
Community Leadership: What does the literature say about what makes an effective community leader?

A version of this paper was published internally by Local Trust in 2018. This version has been lightly edited to make it accessible for a general audience, with core terms and concepts explained wherever possible. Please refer to [our website](#) for more information about the structure and goals of Local Trust.

Introduction

This is a paper based on a preliminary literature review on leadership, in particular community leadership. The main purpose is to provide an overview of what makes an effective community leader, in terms of characteristics, skills and approach. Following internal input, the scope was expanded to incorporate some models of leadership within a workplace/professional context where appropriate and relevant. The paper primarily looks at:

- factors that define a community leader
- what an effective community leader looks like
- what leadership models and theories can tell us about effective community leadership

The literature review included commercially unpublished works (sometimes referred to as grey literature), as well as papers from academic journals, and it was important to look at voluntary sector output as well as academic research given the nature of the subject. Secondary research and primary research studies were both included. The review was not confined to a country or time, but we made efforts to incorporate papers both within and outside the UK. We focused primarily on papers which discussed concepts, ideas, and the practice of effective leadership.

1. What is a community leader?

Community leaders are laypeople who represent and speak for their community. They are grassroots leaders, as opposed to formally appointed leaders of institutions, or the socially and economically powerful (Boehm et al, 2010). They can be leaders of communities of place, communities of interest, or communities of solidarity (Aggleton and Parker, 2015). The legitimacy and value of their leadership is found in their community links: rather than being formally appointed in their role, they emerge organically (although they may then be formally appointed in a leadership role in response to specific opportunities or structures). It can be easier to define a community leader by what they are not – they are not paid, they are not confined to a specific organisation or remit, and they do not necessarily have formal authority or positional power (Lamm et al, 2017). Instead, they have influence through their relationships and ability to persuade (Hollander, 1993).

Community leaders speak for their community, whether that is a place, demographic group or particular interest. The way in which they become a leader varies. Purdue et al (2000) note that they may be “elected, selected, nominated, self-appointed, arm twisted or otherwise chosen”. Because they are often chosen to represent other people’s views, community leaders often encounter challenges of their representativeness and they have to prove they are a legitimate mouthpiece for community interests, as McArthur (1996) notes:

"A major issue in several of the [estate regeneration] initiatives were whether or not the community activists involved in partnership accurately represented the views of the estate and were accountable to them."

An early piece of research by Bonjean and Olson (1964) on community leadership proposes that community leaders can be identified through three lenses.

- Legitimacy (who chose them to lead, and how)
- Visibility and reputation
- Decision-making (what influence over decisions they actually have)

What do community leaders do?

"Community leaders want to improve their community, have something to contribute and don't wait for other to get the job done." (community Toolbox website, 2018)

"[Civic leadership is] local residents stepping forward to solve community-level problem or to promote action that advances the community's wellbeing." (Easterling, 2012, p.51)

Community leadership tasks encompass working with people; devising strategy, including priorities, goals and focus; and spearheading action effect change. Aggleton and Parker (2015), discussing on community leadership within the HIV/Aids crisis, state that community

leaders mobilise their communities, provide outreach, challenge the powerful, and find solutions. Pigg (1999) outlines five steps of community leadership, which move from leadership activity to management tasks:

- initiation and spread of interest (creating awareness)
- organisation of sponsorship (generating involvement and participation)
- goal setting and strategy formulation (making decisions)
- recruitment (mobilising resources)
- implementation of strategy (applying resources)

This mixture of strategic activity, relationship-building and project management shows us how community leaders must possess or recruit for an unusually diverse skillset (discussed further in the following section).

The role also balances finding practical solutions on the small scale against challenging systemic injustice and speaking truth to power. The role of community leader has a politicised history: community development is a “political process that organizes people and promotes cohesion in efforts to solve common problems” (Zanbar and Itzhaky, 2013). And the focus and tasks of community leaders will vary depending on the policy and social environment; for example, the rise of HIV/Aids in the 1980s developed community leaders who had a role in advocating for their community and speaking out against prejudice and apathy, as well as playing a role in outreach and prevention among their peers (Aggleton and Parker, 2015). In the late 1990s, estate regeneration programmes aimed to reinforce the role of the community in achieving estate regeneration goals (McArthur et al, 1996 and Purdue et al, 2000).

Community leadership in appointed leaders

While the grassroots nature of community leaders is often contrasted with formal leaders with defined authority, political and religious leaders who are appointed or elected can also be community leaders. One toolkit on community leadership suggests that this is not automatic but is rather defined by the actions of these figures. Religious or political leaders which implement a specific initiative on behalf of their community can be community leaders. For example, local religious leaders providing drug and alcohol support, or a council member developing a task force on homelessness (Community Toolbox website, 2018).

In England, elected members are increasingly expected to use skills and tactics traditionally associated with community leaders, such as enhancing and developing community capacity, and building bridges between different groups (Skinner, 2018). As early as 2007 James and Cox (2007) called for ward councillors to take on community advocacy, community development and consultation: “Councillors should be out on the streets much of the time. We are talking real engagement with all parts of the community, not just people who share their values.” In 2016 Mangan et al argued that councillors need to work much more collaboratively with communities in the face of cuts, changing technology and the decline of deference towards people in positions of authority. Councillors need to collaborate with citizens to develop new solutions and enable citizens to do things for themselves.

2. Characteristics of an effective community leader

What makes an effective community leader?

The literature on what defines an effective community leader covers a complex mix of interpersonal skills (referred to collectively as soft skills), resources, characteristics and capabilities that vary depending on context. What makes an effective community leader does not fit neatly into one model of leadership, such as transformational leadership, or (defined later in page 5) servant leadership (Onyx and Leonard, 2011). However, we can identify a range of skills, characteristics and qualities highlighted frequently in the literature which seem to characterise effective community leaders, aspiring leaders, and potential leaders. Generally, most skills and characteristics discussed in the literature fall under three broad headings: interpersonal skills; strategy and vision; and implementation.

Interpersonal skills

“It doesn’t make sense to form relationships just to get people to do work for you. That won’t work because people will feel used. Community builders approach relationships with integrity. We form relationships because we genuinely like someone, because we have something to offer that person, or because we share some common goal.” (Community Toolbox, 2018)

Community leaders are embedded in the community, chosen by the community and have a relationship of mutual dependency with their community (Boehm et al, 2010). But they must also work with professionals, elected politicians, and private businesses in many cases. So, community leaders need excellent relationship-building and interpersonal skills.

While interpersonal skills are increasingly important in the workplace, they are arguably even more fundamental in a community setting. Community leaders often do not have any formal power. Instead, they have influence. Hollander (1993) notes that unlike power, influence involves persuasion rather than coercion and the recipient has freedom of choice. Volunteers in a community setting can walk away and are not usually subject to imposed authority. Common motivations to participate or volunteer include relationships, the presence of people who act as role models or supporters, and having confidence that they can make a difference (Local Trust and IVAR, 2018). As such, leaders must be able to effectively influence and connect with volunteers.

Identifying people’s goals and strengths

Community leaders need to be able to mentor and develop their community. Much of their influence over others is emotional (Boehm et al, 2010) and dependent on them being able to identify and harness what motivates people and what their unique strengths are (Kirk and Shutte, 2004). Community leaders are likely to draw upon some elements of transformational leadership: tapping into other people’s values and inspiring action by focusing on core beliefs and aspirations (Boehm et al, 2010). In Kirk and Shutte’s 2004

proposed model of communal leadership, effective leaders have responsibility for linking people's individual values and goals with the values and goals of the wider team.

Assigning roles and giving responsibility

Following on from tapping into and harnessing people's core motivations, strengths and values, community leaders must be able to assign appropriate roles to parts of the community. Empowering all the community is a key part of the community leader's job and part of this is about assigning roles which give people a voice within the organisation, and in fact distribute responsibility across the group or organisation, so that everyone has their own area which they lead on. Effective community leaders give up control and accept the importance of member autonomy (Kirk and Shutte, 2004).

Sustaining optimism and managing disagreement

Community leaders also need to be encouraging and inspiring. Especially in times of difficulty or change, they need to give people faith and confidence (Boehm et al, 2010). Encouraging and maintaining optimism in the face of adversity, persistent barriers or tricky obstacles is key.

Managing conflict and disagreement is also a key part of a community leader's role: being able to unite factions within the community (McArthur et al, 1996); being sensitive to difference; and promoting open dialogue. Especially for leaders of communities of place, they must be able to build bridges within different groups (Skinner, 2002). They also need to be able to take feedback well and incorporate that feedback. Conflict management requires the courage to discuss difficult issues clearly and proactively, and to avoid minimising the problem being discussed. Fear of conflict and seeking superficial harmony over constructive debate is a sign of a dysfunctional group. Kirk and Shutte (2004) discuss what effective dialogue might look like for those leading change in a community:

- not diminishing difference, but recognising the potential of diversity to challenge the status quo
- reducing unnecessary conflict by bringing people's assumptions to the surface and talking them through
- openness about uncertainty, fears, and ignorance
- all voices are heard, and the process of deliberating is satisfactory to all

For the process of making decisions to feel satisfactory for all, community leaders need to be good listeners. Even if the outcome is not one that everyone in the group or organisation agrees with, everyone should feel that their voice has been heard or their point of view considered.

Relationships outside the community

Community leaders' relationships are not just about developing, empowering, and encouraging their community - they are about the wider networks and stakeholders which can help make things happen, bridging capital as well as bonding capital. McArthur et al (1996) showed that effective community contributions to regeneration partnerships were associated with sophisticated organisation and extensive networking among activists. Networks outside of the community is not something that all community leaders start out

with; Onyx and Leonard's 2011 paper on of case studies of community leadership found that they developed this throughout the process, bringing in resources and skills that their community did not have through working with external partners.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership shows a particular way in which leaders can 'serve' their followers and in doing so, help people improve their performance, help people feel part of a group, and reduce burnout. Servant leadership is strongly focused on interpersonal skills and is people first- not mission first. The theory behind servant leadership is that the mission will be accomplished through helping followers achieve their maximum potential. Servant leadership "directs its focus first on the ability of the individuals to succeed and second on the success of the mission" (Gandolfi et al, 2017, p.353). It has been applied in both the workplace and a community context – while some literature assumes a professional context, it is rooted in many ancient and religious cultures (Gandolfi et al, 2017).

Coetzer et al (2017) identified eight characteristics of a servant leader, which reflect this emphasis on relational skills. These eight characteristics are: authenticity (being true to oneself, and having strong principles); humility – humble leaders value and activate the talents of others, and are prepared to learn; compassion; accountability - which is about both personal transparency and holding others to account; courage, including being able to take risks; being others oriented and "helping others to become better in life by serving their needs consistently"; integrity; and listening – "actively and respectfully" (Coetzer et al, 2017, p.6). Another paper identifies ten characteristics of a community leader, which are different but also reflect the emphasis on interpersonal skills and being 'others-orientated': including listening, empathy, and 'commitment to growth of people' (Gandolfi et al, 2017, p352).

Strategy and vision

Community leaders are often inspired to become leaders because they want to change or improve something about their community. Providing clear direction is a core part of community leadership (Lamm et al, 2017). This is sometimes known as visionary leadership: being able to articulate a vision for change in response to a pressing problem, issue, or local goal (Crosby and Bryson, 2005).

There are often multiple ways to look at a local issue and it is not always clear what to do about it. Community leaders can create and communicate meaning about the past, present and the goals for the future. They can provide a frame for a public issue or problem, and then lead others in deciding what to do about it (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). They must be able to communicate that vision when it goes against established norms, and even when it may be controversial or difficult for others to hear. McArthur et al (1996)'s review of community leadership in UK regeneration initiatives noted that the most effective community contributions were characterised by (among other things) "a readiness to challenge the status quo".

"The leader's task is not to find the solution him or herself but to guide the group in understanding the problem from different angles and then facilitating the process of working out the right solutions." (Easterling, 2012, p. 55)

However, the process of finding meaning and communicating that meaning should be “thoroughly collective” (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, p.109). Visionary leadership is arguably best seen as the task of a group not an individual. Visionary leaders should collaborate with others and facilitate making decisions (Onyx and Leonard, 2011). Lamm et al (2017) state that effective leadership should seek to build consensus, rather than obtaining a majority vote. This is a challenge for any leader. There are often multiple valid ways to frame complex social problems, such as public health issues or long-term unemployment.

"No single person, group or individual is 'in charge' of the problem...part of the battle is just getting rough agreement on what the problems are." (Crosby and Bryson, 2005)

Accountability and transparency are key; being held to account for whether the strategy is correct and whether the activities are meeting that strategy. Community leaders should be able to perform critical analysis of outcomes; that is, to analyse whether their group's activities are likely to result in the change people want to see (Lamm et al, 2017).

Implementation

"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." (Community Toolbox website, 2018)

Community leaders need to be able to, simply, get stuff done – often in an unstructured environment where roles and responsibilities are not immediately clear. In servant leadership theory, this is known as stewardship: being a caretaker, rather than an owner (Coetzer et al, 2017). It is about coordinating resources, gathering information, and galvanising people to take action (Lamm et al, 2017). Studies have shown that in times of crisis, communities value leaders who can initiate structure and clear objectives (Boehm et al, 2010). Being able to problem solve is important and goes alongside optimism and resilience when it comes to overcoming obstacles.

Pigg (1999) notes that this element of community leadership strays from leadership towards management. Community leaders who are natural visionaries or relationship-builders may not themselves have excellent project management skills – but they recognise the importance of this skill and can delegate specific responsibilities to others (Onyx and Leonard, 2011).

Transformational and transactional leadership

Transactional and transformational leadership are two leadership styles which are often contrasted with each other. Transactional leadership focuses on achieving objectives which have been agreed upon and ensuring compliance and consistency. The interaction between the transactional leader and follower is about exchange; most

commonly, the exchange of appropriate rewards provided by the leader in return for the follower meeting the objectives which have been agreed upon (Bass and Avolio, 1993). Transactional leaders provide clear guidance and directions to followers and initiate structure and concrete objectives (Boehm et al, 2010), and reinforce objectives through intervening to correct poor quality work.

Transformational leaders aim to inspire and encourage people to change their behaviours and outlook, focusing on values, beliefs, aspirations and potential (Hollander, 1993). They provide inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration; they encourage people to think for themselves and treat people as individuals.

Transformational leaders are also associated with charismatic leadership (although it is argued that these two leadership styles should not necessarily be seen as the same). Followers of charismatic leaders have a strong emotional attraction to and identification with their leader (Hollander, 1993). Even if transformational leaders are not strongly charismatic themselves, they may still be able to inspire people with a sense of mission or to think for themselves (Hollander, 1993).

The dichotomy of transformational vs transactional leadership styles has been critiqued; a leader can blend elements of both. Treating people like individuals and providing them with intellectual stimulation (transformational leadership styles) is a way to reward people for delivery of objectives (the focus of transactional leadership) (Hollander, 1993). Boehm et al (2010) found that communities in times of crisis want their leaders to possess elements of both transformational and transactional leadership. They wanted leaders who could inspire and communicate, but also set clear objectives and focus on what needs to be done (Boehm et al, 2010).

All three of the core requirements of community leadership – interpersonal skills, strategy, and implementation – overlap with each other. To galvanise people to take action, leaders need to be inspiring and encouraging. To overcome a seemingly intractable barrier, communities need leaders who can sustain morale and optimism, as well as find practical solutions. And what makes a good leader is dependent on context. Leadership should adapt to the situation at hand. For example, in stable, predictable environments, reliability is particularly important, and leaders should be good coordinators who can ensure delivery against predetermined contexts (so certain implementation skills may be particularly important). But in less stable contexts, wherein adaptability may be more important than consistency, communities need leadership, which is able to inspire innovation, and empower others to act autonomously (so interpersonal skills may be particularly important) (Lent and Studdert, 2018).

In conclusion, there are some clear messages from the community leadership literature on the core requirements of community leaders, even while it is important to acknowledge these requirements will vary dependent on context. Community leaders must be able to build effective and meaningful relationships with their community and with the volunteers they depend on. They also need to develop relationships with those outside their community who may possess new and useful resources. Providing meaning to local problems or issues and devising a vision, goals and purpose that is widely supported is also an essential skill for community leaders although it is not a task that individual persons should undertake on their own. As well as being inspiring leaders, they need to be effective managers: implementing projects effectively and getting the job done so that communities make tangible achievements.

Exploring distributed leadership

"The task of the leaders is the nurture and enable, not to command or control." (Onyx and Leonard, 2011)

Very often leaders are "dominant personalities, with developed communication skills and high visibility" (Boehm et al, 2010, p.185). However, all leaders should be able to give up control and power to others. This is not a new concept – the servant leadership literature, which is a concept dating back centuries, identifies the humble leader who can activate the talents of others. Community leaders should spend a good chunk of their time training and developing others (Community Leadership, 2018) and should be open to "recruitment of new leaders and reviewing representative structures and mechanisms of accountability" (Purdue et al, 2000). Succession planning – that is, giving over leadership to someone else – is a core part of the role (Onyx and Leonard, 2011).

However, conceptions of leadership have begun to question the idea of the leader as individual and whether one person or a few people should adopt the title of leader. In both the workplace and the community, there has been a shift in ideas and practice around what makes an effective leader; from the "charismatic, heroic individual" to a much less hierarchical idea of distributed leadership in which people across an organisation lead in different elements of the work and "access their own leadership" (Kirk and Shutte, 2004, p.237).

Distributed leadership in the community

In general, tightly controlled and hierarchical approaches are less likely to work in an unpredictable, unstable environment. Old-fashioned models of leadership which prioritise following procedures and policies to the letter are most appropriate for environments where the future is stable and predictable. In environments which are not predictable or structured, there is a greater need for people to be able to use their creativity and autonomy to adapt and create solutions in response to new problems (Lent and Studdert, 2018). Most cases of community leadership are inherently unstable and unstructured, and community leaders need a high tolerance for uncertainty (Lamm et al, 2017, p.121). And as noted earlier, community leaders cannot rely on a transactional approach which exchanges compliance for material reward in a context where they rely on recruiting and retaining volunteers.

In this context there is an increasing focus on a non-hierarchical, distributed leadership approach (Kirk and Shutte, 2004). For example, a community leadership programme which operates in several countries has the value of "collective decision making", and decentralisation wherein planning, and implementation takes place at grassroots levels (Bearfoot College, 2018). Another paper based on research into community leadership in South Africa outlines a model of distributed leadership in a community context. In this model, leadership is described as a process, not a person, and is a "collective relational phenomenon". Everyone within the organisation is empowered through a role on which they lead, which they can fulfil with "purpose, confidence and authority" (Kirk and Shutte, 2004, p.235).

Interestingly, they note that a communal leadership approach and a heroic leadership approach can and do co-exist in many cultures. And under their model, there is still a role for the leader, who needs to be able to identify people's strengths and assign people appropriate roles, as well as manage conflict and promote dialogue across diverse groups.

Under this model, leadership as a skill remains important, but there is a shift in emphasis from telling to enabling and empowering. As with workplace trends towards self-management, the leader or boss is not gone, but they have different responsibilities and need different skills.

Distributed leadership in the workplace

Arguably, a hierarchical command and control approach to leadership was never appropriate in a community context, reflected by the need for interpersonal skills such as persuasion, motivation and encouragement. However, there has also been a shift in workplaces towards self-management and distributed leadership. This has occurred as global changes (ranging from rapid evolution in technology to the financial crisis) create an increasingly complex and unpredictable environment which requires innovation and adaptability (Lent and Studdert, 2018). Under these models, the requirements and values of leaders have changed and moved away from command and control towards values of humility, trust, collaboration, and coaching. Emotionally intelligent leaders are prized for their ability to coach, enable and develop (Chamorro-Premuzic and Sanger, 2017) and it is more important for the workplace to be adaptable and flexible rather than consistent.

In the self-managing workplace, people across an organisation lead their own contribution to a multifaceted, complex piece of work. For example, organisations such as Zappos have implemented something called holacracy: "a form of self-management that confers decision power on fluid teams....and roles rather than individuals". In Zappos leadership is distributed among roles, not individuals, and people may hold multiple roles on different teams (Bernstein et al, 2016). Elsewhere, a healthcare provider in Holland has no bosses, only coaches. Nurses working within local teams make their own decisions about recruitment, shifts, patient caseload and training (Laloux, 2014).

Anti-heroic leadership (Wilson et al, 2013)

Anti-heroic leadership contrasts the traditional heroic leader who is charismatic, inspiring and authoritative, with a new model of leadership which questions hierarchy and truths and sees the world in shades of grey. Heroic leadership, it is argued, is a model of leadership built for simpler times. Where everyone knows the desired outcome and a good process to get there, heroic leadership is appropriate. But complex issues require a different way of thinking and of leadership, which can incorporate multiple frames and tolerate uncertainty. When it comes to tackling complex or wicked issues, leaders need to be flexible and open-minded enough to be able to and combine elements of many ways of understanding the world and of framing issues or problems. They need to be able to start from the position of not having all the answers, and of being explicitly open to all options. Anti-heroic leaders are defined by "empathy, humility, self-awareness, flexibility and...an ability to acknowledge uncertainty" (Wilson et al, 2013, p.9).

3. Conclusion

Community leaders hold the responsibility of representing and mobilising their community, informally or formally. They are grassroots leaders, who emerge as leaders because they have strong links within the community: they are likely to have a strong network of connections and meaningful relationships. It isn't always clear how community leaders come to be legitimate leaders, but we can potentially identify and differentiate them

through their visibility and reputation, their power over decisions, and the legitimacy of the process which made them a leader – although the nature of the role means there may not be a formal procedure.

The tasks of a community leader encompass raising awareness, generating a groundswell of participation, setting goals and focus and implementing plans. This varied mix of tasks – which community leaders always need to do collaboratively – demand a high level of skills. While the specific mix of skills will vary depending on the leader's particular context, there is a broad trend towards three types of skills. These are interpersonal skills, strategy and vision development skills, and implementation skills. The first is perhaps the biggest theme in the literature, and covers personal development, motivation, conflict management, networking, role assignment and more. Interpersonal skills are also necessary for the development of strategy and the implementation phase as it is very unlikely that community leaders can do these alone and succeed.

It is also important to note that there is a distinct trend within leadership approaches within the workplace and community groups towards a non-hierarchical approach. Non-hierarchical leaders enable rather than dictate. They have the skills and confidence to distribute leadership across a group, ensuring that different people have leadership over distinct roles or responsibilities. While they remain leaders over a large group, they must be able to empower those they lead rather than control them.

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Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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