

## Leadership as Community Capacity Building: A Study on the Impact of Leadership Development Training on Community

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*Leadership development programs have documented positive impacts on individuals, but there is much less evidence of long-term community impacts. To explore the relationship between leadership development and community capacity, interview data from participants in a 1987 multi-county leadership program were collected and analyzed. Community impacts were assessed using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to determine impacts on community capacity as defined by community capitals. The findings demonstrate that participants contributed greatly to specific projects from which the community benefited. The impact on capacity as measured by the changes in community capitals is not as strong, in that the participants did not explicitly link the different projects. Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, capacity building, Community Capitals Framework, evaluation, leadership development*

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Private sector, private not-for-profits, and civic organizations both within the U.S. and on a global scale invest vast resources in leadership training in order to facilitate positive change within communities and organizations. The individual is the unit of analysis in the plethora of studies on the impact of these programs. No studies could be found that measured the impact of leadership training on the targeted community; rather evaluation studies relied on reports of participants' activity. As one Extension Educator connected to an extensive state program dedicated to leadership development commented, "We haven't yet figured out how to measure impact on the community." This study introduces a tool to do that by mapping individual and collective leadership activities to changes in community capitals in order to link individual activity to community change.

This article describes a pilot study to investigate the impact of a leadership program on six communities in two counties in Iowa through the eyes of former participants more than

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two decades after the training took place. This program's impact on community capacity, defined as developing assets in multiple capitals (Flora & Flora, 2008), was evaluated because the former participants reported that the training had a positive impact on their communities and invited us to document that impact. Thirteen former participants in a single community cluster were interviewed to test the hypothesis that the increase in individual capacity gained through the leadership development program yielded significant increases in the community's capacity to create and manage positive change processes as measured by increases in community capitals.

## **TOMORROW'S LEADERS TODAY (TLT)**

In 1987, Iowa Cooperative Extension offered a regional program for people interested in leadership skills organized around the design team's notion of what effective leaders do. The program included:

- specific skills related to leadership: running a meeting, developing a plan, identifying stakeholders, etc.,
- opportunities for participants to expand their bridging social capital and networking opportunities,
- specific content around topics of value to leaders such as the personality types, strategic planning, vision and values, and
- group tasks designed to help participants develop a sense of collective leadership.

A key element in the program's development focused on multi-community and inter-community cooperation (Wells, 1990). According to Wells:

The program design of Tomorrow's Leaders Today is both purposeful and flexible. It specifies that the program will provide leadership education for emerging leaders within "clusters" of neighboring small towns... Communities apply as a group... and set their own goals. (p. 2)

TLT is framed as an action-learning, action-research setting for "experiential learning in which people work collaboratively for social change..." (p. 3). Communities applied as clusters, undergoing training together. Twenty one clusters were chosen to participate in the TLT program. One cluster was selected to examine in depth for community level impacts.

Northeast Iowa, where the cluster communities are situated, is experiencing long-term declines in population and number of farms. Similar to many other rural areas in the Great Plains, an increasing proportion of the population is over 65. The aim of this study was to learn from those participating in the program over 20 years ago how the TLT built their community assets in light of the larger secular demographic and economic trends.

Respondents ranged in age from retirement (around 65) to their mid-to-late forties. Thus when they participated in TLT, they were relatively young by Iowa standards (mid-to-late 20s to mid-40s). All three of the women interviewed had worked outside the home at some point, and two were still active in their professional lives. Several of the male participants were business owners; one worked in the public sector, and many were connected with the banking industry which encouraged their participation. One employed male respondent spends 20 hours per week volunteering for the community, with half of that time occurring during the work day. All of the people who were interviewed were involved in some kind of volunteer or community-based activity at the time of the training, and all have continued their involvement since that time.



### *Sample Selection*

Of all the individuals who attended TLT in the selected community cluster, current addresses were found for 18. Of those 18, 13 were interviewed by phone or in person. One person refused to participate, and the other four were unable to be contacted. Members of the design and delivery team were also interviewed.

The open-ended questions were designed using an Appreciative Inquiry approach (Elliot, 1999; Fitzgerald et al., 2002; Mohr & Watkins, 2001), which allowed the respondents to focus on what worked in the past and would be useful for a more positive community future. The interview was recorded and transcribed, coding themes using NVivo software. The intent was to ferret out issues, themes, and insights that address how activities by TLT and the participants impacted community capitals in order to inform future leadership assessment efforts aimed at increasing community capacity.

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) (Fey, Flora, & Flora, 2004; Flora & Flora, 2008) provides a way of looking at outcomes and impacts from a systems perspective (Emery, Fey & Flora, 2006). The interview data were analyzed using the CCF to map activities, outcomes, and impacts to determine if, and how, the actions of program participants led to increases in community assets and the capacity of the community to mobilize those assets (Emery & Fey, 2006). Mapping the actual community impact of program-inspired or related activities (Earl et al., 2001) leads to identification of changes in various capitals, allowing the study of changes in the community field (Emery & Flora, 2006). The extent to which the exercise of leadership by participants influenced community capitals and led to a spiraling up of community capitals assets can be discovered in order to analyze the impact of the program on community capacity and systems-level changes.

## **IMPACT OF TRAINING ON COMMUNITY CAPACITY**

Leadership training programs seek to provide emerging leaders with experiences that will strengthen their ability to lead (Wells, 1990). They increase participants' capacity by strengthening their knowledge, skills, and self efficacy (human capital) and by increasing their access to networks and resources (political capital). Respondents shared very positive reflections about the program, the instructor, the process, and the content.

The respondents were then asked to share their perceptions about how TLT made a difference within the community. Most saw this as a difficult question.

... one thing that came out of this training was a different result than what the organization maybe planned in the first place. In my experience, we learned more about the dynamics of how people work together rather than developing any specific leadership skills.

That is a hard one... As far ... as my community involvement I think it has helped. As far as how it has helped the community specifically, how do you quantify that? I think we have... to keep improving. There has been some growth in business ... But it was a fun group really to be involved with... Howard County seems to be doing ok for itself. We are not setting the world on fire, but we are predominately an older population too, and we are getting older.

The impact of the training on the communities in which they lived was only visible when individual and TLT activities were linked to specific community capitals. In Table 1, the activities reported by the capitals mobilized and the resulting primary and secondary assets grown in the process are categorized.

Table 1. Impact of Leadership Training on Community Assets

Outcome	Assets mobilized by capital	Primary capital impacted	Secondary impacts by capital
Community Foundations	Social, human, financial, political, cultural, built	Financial	All
Bike trail	Social, human, cultural, natural	Built	Human, social, natural
Library renovation	Social, human, cultural, built, political	Built	Human, social, cultural
School renovation/ track	Social, human, cultural, built, political	Built	Human, social, cultural
Hospital expansion	Social, human, cultural, built, political	Built	Human, social,
Successful grant applications	Social, human, cultural	Financial	Various
After school program	Social, human, cultural	Human	Social, cultural, long-term financial
Re-energize BRIDGE	Social, human, cultural	Social	Human, financial
Get out the vote	Social, human, cultural, political	Political	Human, social, cultural
Clean up the lake	Social, human, political, financial	Natural	Human, social, cultural
Toxic spill	Human	Natural	
Fiber optics	Human, social, political, financial	Built	Human, social, financial
Increased business profits	Human, social	Financial	Human

Human Capital

The respondents provide examples of how the training provided opportunities for participants to expand their human capital by increasing individual skills, knowledge, and self efficacy. They mentioned specific skills that include learning to:

- develop and use strategic plans at the county level,
- manage conflict within church and work contexts, and
- raise funds for the school, library, and health facilities.

The activities to which these leaders contributed increased community-wide human capital by improving health, education, and access to resources with particular attention to youth. Projects to broaden the prospects of young people resulted in increased educational access, new skills and knowledge. They also, however, are aware that many young people will leave and not return. The respondents identified this as a major challenge for current and future leaders. Several did mention that these skills enabled talented young people to leave.

Financial Capital

The respondents report raising over a million dollars to support local initiatives, such as a library in one community and a school track in another. More importantly, several participants worked to develop and build community foundations for one city and one county, thus ensuring future funding opportunities for local projects like the school tracks and local clubs.



Raising money for Boy Scouts is an adventure... Basically I want to be doing what I am doing and be involved with the community. It is fun to see good things happen.... That is part of my job... I like to see things happen... for people that have ideas, at least be able to help them have it happen if possible.

Because of the increases in human and social capital, several participants report an increase in submitting successful grant proposals. In addition to the impact of the training on community financial capital, some respondents also report that they used the training to improve their business and the local business environment.

...it is not only your store but you also want the community to grow because it will benefit your store. Lots of the things you will apply- your skills, your abilities - to benefit the community, but it comes the other way around, it will benefit you.

### *Cultural Capital*

Changes in assets connected to cultural capital appear more subtle, yet marked evidence of growth can be seen in short-term cultural capital in three areas: defining who we are, ways we do things, and definitions of the possible. Several respondents specifically commented that they had or saw among their colleagues a change in the how they defined community. Significantly, this change in how people see community led to the ongoing development of a county-wide economic development effort supported by a small group of interviewees.

...view this county as more of a community. ... We are doing a pretty good job of having a county-wide economic development program. We have people, many of which were in this organization, on the countywide industrial development board, so strides have been made along that line.

In terms of how people get things done, one respondent mentioned that people see the importance of doing things themselves rather than depending on outside expertise. Several respondents describe reframing their view of what is possible – that there is a positive future out there for them to grasp as a community.

Respondents also indicate that the new human capital assets influence how things get done, based on an understanding of the importance of inclusion and reaching out to the community to the success of local projects.

### *Social Capital*

Like human capital, social capital appears often in the Table 1. Respondents relied on their new bridging social capital to identify resources that led to successful efforts to build other capitals. For example, several respondents report using successful grant applications from other communities as models to help them develop their own skills. The county-wide efforts reflect the value of the stronger ties that some participants developed within the cluster. Interview data describes how these ties enabled them to work together and to draw on each other's networks for support balancing, mobilizing, and using both strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Hollifield et al., 2007). Based on the mapping of the descriptions of what these leaders did, the apparent growth of social capital can be seen as it is used by members of the group, who in turn can access the results of that growth to further additional projects. All the projects described by respondents involved some mobilization of people and thus required leaders to access their stock of social capital. Through that participation, participating communities added new assets to their collective stock of social capital by forging new relationships with those engaged in the project and building additional bridges by learning about resources and opportunities through association with the project.



### *Political Capital*

Participants grew their own political capital, better enabling them to influence the rules and regulations that impact how resources are used. They gained practical experience in how to influence local decision making to achieve tangible improvements in their human, built, and financial capitals (library and school renovation and hospital expansion), as well as in the restoration their natural capital represented by improvements on the lakefront (also a cultural icon). They learned about the importance of community input as they described how they expanded the numbers of people involved in decision making. In addition, one leader's effort, a "Get Out the Vote" project, presumably resulted in providing access to the political system for those they registered and encouraged to vote.

### *Built Capital*

When talking about their accomplishments as leaders, respondents focused many of their stories around raising money to improve facilities. Increases in built capital within the community contributed most to their personal satisfaction.

... have you put up jelly or canned something?... when you are in the kitchen, you see that product sitting on the counter. It is different than... a Thanksgiving meal that you worked all day on and was eaten in fifteen minutes. So I think when you see the library sitting there and you know that you and a group of women shingled the roof, and it wouldn't have gotten done otherwise or that you went after... a grant, and you have decided that instead of taking the 35,000 dollars on the project, you would invest it and borrow money at a lower interest rate and have that investment pay off the building project. You see that product sitting there .... It is like canning that fruit or vegetable or jelly.

One person who claims to have learned nothing from the training at the same time described accomplishments related to improving the infrastructure. While this analysis links actions of participants to specific community capacity building efforts and successes, for many participants the community impacts of TLT were not self-evident.

### *Natural Capital*

Natural capital was mentioned in regard to three areas: cleaning up a chemical spill, cleaning up the lake, and developing a bike trail. Each of these projects was mentioned by only one or two women. However, it was made clear in other projects that bike and walking trails do have a long-term impact on quality of life and on the health and welfare of those who use them. In addition, amenities like lakes often play a key role in helping communities identify their niche in the unfolding new economy thus contributing to asset development in financial capital.

From the examples included in the table of projects and capitals, the ways in which leaders connect the TLT experience to specific projects and outcomes is visible, particularly in relation to built capital. Using Kalambokitis' (2005) examples of a public good, "The production of a good or service confers benefits (costs) on someone other than those directly involved in the transaction," participants' accounts describe how TLT resulted in many benefits for the community and contributed to the public good.

## **ANALYSIS**

Despite the temporal challenges and the small sample size, very rich data were found that helped us understand what skills, information, and connections participants used and how. Using the mapping technique, the impact of the increases in their individual capacity



and their specific projects on the community were analyzed, as measured by increased assets across the community capitals.

### *Leadership as Relationships: The Impact on Social Capital*

Fukuyama also described social capital as “frequently a by-product of... experiences that lie outside the control of any government” (1999: 9) but can be passed on in educational settings. While the strength of the ties developed among the majority of participants may be described as a by-product of the training, the designers of TLT purposely focused activities toward the development of social capital in three ways. First, they involved participants in small group activities with people they did not know. Second, they introduced participants to a number of people representing a wide range of resources, thus facilitating the growth of weak ties and bridging social capital. Third, they placed participants in work teams that were given specific tasks to achieve and where they developed specific norms regarding trust, team work, and other values.

The data from this study reinforces the notion that leadership is relational. Kilpatrick et al. (2003) find that quality learning environments can increase the accumulation of social capital. The interviews indicate that most participants did indeed develop their social capitals. The experience of learning from one another about each of the communities in the cluster led to regional cooperation, yet follow up may have stopped short of the designers’ intentions in that the group itself did not have a life beyond the training. Because the bonds developed by the group were insufficient to keep them together, they were less able to engage the larger community in a strategy for change. For these participants, “Social capital is a private good that is nonetheless pervaded by externalities, both positive and negative” (Dasgupta quoted in Fukuyama, 1999; 2). This data indicates that a positive externality emerging from the leadership training experience involves the development of a “radius of trust” (Fukuyama, 1999; 2) that extends beyond the members of the class, as illustrated in a comment about feeling comfortable contacting people in other communities or agencies for information. For Fukuyama (1999), a major negative externality emerging from many social capital formations occurs when group solidarity creates “hostility” towards people outside the group. While the interviews clearly point to the positive externality of an expanded radius of trust, the absence of discussion about negative impacts and the feeling by some that the group was a club they were not part of, indicates that a possible negative externality was created as well.

Social capital has also been identified as a critical factor in community mobilization. In this sense, social capital is seen as a property of community, not just of individuals. The bonding and bridging social capital of participants expanded. There were only a few continuing multi-community efforts that remain in place: a county economic development organization and the county level community foundation.

The social capital developed was limited to the individual communities, as were almost all the capitals developed. The cluster concept of TLT did not lead to permanent regional cluster or even on-going collaborations across communities. As one respondent reports, “*When we left [the TLT program] they wanted us to be an organized group, and that didn’t happen.*”

However, northeast Iowa has formed an impressive five-county initiative, which includes the communities who were part of TLT. There is reason to think that the decades-old patterns of collaboration were more easily reinstituted because of the cluster-based TLT experience.

### *Leadership as Power and Influence: The Impact on Political Capital*

Many respondents mentioned the importance of learning about influence at the intersection of political and social capital where the weak ties associated with social capital



become the mechanism by which individuals influence rules, both formal and informal, and regulations that determine how resources are used (Flora & Flora, 2008). Pigg (2000) references Rost on the importance of these relationships referring to leadership as an “influence,” not as a person. Pigg uses Rost’s definition of a “leader” as an “influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (Rost quoted in Pigg 2000, p. 199). Participants increased their knowledge, both tacit and explicit, about rules and regulations. They developed the knowledge to access and use these conduits (Foucault, 1980); they did not, it appears, consider changing them. Thus, while participants developed their own political capital assets, overall the experience appears not to have increased assets within the community related to political capital by changing these conduits or increasing access to these conduits. Two exceptions to this might be the “Get Out the Vote” effort mentioned by one person. Again the effort to create a county-level economic development organization did have the effect of changing the community structure and the conduits of power for that county.

### **LIMITATIONS OF FOCUSING ON HUMAN, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CAPITAL: THE OVERLOOKED IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL**

Culture refers to: (a) the values that lie beneath what the Organization’s rewards, supports and expectations; (b) the norms that surround and/or underpin the policies, practices and procedures of the organization (c) the meaning incumbents share about what the norms and values of the organization are. (Schneider, 1988, p. 353)

One of the intents of TLT was to develop a shared culture of leadership among participants. According to Pigg (1999), “Listening to one another, seeing each other as allies, and finding a common vision and purpose are the important elements of leadership development.” One argument posed by this study, however, is that one of the challenges of programs like TLT is to overtly and critically address the existing conduits of power and the accepted ways of doing and thinking beyond the empowerment of participants to become part of the existing power and structures. The interviews include a plaintive complaint about the importance of being “one of the club” – the insiders within the community – and the inability of the TLT group to see beyond the insiders to notice the assets of “people who work with their hands.” This finding is consistent with other studies of leadership in small communities. Wildavsky (1976) found in small communities a more limited number of leaders and a leadership group that involves a fairly consistently involved group of people. As one respondent put it:

...but most of the residents are born and raised here so you do not get a lot of outside views. So vision to me has always been important. I think so many of our small communities believe they cannot compete today to be a successful community. I am a believer that attitude is the biggest thing and to me that vision is extremely important.

There was little mention of the large number of working poor in the region in terms of directing TLT activities. Research (Flora & Flora, 1993; Luther & Wall, 1998) indicates that an inclusive view of the community is a critically important characteristic of communities who find ways to thrive while others struggle to survive. Who is noticed, who is involved, and how they are involved indicates much about the cultural norms and values around inclusion, power, and influence. For instance, the lives of people on food stamps appear to be invisible to respondents. Furthermore, while some respondents talked about getting people involved early in a project, they did not challenge the norms around current practices of decision making.



More recently in several of the TLT communities, the Iowa State University Extension/Northwest Area Foundation Horizons program explicitly addressed poverty through community conversations and leadership activities, resulting in activities that directly address community inclusiveness (Flora & Flora, 2008, Ch. 13).

Because people think of culture in terms of artifacts: language, dress, dance, art, and as customs, marriage, and kinship relations, often culture appears as an externality to leadership rather than as an asset that leaders can shape and mobilize for positive change. Culture plays a role in shaping or creating boundaries for the content of everyday life. The respondents allude to culture in terms of the expectations and norms that create the boundaries within which acceptable behavior takes place. When the thus created box remains the same over time, indicating an atrophying structure, community capitals can deteriorate. Cultural capital expands when everyday decision making includes people from all sectors of the community (Emery & Flora, 2006). Changes in community cultural capital require changing the habits of everyday life. Leaders cannot dictate these changes; they can provide the settings in which people experience a new perspective for themselves and thus are motivated to do things differently.

### **SPIRALING UP: TOWARD THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LEADERSHIP**

Communities may contain many projects that require leaders; seldom, however, do these project groups work in tandem. According to the participants, the training helped them bolster their own capacity and led to stronger, successful single purpose efforts such as putting a new roof on the library or raising money for Boy Scouts. However, an effort by one group can easily result in a decline in one or more of the community capitals at the same time another group may be working to expand related assets. When leaders work to increase community capacity, rather than individual or organizational capacity, the work of these separate projects becomes cumulative, building assets across the community capitals. Emery and Flora (2006) apply the CCF to a community which is moving toward a cumulative community capitals investment strategy. In evaluating the impact of the HomeTown Competitiveness Program on Valley County, Nebraska, they found that increasing assets in political, human, and social capital were not enough to initiate a spiraling up of assets building on assets to create more assets; transformative change involves new stocks in cultural capital assets as well. Therefore, the researchers posit that leadership for community capacity building is more than skills, relationships, and influence; it is also finding and sharing a deeper, more inclusive vision that can mobilize the whole community and align these separate projects in ways that build assets across the community capitals.

In studying communities that spiral up, the hypothesis of this study is that leadership is an emergent property, continually socially constructed as volunteers, leaders, and community members come together to create a vision for the future and to find new ways of doing things, especially in regard to community-based leadership. According to Ospina et al. (2002), leadership happens when people construct meaning in action; leadership can be considered to be a shared act of meaning in the context of a group's work to accomplish a common purpose (p.3).

In this spiraling up process, the interaction among the capitals plays a critical role in creating tipping points of change that can result in increased cultural capital assets. Communities must struggle to construct leadership and community that are inclusive of all perspectives and open to hearing the voices of all within the decision making process. One respondent commented on the importance of getting new views from outside the community, because of the tight-knit nature of the communities. Yet, participants seemed



unaware that new views of what is possible might come from within the community. This ongoing process of reaching out within the community can bring not only new voices but the energy and resources to act on the resulting vision.

## CONCLUSIONS

What does this research tell us about leadership development and community capacity? Successful community leadership development is a process whereby committed individuals work with others in their community to achieve positive social change that builds assets across the capitals. How can leadership development be most effective in fostering community capacity? Clearly, there are specific skills that aid leaders in their community-based work. New information about how communities work also helps them. Practicing leadership through developing collective activities and projects builds their self confidence and motivation. Networking creates the bonding social capital to make an effective team and access to the external resources helpful to their efforts. These components alone, however, will not necessarily build capacity. Dialogue, conversation, and working together create the conditions for emerging leaders to socially construct what effective leadership and proactive community capacity mean. Ospina et al. contend, "Leadership is a process of meaning making in a community..." (2002: 30). Constructing this common meaning and direction to shape change efforts will enable individuals and organizations to align their efforts and create an upward spiraling of increasing assets.

The analysis of the interviews also helped the researchers frame the issue of leadership in a community context. If indeed, developing leaders are seen as the key to addressing the many challenges confronting communities of all kinds, the importance of developing shared, inclusive leadership cannot be overstated. Thus leadership is not only, "...a function of the group through how the group understands and seeks to go about carrying out its task" (Green, 2001: 1); it is also about the process that transforms the cultural capital associated with thinking and doing leadership to become more inclusive, self reflective, and participatory. "The process of leadership is a collective activity that occurs when there is a need for action or change beyond oneself" (Hickman, 2001: 1).

This exploratory research indicates that it is feasible to study the impact of one community leadership training program on community capacity by identifying how collective activities resulting from that program change community capitals and the process of asset building across the community capitals. These findings have implications for how to improve these programs, to determine return on leadership development investments, and to address questions of sustainability. Extending this methodology to develop pre and post-mapping of the interactions among community capitals would also help us better understand how specific leadership interventions result in community change. Future research could address the study of the process by which leaders in training come to develop new views of themselves, their communities, and the possible. Such findings could inform the many programs now in existence and in process of development.

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