

# Leadership *for* Healthy Communities



## Working with the Power Constituents in Communities

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### POWER - LEADERSHIP

The term “power” has several definitions. One that relates to people is: The ability or official capacity to make decisions and exercise control over others.” People who have power to make decisions are knowledgeable about what will and will not work. In this publication, these people will be referred to as decision makers. Community decision makers earn and maintain their position by knowing and communicating what needs to be done and who should do it. These people may be visible, but more often than not they work quietly behind the scenes. The decision makers are composed of individuals having political, social, and economic knowledge of the community.

Leadership is successful when there is a cooperative relationship between decision makers and followers for identifying and solving community problems and expanding available local resources. Viewing leadership as a cooperative relationship allows a community to use the energy that can be created between leaders and followers.<sup>2</sup>

A community is generally defined as a geographic space inhabited by people who have a sense of unity and common interest. Every person belongs to a series of communities that include organized or unorganized groups. Collectively, these groups determine the long-run fate of the community. This is very important to individuals as they take their places as players in society.

People may identify with many subcommunities. They may belong to a subcommunity interested primarily in schools, economic development, city, county, civic, or other interest

groups. Within these groups are people who have the power to make decisions for specific projects. There are various interests within each of the groups who want to see projects completed for their community.

Different people are involved in each stage of the development process. The community is stratified among influence leaders (decision makers), leadership action-oriented people (leaders), followers (interested citizens) and nonparticipants (citizens who don’t care).<sup>3</sup> Decision makers generally make final policy decisions concerning development and usually have the community’s best interest in mind. Leaders occupy the next level and make decisions concerning specific projects. The next layer is composed of interested citizens who can be in charge of special projects. These people tend to be officers and active members in local civic or social groups. The final authority for economic development lies with the public, who vote on the specific tax issues for water, sewer, streets, education and other projects before the actual work is done. It is the cooperative relationship among all levels that makes community development a successful activity.

Decision makers provide overall direction for accomplishing the goals and objectives of the community. The ability of decision makers to use the cooperative energy of the community to guide development will depend on how effective they are in relating to different subcommunities. They have a broader view of the community and are able to influence leaders to develop and complete individual projects.

Leaders in a community take on different responsibilities, working with subcommunities or within an organization. Leaders have the ability to work with people and to influence a group to complete a project that was approved by decision makers. Leaders are more willing to learn about the details of a project than the average citizen. New leaders with special interests may come forward to get their projects completed. Old leaders may have vested interests in the status quo and may actually feel threatened by new leaders trying to create new projects or programs for the community.

### PLANNING - STRATEGIC ECONOMIC PLANNING

In order for new ideas to be successfully presented, they need to be incorporated into established programs through a planning process. A strategic planning process should be completed by leaders and approved by decision makers with input from the public. The strategic plan should take into account resources of the community and the possibility for completion. When a strategic plan is completed, all those involved in the planning process understand it and have a vested interest in it. Given this knowledge, leaders are more likely to implement various projects, which the community will undertake based on the need and resources available.

It is wise for leaders to consider some projects with a short-term duration of one or two years at the most. This gives the community a sense that something is being done. Longer term projects, such as an industrial park development, health care facilities, or a new water system, may require several years to complete.

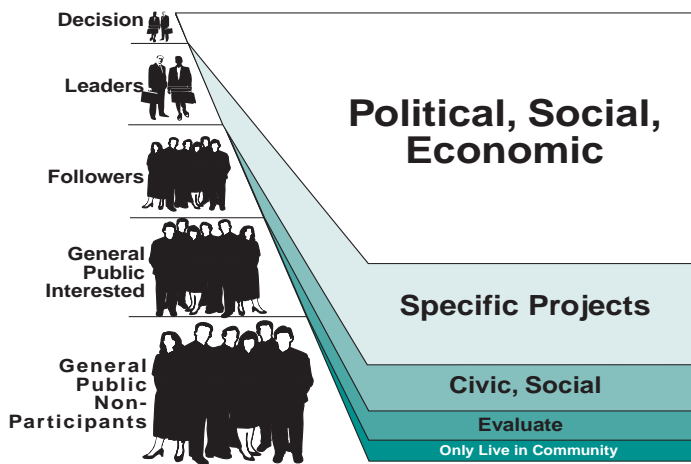


Figure 1. Illustration of power levels in a community

### THE POWER PRINCIPLE

The struggle for power compels some individuals to act in such a way as to be influential in the community. Information is a key component used to make decisions that are in the best interests of the community. The people who continue to learn about new opportunities and what is happening in their community will continue to be decision makers using the information to create action in the community. The relationship between decision makers, leaders, and followers can assume different types of action for survival, which can be described by using biological terminology:

#### Symbiosis

- when two or more decision makers or leaders work together with the public to make better use of limited resources or knowledge;

#### Competition

- when local leaders compete for new leadership positions such as in local elections or when a new group of leaders emerges to implement a new project that is in competition with the status quo but eventually benefits the community;

#### Parasitism

- when a decision maker, leader or group of leaders gains personal recognition from projects started.

Symbiotic efforts can make use of a few resources that will produce greater results than if each effort or project was developed independently. The most efficient way is to have leaders and local government officials working together to make the best use of limited resources. Rural communities usually do not have excess resources to afford the luxury of every group's acting alone.

Competitive leadership projects can be beneficial for a community. Decision makers who are in competition with each other can provide positive opportunities for the commu-

nity if the competition is friendly within the community. However, if the competition is very strong, one group could prevail and defeat the other, leaving the community worse off when the dust settles.

### THREE STAGES OF POWER DEVELOPMENT FOR NEW LEADERS

Younger or new people often seek power in a community because of the inactivity of existing leaders. When new members of a community have ideas and make recommendations about helping their community and nothing gets done, their only resort is try to change the system themselves.

These new leaders will have to begin by developing decision making powers. Detailed information can be assembled about a specific project, followed by an educational program informing the public about economic costs and benefits. New leaders have to gain the trust of the public about the merits of the project before anyone will support it.

New leaders learn how to interpret various signals received from the community. They are not told how to act, but are given some principles that will help them decide among courses of action for themselves. The type of action taken within the community will affect the development of the community. There are three basic stages of power development:

#### Establishment

- learning about one or two issues that are important to the individual and community.

Initially an individual has a certain degree of expertise in a project or area. This expertise is necessary to gain a foothold in order to act at all. As individuals gain community trust and support, they begin to move up the power scale in the community.

#### Expansion

- learning more about policy issues that will enhance the power to act or guide decisions.

This will allow an individual to begin to assume a role in several projects. Completion of major projects that are successful will promote a trust when a new project is proposed by him/her.

#### Stabilization - consolidation

- maintain power by continuing to learn more about the issues and work toward policies  
expanding and preserving the community or project that is being pursued. Generally, the decision makers who do not change easily have a large economic and social investment in the community. There are also decision makers who have little or no economic interests but have developed a large social investment in the community.

New leaders will have to learn how to work with special groups, such as chambers of commerce, economic development committees, developers and local governments on special projects. Support of these front groups will come with the approval of the established power.

Developing a respected power base by new leaders takes time. Sometimes new leaders may use the local political route to develop. New plant owners who have just moved into the community will have to establish themselves before they are accepted. Communication is the most important aspect once a project is deemed economically beneficial to the community.

### POWER AND COMMUNICATION

Power is maintained with discussions throughout the community and with accurate information flows from the leaders to the public and back again. Decision makers are responsible for sending and receiving accurate information concerning development in the community. If a complicated command or approval moves through several stages from the decision maker to the public, it may be altered enroute to suit the interest of individuals at intermediate levels. A signal may become very weak or changed deliberately or inadvertently as it passes from one person to another. Public forums and commission meetings are the most common formal channels of communication. Local coffee shops and social events provide informal channels of communication. Decisions are made based on all the information that is available at the time.

Inaccurate information or partial information about an issue will eventually become known to the public, and they will react accordingly. Interpretation and summary of community information should be done very carefully with honesty and integrity. Feedback in communication to leaders and decision makers is necessary to know how and what action is being taken. Larger communities require more effort for feedback.

Internal dynamics of power and communication set up the decision making framework. The public may not want all of the details, but they need to know how it will affect them and who will benefit the most from any specific project. This not only includes economic benefits but social and political enhancements for the leaders as well.

Noise in communication becomes very critical if a project is controversial for a certain group within the community. Noise has no information or only misleading information. This could result in unauthorized messages being received by appropriate leaders and could mislead the leaders in their decision making. These noise messages could be accidental or, if a specific group is opposed to a project, interference can be deliberate. Among the critical factors in reducing noise in communication is repetitious signals that add little or nothing to the message. However, by using several different sources of information, the noise or interference in the system can be bypassed. A message does not convey knowledge if the recipient can predict in advance what the message will be, but it can be used as reinforcement of earlier similar messages.

A type of conversation that is socially accepted but does not pass any relevant information to others is called "phatic communication." Examples of phatic communication include small talk, such as local sports and weather, topics which take no position nor do they reveal the thoughts and prejudices of any individual. However, phatic communication used to keep people ignorant about specific projects is not consistent with effective communication.

### POSITIONAL BEHAVIOR

Positional behavior in the power structure is a kind of behavior addressed primarily toward influencing positions in a group. Sometimes leaders pursue a leadership position while others are elected to be there by a group or community. As leadership positions get higher, there are fewer people qualified to fill them. However, there is never room at the top for all who would like to be there. Community decision makers earn and maintain their position by knowing and communicating what needs to be done and who should do it.

Maintaining power through persuasion can take place even though a leader may not have full support of the community. He/she endeavors to convince individuals that a specific project may or may not be in the best interest of the community. Conveying this information to the public or a group has to be accurate and sufficient enough for a clear understanding of what is to take place.

### GRANTED POWER

Political power is granted by the public on a majority basis, usually through elections. Locally elected officials have some power in the community but usually are fronting for the decision makers. State and nationally elected officials have limited power in a local community because they represent a much broader community. Political power often provides access to outside resources needed to complete local projects. Limited project funds are allocated by elected officials on the basis of influencing voters in order to maintain their political position. This is done through state and federal agencies that manage project funds.

Power can result from the office held, such as rank in military services, or political parties, such as president, senator, governor, mayor. Power exercised by these office holders is held as long as they are in office. If they move out of the office, they no longer have the same kind of power. In smaller communities local elected officials are sometimes part of the power structure. Often these people are restricted by limited resources in what they can or cannot do within the community development program.

#### Changing stages of power

Some elected officials earn power overtime. After leaving office, they are still looked on as leaders. Former President Jimmy Carter, Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Former Kansas Governor Alf Landon are all examples of elected officials whose influence continued after they left office.

### SOCIAL POWER

Social power is equally important in developing a community base. Leaders hold offices in one or more of the social organizations in the community. Members of the social group elect and support the officers, resulting in a social base for the leaders. One of the shortcomings for a social group is that they often have limited membership within the town and rarely include others from neighboring towns. This social group has very little community power but often starts projects it wants to support,

projects which are limited in scope and interest but can contribute to the overall improvement of the community. These projects usually pose no threat to the existing decision makers.

Issues that have no political boundaries require a different power base. Specialized social structures can be developed for a specific project that has communality with surrounding counties. Tourism, health care and cultural activities are examples that could involve many different geographic entities and groups. Decision makers from different communities can get together to discuss common projects and then persuade leaders of each group to work together. The main idea is to develop natural and social strengths of a county or area and to stimulate people outside the area to pay to use them.

### ECONOMIC POWER

The wealthiest individuals in a community are often thought to comprise the power structure. Owning a large business, however, does not guarantee a decision maker role. A person must be an active community participant in economic development before he or she can gain the support of the community. Enlightened business people will see advantages of a project to the community even though it does not benefit them and their enterprise directly.

### IDENTIFYING POWER STRUCTURE

The power structure in a community can be formally identified with a series of interviews, starting with a random sample of the population. The size of the sample will depend on the size of the population. Each interviewee is asked who he/she feels is knowledgeable about a number of different topics, topics which reflect the issues that are of most concern in the community, such as industrial park, economic development, downtown development, housing, health care, utilities, water and sewer infrastructure, beautification, education, and property taxes. Topics can be changed and should reflect the issues that are of concern in a specific community. The names of the people mentioned for each topic should be kept separate.

Second, the people listed for each topic should be visited and asked with whom they would consult for the same topics listed in the earlier sample. The names for each topic should be summarized by ranking them in order of number of times they were mentioned. Topics are kept separate, as some decision makers are specialists while others are generalists and under-

stand what is happening throughout the community. This interview process is repeated until a consolidated list of names emerges. Once the final list is identified, there will probably be fewer than fifteen people who have knowledge about what is happening and understand how each project will impact the community.

Decision makers will not be a formal group with any type of meeting arrangements, but they are very much aware of each other and communicate when necessary. Projects can be approved by visiting one or two of the decision makers. Working with them at the beginning stage can save a lot of time.

### SURVIVAL AND GROWTH OF POWER

An organized decision making system in a community doesn't die because a leader dies, moves out or is no longer interested. The community decision making group continues as new members become part of this group. Capacity for undergoing a change requires leaders who can become informed about many programs. Systematic growth should be the overriding goal of most communities. It is necessary to go forward in order not to fall backward.

Understanding the power system in a community can result in more completed projects with less controversy. This depends on the amount of strategic planning that has been done and the involvement of the decision makers. Trying to bypass this structure is difficult and time consuming. Working with the structure will provide more success in any community development effort.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Community Enterprise Development, Department of Agricultural Economics, Cooperative Extension Service, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, August 7, 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Mark McCaslin, Leadership is a Relationship, Next Age Leader, News from the North Central National Extension Leadership Development Program, Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, 17722 Oak Park Avenue, Tinley Park, Illinois 60477, September 1995.

<sup>3</sup>J. Carroll Bottum, "The Philosophy and Process of Community Development" The Development of Rural America, Edited by George Brinkman, The University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1971, Page 8.

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