

# Developing Community Leadership

by Carole R. Bloom

What makes a person a leader in their community? Were they born with such traits or did they develop them over time? How can you actively develop strong leadership for your community? These are questions often asked by members of a community. And there are answers.

American traditions and circumstances foster widespread leadership potential. The question of whether or not just one type of person can be a “leader” has been studied at length. Early research on human behavior was directed toward finding inherited traits that would distinguish between leaders and nonleaders. Most researchers today have concluded that inherited characteristics are not crucial to becoming a leader. Instead, they have focused on leadership as an *ability*, a *process* and a *product*.

Leadership is an *ability* because a leader must have the intellectual awareness to perform in ways that attract others. It is a *process* because being a leader calls for developing positive interpersonal relationships with others. It is a *product* because the processes initiated by the leader and developed among group members result in satisfying the group’s goals.

Leadership is *not* taking a group where the leader wants to go, but in seeing that every member of the group has a sense of accomplishment and feels his or her objectives have been met.

Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who cut through argument, debate and doubt to offer a solution everybody can *understand* and *remember*. Leaders also understand that people can only be led where they want to go. The leader follows, though a step ahead.

As a planning commissioner, you can help your community by identifying and “nurturing” future leaders.

Observe those participating in neighborhood meetings, as well as in meetings of your planning commission and local gov-

erning body. Are they sound and rational thinkers? Even if their opinion differs from yours, do they have an objective approach to the subject? How do they react when questioned? How do they relate to other people? Compliment them on their contributions — and call on them to participate on committees or on projects when opportunities arise.

Remember that leaders come from all sorts of economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Look for diversity when identifying potential leaders

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING


Development of community leaders is a never-ending process beginning with the identification of potential leaders, drawing them into areas of involvement, *and* providing training.

The objective of leadership training is to identify each person’s style of interaction with others in a group, and to “round out” a person, giving them strength in their individually weak areas. Leadership training need not be formal to be effective; however, it is often enhanced by some form of an organized program.

Members of the Littleton, Colorado, Planning Commission have participated in a number of training programs, including the following:

*Chamber of Commerce Leadership Training.* Chamber of Commerce Leadership programs give participants the opportunity for face to face discussions with present community leaders. This allows for a better understanding of the interrelationships and complexities of the current scene. In the Denver area, candidates for the Chamber training programs are typically already proven leaders: CEO’s, mayors, and others representative of top level management. A training program typically involves about two dozen individuals, selected to provide diversity in race, gender, and occupational fields. Participants attend monthly all day sessions to expand their knowledge about

the community, and improve their leadership skills.

*Community Leadership Retreats.* In Littleton, the non-profit, “Littleton Leadership Retreat,” each year sponsors a weekend retreat during which participants discuss a designated topic of concern to the community. Suggestions made at the weekend retreat are often put into practice in the community. The retreat participants have formed the nucleus of community support for the program, each offering assistance in their own particular areas of expertise and concern.  Littleton’s “Mythical Village”

*Skills Training.* The Colorado Chapter of the American Planning Association (like many other APA state or regional chapters) regularly sponsors planning commissioner training. Leadership skills are often the focus of workshop sessions, dealing with topics such as holding an effective hearing and developing good listening skills.

Leadership training takes time and commitment. But it can yield valuable dividends for your community. Make use of existing training opportunities in your community. If you don’t have any, be a leader yourself, and see about getting some started! ♦

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## Littleton's "Mythical Village"

On January 20-22, 1995, sixteen high school students and sixteen community leaders attended the annual Littleton Leadership Retreat in Estes Park, Colorado. Activities for the weekend included team-building in the bus on the way to the retreat, discussions on values and personal contributions, building a "Mythical Village," and evaluation of the village, group process, and positive feedback on different leadership styles used by the participants during the weekend.

Post-events will include two paired activities (one youth-one adult) of their choice and a mid-year retreat to discuss ways each person has contributed to their community since the retreat.

"Putting together an ideal place to live involves more than cutting and pasting," said Karin Heath, a reporter for the *Littleton Independent* who attended the retreat. Lia Moran, a Littleton High School senior said, "I've realized you have to cooperate and listen."

At times the participants experienced great frustration when dealing with "turf wars." "A perfect society cannot be attained as long as human nature gets in the way," said Jelena Radenkovic, a Heritage junior. "It illustrates how hard it is to create a good community."

—[CRB].



## Beyond Genes

*From: Learning to Lead: The Art of Transforming Managers into Leaders, by Jay A. Conger (1992). Copyright Jossey-Bass Publishers. Reprinted with permission.*

"The majority of leadership researchers believe that the origins of leadership go beyond genes and family to other sources. Work experiences, hardships, opportunity, education, role models, and mentors all go together to craft a leader ... . Certain types of work experiences emerge as the primary developmental forces behind leadership. For example, challenging and multifunctional work assignments taught self-confidence, toughness, persistence, knowledge of the business, skill in managing relationships, a sense of independence, and leadership. Harship taught personal limits and strengths, while success bred confidence and an understanding of one's distinct skills. Diversity in experiences developed breadth and perspective on the business and in human relations. ..."

"[T]raining can play a vital role in leadership development. ... But to be successful, training must be designed to: (1) develop and refine certain of the teachable skills, (2) improve the conceptual ability of managers, (3) tap individuals' personal needs, interests, and self-esteem, and (4) help managers see and move beyond their interpersonal blocks."



## On Leadership ...

*From: Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge, by Warren Bennis & Burt Nanus (1985). Copyright HarperCollins Publishers. Reprinted with permission.*

### KEY LEADERSHIP SKILLS:

1. The ability to accept people as they are, not as you would like them to be. ...
2. The capacity to approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past. ...
3. The ability to treat those who are close to you with the same courteous attention that you extend to strangers and casual acquaintances. ...
4. The ability to trust others, even if the risk seems great. ...
5. The ability to do without constant approval and recognition from others. ...

The essential thing in organizational leadership is that the leader's style *pulls* rather than *pushes* people on. A pull style of influence works by attracting and energizing people to an exciting vision of the future. It motivates by identification, rather than through rewards and punishments.

Learning is the essential fuel for the leader, the source of high-octane energy that keeps up the momentum by continually sparking new understanding, new ideas, and new challenges. It is absolutely indispensable under today's conditions of rapid change and complexity. Very simply, those who do not learn do not long survive as leaders."

### DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT LEADERSHIP:

"*Myth 1. Leadership is a rare skill.* Nothing can be further from the truth. While *great* leaders may be as rare as great runners, great actors, or great painters, everyone has leadership potential ... More importantly, people may be leaders in one organization and have quite ordinary roles in another. ... The truth is that leadership opportunities are plentiful and

"LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING ARE INDISPENSABLE TO EACH OTHER."

—John F. Kennedy

(remarks prepared for delivery at the Dallas Trade Mart, Nov. 22, 1963).

within the reach of most people.

*Myth 2. Leaders are born, not made.* Biographies of great leaders sometimes read as if they had entered the world with an extraordinary genetic endowment, that somehow their future leadership role was preordained. Don't believe it. The truth is that major capacities and competencies of leadership can be learned, and we are all educable ... . Furthermore, whatever natural endowments we bring to the role of leadership, they can be enhanced. ...

*Myth 3. Leaders are charismatic.* Some are, most aren't. ... Our guess is that ... charisma is the result of effective leadership, not the other way around, and that those who are good at it are granted a certain amount of respect and even awe by their followers, which increases the bond of attraction between them.

*Myth 4. Leadership exists only at the top of an organization.* ... William Kieschnick, CEO of ARCO, told us that one of the biggest problems he faced was to inspire the entire multi-billion-dollar corporation 'with an entrepreneurial spirit ... which means that we need leadership at every single unit, at every level ...

*Myth 5. The leader controls, directs, prods, manipulates.* This is perhaps the most damaging myth of all. As we have stressed ... leadership is not so much the exercise of power itself as the empowerment of others. ... "