



Seeing the Future: Leadership and Social Capital

Introduction

Until the late 1980s, local businesses, banks, newspapers and utilities were traditional sources of community leadership. Globalization and other economic forces have impacted the leadership structure in many of today's communities. Businesses are now competing on a global basis and often have fewer roots in a single locality. In addition, business executives tend to be more mobile and may stay in a community for only a few years, rather than a lifetime. Mergers and deregulation have also meant less autonomy for many business executives. Whereas a bank president might have had the authority to make commitments to the community in the past, today he or she often needs approval from someone higher up the ladder.

Why does this even matter? Isn't this what we elect leaders for?

The South has been transformed from the poorest region in the nation to one of the world's largest economies in the span of a single lifetime. Much of the region's progress—from bringing thousands of jobs to our states to developing world-class universities—is due to visionary leadership. Many communities can also point to committed leaders as the inspiration for their renewal. Long-time Mayor Joe Riley, for example, has been widely recognized for his leadership role in the dramatic revitalization of Charleston, South Carolina—bringing international acclaim to what had been variously described as a “neglected backwater” and a “Sleeping Beauty” in the 1970s.

But, even in cases where there are strong elected leaders, they can't carry the burden alone. Tupelo, Mississippi is often cited as an example of a community where broad-based leadership has been key. Sixty years ago, Tupelo was one of the poorest communities in one of the poorest states in the nation. Today it is regularly cited as a national model of economic and community development. One of the keys to the community's success has been the Community Development Foundation, a non-profit organization that, for more than 50 years, has acted in partnership with citizens, businesses and educators to build leadership and improve the quality of life in the community. In Tupelo, community participation and connections—what many have come to call “social capital”—have made the difference. While not as tangible as infrastructure such as roads, bridges and broadband, it's clear that leadership and social capital are essential foundations for community success. They're critical at every level—from the smallest communities to the biggest states—and in every sector—education, government and business. Yet, economic and demographic shifts of the past decade have important implications for community leadership in the future.

So, what do we need to know about leadership?

Riddle: *What do you get when you combine a local bank president, a newspaper publisher and a businessman?*

*In many communities, the answer to this riddle used to be simple:
Leadership.*

But, the answer isn't so easy anymore.

Key Points

1) Traditional sources of community leadership are changing

As noted above, no longer can we rely on the bank president, newspaper publisher and local businessman to guide our community into the future.

For one, the demographic profile of many communities is changing. Populations are growing older and more ethnically diverse. A leadership challenge will be to find ways to tap into populations that have not been a traditional source of community leadership, including women, minorities and youth.

Women, for example, make up more than half of the population of the South, but accounted for only 17 percent of the region's state legislators in 2010 (See Table 1). At the local level, only 22 of the region's cities with populations over 30,000 had female mayors in 2010. Consider also, that despite a rapidly growing Hispanic population in the South, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials reported only 11 Hispanic county or municipal officials in the region in 2008.

"Everyone's opinion is important, no matter what age you are."

Table 1. Women in the State Legislature - 2010

State	Women in Legislature	Total Legislators	%	National Rank
AL	18	140	12.9%	48
AR	31	135	23.0%	28
GA	46	236	19.5%	38
KY	22	138	15.9%	45
LA	23	144	16.0%	44
MS	25	174	14.4%	47
MO	44	197	22.3%	29
NC	44	170	25.9%	19
OK	17	149	11.4%	49
SC	17	170	10.0%	50
TN	25	132	18.9%	40
VA	27	140	19.3%	39
WV	22	134	16.4%	42
South	361	2,059	17.5%	
US	1,811	7,382	24.5%	

Source: Center for American Women and Politics at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu>.

In many cases, young people, including young entrepreneurs and professionals, have yet to be integrated into the community's leadership structure. Some suggest that the younger generation has a different outlook that makes them less likely to join the traditional service organizations that have been a source of community leadership in the past. They also have different ways of communicating, embracing the Internet and other new technologies to join with others on issues of common interest.

In a series of more than 150 community forums held across the region in 2008, Southern Growth heard that young people were generally eager to participate more in community life. "Everyone's opinion is important, no matter what age you are, but when dealing with issues that have long term implications younger people will be the ones who have to deal with the effects of a decision," explained a high school student at a forum in Raymond, Mississippi. Yet, many felt that adults did not really listen to them or value their contributions. Young people identified a number of barriers to community

involvement, including not knowing how or where to get involved, not seeing potential opportunities as meaningful, and logistical concerns such as time and transportation constraints.¹

2) Traditional models of community leadership are changing

Traditionally, leadership has been seen as coming from the opposite ends of a continuum. At one end, it has been someone of importance (or a group of people of importance) with a vision and often the resources to make something happen. At the other end it has been grassroots leaders, perhaps not in formal leadership positions and often with limited resources, but with a passion to make something happen.



Today's pace of change and increasingly complex challenges make it difficult for any one leader—or small set of leaders—to keep up with every issue. Leadership is becoming much more dynamic and flexible, with leadership often changing depending on the issue. Groups come together to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity, then may go away, with an entirely different group emerging to deal with another issue. Someone may play a leadership role on a certain issue, but play less of a role—or no role—on another. Many are calling this “networked leadership.”

The advantages of networked leadership are perhaps best explained by the simple observation that “communities are built on connections. Better connections usually provide better opportunities.”² As author and scholar Robert Putnam detailed in his groundbreaking book, *Bowling Alone*, experience shows that communities with strong social capital—vibrant relationships, networks, and lines of communication between diverse members of the community—are most likely to have strong economies.³ Social capital becomes the glue that brings entrepreneurs together with their peers, companies together with their suppliers, and neighborhoods and ethnic groups together with those outside their narrow boundaries. Communities that have built a spirit of cooperation, a sense of trust and a shared purpose will be better positioned to meet the challenges of an economy that rewards speedy, creative and strategic actions.

In today's world, leaders are valued for their ability to actively work to build connections and networks in the community. They are seen as “network weavers” and “systems integrators.”

Despite popular perceptions of the South as a place with strong community connections, recent measures show a picture that is not quite so rosy. As shown in Table 2, while about one in three Southerners participate in a religious, sports, civic or other group, less than one in four reported volunteering with a formal organization in 2009, and less than one in ten reported attending a public meeting or working with neighbors to address a community problem.



Table 2. Civic Participation Rates–2009 (3 year average)

State	Participate in a Group	Volunteer with Organization	Work with Neighbors	Attend Public Meeting
AL	32.7	24.6%	6.6%	7.5%
AR	24.5	22.8%	4.9%	5.6%
GA	36.8	24.7%	8.1%	9.0%
KY	30.9	25.9%	7.0%	7.5%
LA	30.4	20.9%	8.7%	7.9%
MS	38.1	21.3%	6.1%	7.1%
MO	34.1	29.0%	10.7%	9.1%
NC	32.9	24.6%	7.7%	8.3%
OK	35.8	29.8%	7.2%	9.0%
SC	36.6	26.8%	10.4%	9.8%
TN	32.2	25.9%	6.5%	6.9%
VA	38.3	28.0%	6.8%	8.8%
WV	33.2	25.2%	7.2%	7.1%
US	35.1	26.5%	7.9%	9.3%

Source: Corporation for National and Community Service, *Civic Life in America* at www.civc.serve.gov/rankings/States/Volunteer-Rates/

3) Regional leadership is increasingly important

Regions have been called “the new communities of the 21st century.”⁴ While many of us continue to identify with our hometowns, in reality, many key issues, such as transportation planning, economic development and environmental protection require action beyond the boundaries of any single town or county.

Today’s economy is also regional in nature. Businesses draw workers and use suppliers from across multi-county regions. In many cases, regional economies even cross state borders. Building a regional cluster, or critical mass of related businesses, can help make businesses more competitive by giving them access to suppliers, service providers who are familiar with their industry, and a pool of workers who are likely to have relevant skills.

It has been said that, “Thinking regionally will not be an option in the future; it will be a matter of survival.”⁵ Multi-community collaboration offers a number of benefits. It enables communities to:

- 1) Leverage limited financial resources;
- 2) Tackle major infrastructure projects that may not be feasible for a single community;
- 3) Address “spillover” issues, such as water and air pollution; and
- 4) Build clusters of similar businesses that in turn increase the area’s attractiveness to other prospective businesses in similar or related fields.

Regional action requires collaboration. This can be very challenging since there are few formal mechanisms in place for regional governance. As one scholar notes, “In most cases, the region is nobody’s community. This means that getting any action at the regional scale requires creating new collaborative alignments among interests who previously either didn’t believe that they shared issues in common, or who knew it but felt no compelling reason to act on it.”⁶ Some suggest that citizens are key in advocating and sustaining regional action, since public officials have no mandate to take action at the regional level. Business coalitions can also help make a case for regional action.

4) Technology has played a role in leadership transformation

The Internet and other new technologies have played a role in building new networks and connections not only within geographic communities, but also communities of interest. One writer on the topic talks about the power of people coming together via the Internet to focus their activity around a single task or issue to which they may feel deeply connected. Despite the fact that these networks often have no formal leadership, they can still transform themselves into a formidable power, he points out. In his view, “...these affairs of the heart will be the engines that drive 21st century business, politics and community.”⁷

While a common perception is that the Internet has stifled in-person connections, recent research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project concludes that the Internet and mobile phones have actually led people to become involved in not only more—but also more diverse—discussion networks. And, as important, these online connections have not limited those participants from also taking part in local community efforts on the ground. In fact, those who used technologies frequently were more likely than others to join local groups.⁸

Ideas for Getting Started

- **Take an inventory of individuals, organizations, institutions and businesses that could be considered assets in the community.**

This type of inventory is often called an “asset map.” In Biloxi, Mississippi, for example, youth and adults met in a two-hour workshop to begin identifying, categorizing and mapping activities, resources and other community assets related to youth. They created a website and Twitter feed to continue collecting information.

As a next step to mapping assets, identify existing connections and ties between these groups and individuals and look for ways to build, strengthen and actively manage connections. As two experts on the topic have emphasized, left on their own, networks and connections tend to form among individuals and groups who are similar to one another. In their view, this results in networks with little or no diversity, limiting the potential for new ideas and innovation.⁹

- **Identify programs in the community that already provide some type of leadership or skills training to adults and/or youth.**

It’s likely that your community already has programs that provide some type of leadership training to select groups or individuals. Find out who they reach and what type of training they provide. What are the gaps? Look to build more connections between leadership program participants and the community at-large. Provide opportunities for leadership program participants to take on community projects that bring them together with diverse members of the community, for example, as well as opportunities for young people and adults to interact on service projects and other community efforts.

- **Set up periodic community dialogues or study circles that bring everyday citizens together to talk about community issues.**

Work with your local university or community college to provide the space and help facilitate these community conversations. Or, think outside the box, like the folks in Greensboro, Alabama. In May 2009, Pie Lab opened its doors in downtown Greensboro, with the aim of providing a place where community members could gather “to share stories and ideas that will inspire and improve the town collectively”—all “while enjoying a slice of pie—because who doesn’t love pie?”¹⁰

- **Launch regular gatherings of community leaders from different sectors around specific community issues.**

Education leaders talk most often with other education leaders, while economic developers talk with other economic developers. Provide an opportunity for leaders from different fields to come together to talk about the community as a whole. Ask your local Chamber of Commerce or other community organization to take the lead in bringing these leaders together on a regular basis. In Carrboro, North Carolina, for example, the Chamber brings together leaders from different sectors every other month to talk about emerging community issues.

Examples:



Colquitt, Georgia: Swamp Gravy

“Swamp Gravy” is a people’s play. Written and produced by residents of Colquitt, Georgia (population 2000), it is a compendium of memories, tales, and vignettes depicting life in the raw. The play is a prime example of how theatre can be used as a means of strengthening community ties. “We let people tell their story and the story of their communities, and in the process, community ties are strengthened,” said Karen Kimbrel, former executive director of the Colquitt-Miller Arts Council. Local volunteers do everything, from acting to running the lights. Each performance is an original blend of comedy, drama and music. All of Swamp Gravy’s plays are based on real-life stories, taken from taped interviews and adapted for the stage by a professional playwright. The cast is drawn from all racial and economic groups in Colquitt.

The impact has been dramatic: Swamp Gravy has sold more than 140,000 tickets since it started, and has been something of a mini economic boon to the town. Swamp Gravy’s popularity has led to the creation of a multi-faceted organization that is focused on positive social and economic change. The Colquitt-Miller Arts Council now operates Market On The Square, a mini-mall where vendors of arts, crafts, and antiques have affordable rent; a Storytelling Museum; a Mural Project; and the New Life Learning Center, a state of the art facility where over 150 students are exposed to the arts during afterschool and summer art programming, tutoring, and mentoring. Colquitt, now home to 15 murals based on stories collected in conjunction with Swamp Gravy, hosted the Global Mural Conference in 2010.

As a complement to Swamp Gravy, a second show, entitled May-Haw, was launched in 2005. Modeled after the popular TV show Hee Haw that aired in the late 1960s, May-Haw is a variety show that includes both comedy and music. May-Haw’s performances take place in April and November, while Swamp Gravy is presented in March and October.

Several businesses have spun out of these efforts, including the Tarrer Inn, an historic bed and breakfast that the Arts Council recently deeded over to the Downtown Development Authority, and four new downtown businesses that were incubated in the Market on the Square. The Arts Council also has a consulting and training arm known as the Swamp Gravy Institute (SGI). Learning to share life experiences through storytelling is an important element of SGI’s training, but skills such as communication, partnership building, and community organizing are also emphasized. The aim is to use these skills to transform communities. Teams have worked to spread Swamp Gravy’s lessons both around the country and abroad.

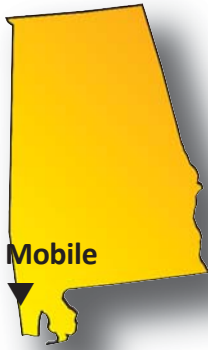
Just as important as these impacts, the play has united the community, connecting people who had not otherwise worked together, and empowering them to take on other projects in the community. The process, telling one’s story and/or working on the production (either on-stage or behind the scenes), has served to form strong bonds among people, crossing racial, gender and class lines. Breaking down racial barriers in the community is, in fact, considered part of the program’s mission.

Two African-American cast members, empowered by the Swamp Gravy experience, started their own non-profit organization, New Visions Coalition, to run “Bounce,” an after-school program that offers tutoring and substance abuse counseling to local youths. More than a thousand students have participated in after-school programming since the program was established in 1996. Community members also developed a Community Development Corporation that has built a 32-unit affordable apartment complex, launched a small business incubator, and established a training program to encourage high school students to become entrepreneurs and start their own businesses in the future.

Swamp Gravy, which has been designated as the “Official Folk Life Play of Georgia” by the Georgia State Legislature, was featured during the Cultural Olympiad Arts Festival that was held in conjunction with the 1996 Olympics. Swamp Gravy has also toured throughout the country, including a performance at the Kennedy Center.

To learn more, visit: www.swampgravy.com.

Mobile, Alabama: Mobile United



For nearly four decades, Mobile United has brought together business, political and social leaders to work on key issues affecting the community. Among the organization’s notable accomplishments was its key role in creating the Alabama School of Math and Science to address concerns about the need for stronger math and science education at the high school level. Recent activities have included the distribution of Hurricane Guide coloring books (printed in several languages) through schools, churches and other venues to help community members better prepare for any future disasters.

In the view of Sandi Forbus, the organization’s executive director, the organization’s success is in large part due to its ability to bring people of diverse perspectives together to address local concerns and problems. Mobile United sees itself first and foremost as a unifying force in the community it serves. “In a community you don’t make decisions for people who are not at the table,” emphasizes Ms. Forbus.

The organization has its origins in multiracial civic groups formed during the days of legal segregation. Rather than turning to outsiders to deal with community problems, these groups resolved to meet regularly to discuss issues and to develop policies to deal with them. Today, the organization continues to provide “an arena for identifying, communicating and addressing relevant issues that will improve or enhance life for all citizens in the area.” Mobile United also administers Mobile’s adult and youth leadership programs, Leadership Mobile and Youth Leadership Mobile.

Mobile United’s work is organized around standing committees focused on issue areas that include race relations, public safety, natural resources, government, social services and housing, and education. In addition to regular committee meetings, the organization holds monthly gatherings on topics of interest to the community. The location of these meetings rotates around the community in order to enable attendees to experience new facilities, businesses, agencies, and government entities in the community.

To learn more, visit: www.mobileunited.org.

St. Louis, Missouri: FOCUS St. Louis



FOCUS St. Louis works to create a thriving region by developing leadership, influencing policy, and promoting community connections in the 16-county St. Louis metro area. The organization was created in 1996 through a merger of two influential non-profit organizations – Confluence St. Louis and The Leadership Center of Greater St. Louis. “We combined a leadership center with a regional policy organization,” says Christine Chadwick, the organization’s founding executive director. “We’ve not found this combination elsewhere.”

Leadership development is one of the organization’s major roles, with FOCUS St. Louis boasting more than more than 4,000 graduates of its long-standing leadership programs. Among its programs are Leadership St. Louis, a program aimed at strengthening both emerging and established leaders in the region; Youth Leadership St. Louis, which brings together students from 25 schools across the region for skill and team building activities; and Experience St. Louis, which seeks to both inform and involve business executives and their spouses who are new to the region.

FOCUS St. Louis also works to promote understanding of key policy issues in the region and to give citizens a voice in influencing public policy. Citizen task forces are one vehicle for citizen involvement, with current focus areas including charter schools, environmental sustainability, regional disaster preparedness and affordable workforce housing. Forums on a wide variety of topics are held throughout the year to inform citizens about regional issues and connect them with key policy makers and guest speakers.

Promoting community connections is one of the organization's broadest roles. This is accomplished not only through its leadership programs and public policy work, but also through a number of special programs and events. Among the most recognized of the programs is "Bridges Across Racial Polarization," an initiative that uses the age old inducement of a good meal and a bit of fellowship to try to improve race relations in the region. The program organizes small groups of diverse members that meet four to six times a year for potluck dinners or in other informal settings to discuss racial, cultural and/or other current community issues. "We find that the meetings help to break down stereotypes, and to show that we are really more alike than different, and where there are differences, to honor them," Chadwick says. Other FOCUS programs connect and engage young professionals in the region, match volunteers to non-profit board openings, and bring citizens together to celebrate regional successes.

To learn more, visit: <http://www.focus-stl.org>.

Resources:

Organizations/Websites:

Alliance for Regional Stewardship

The Alliance is a national peer-to-peer network whose goal is to promote regional collaboration. It is an affiliate of the American Chamber of Commerce Executives.

<http://www.regionalstewardship.org>.

Everyday Democracy

The mission of Everyday Democracy is to help communities develop their own ability to solve problems by exploring ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to create change.

<http://www.everyday-democracy.org>

Kettering Foundation

The Foundation's research and publications are focused on finding ways to strengthen the role of citizens in governing themselves.

<http://www.kettering.org>

Leadership Learning Community

LLC is a non-profit organization focused on connecting organizations and individuals in the leadership development field, including practitioners, grant-makers and thought leaders. Their primary focus is leadership development for social justice.

<http://leadershiplearning.org>

Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose mission is to help citizens learn more about critical policy issues so they can make informed choices, while also helping leaders better understand the public's point of view.

<http://www.publicagenda.org>

W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Civic engagement is a key focus of the Foundation's work.

<http://www.wkkf.org/what-we-support/civic-engagement.aspx>

Women's Leadership Initiative

The Women's Leadership Initiative, a multi-year project of Demos, non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization, is aimed at addressing women's poor numbers in top leadership positions in the U.S. compared to the rest of the world.

http://www.demos.org/issue.cfm?e=Womens_Leadership_Initiative

Books, Articles and Other Written Resources:

Annie E. Casey Foundation (report series on networks):

<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/PublicationsSeries/SocialNetworks.aspx>

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Podcasts, Videos and Other Non-Written Materials:

Center for Creative Leadership

The Center has a podcast series entitled Leading Effectively. Its podcast feed provides news, resources and tips about leadership delivered directly to your iPod or audio player.
<http://www.ccl.org/leadership/podcast/index.aspx>

Everyday Democracy

In addition to guidebooks and other written materials, Everyday Democracy offers a number of videos and podcasts that feature people creating change in their communities.
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Videos.aspx>
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Podcasts.aspx>

Leader Network

This podcast series highlights a different leader every month. Hear leaders provide their insights in their own words.
<http://www.leadernetwork.org>

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- 10) News release from Project M, May 29, 2009. For more information, visit <http://www.pielab.org>.