*. Pomfret: CT. The Topsfield Foundation.

Gardner, J. (1990). *On leadership*. New York, NY. The Free Press.

Jackins, H. (1987). *The enjoyment of leadership*. Seattle: Rational Island Publishers.

Kahn, S. (1991). *Organizing: A guide for grassroots leaders*. Annapolis JCT, MD. NASW Press.

Karnes, F., & Bean, S. (1993). *Girls and young women leading the way: 20 true stories about leadership*. Minneapolis, MN. Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.