

Concept Paper

# Building Engaged Communities—A Collaborative Leadership Approach

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**Abstract:** Community engagement is essential for building smart cities. While leaders who participate in community leadership development programs create engaged communities, there is a gap in literature on the role leadership programs play in the formation of engaged communities. This conceptual paper examines the relationship between collaborative leadership and leadership development programs in order and their role in fostering engaged communities. Recommendations for future research on building effective leadership programs are proposed.

**Keywords:** engaged communities; leadership programs; collaborative leadership; leadership theory

## 1. Introduction

Smart cities are characterized as safer, friendlier, and greener [1] as a result of a combination of a growing human, infrastructure, and entrepreneurial capital [2]. Initiatives in smart cities promote community and citizen engagement. Research indicates that community and civic engagement is closely related to the development of smart cities [3]. Long-term benefits of smart cities have been not only linked to the enhancement of community engagement [4], but also to the increase in the sense of agency and belonging to a community [5]. Smart initiatives led by the community have been found to address urban problems [6], foster social inclusion and resolve regional challenges [7]. Finally, the literature demonstrates that an actively engaged community is necessary for the success of smart cities as it promotes the generation of project ideas and fosters the sustainability of services [8].

Community engagement is defined in a context of partnership and reciprocity as a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources [9]. Low community engagement leads to lack of trust within the community, high crime rates, and increased levels of unemployment, poverty, and subsequently poor education [10]. Creating local networks of community members fosters a climate where more people are willing to work toward a goal [11]. Leaders who participate in community leadership development programs create engaged communities. Although many scholarly articles pertain to community development programs and leadership development programs, limited research exists that focuses on the role of leadership programs to develop the skills leaders need to engage their communities. Similarly, while there is an abundance of studies on struggling communities, there is a gap in literature that examines factors that lead to the fostering of engaged communities [9–11]. As a result, the goal of this study is to close this gap.

Local governments are perhaps the most important level of government for their residents, because local elected leaders impact their constituents far more frequently than either state or federal government. For this reason, community leadership development programs connecting elected officials with local leaders in the private and nonprofit sectors will achieve the most effective outcomes by focusing on topics that relate to knowledge and awareness of the particular community. Some communities have leadership development programs to help nurture emerging and established leaders.

By examining the literature on collaborative leadership, this position paper explores areas that can help leaders build a thriving, engaged community. This study represents a unique approach to investigating the key factors that motivate leaders to engage in community initiatives. Furthermore, it is argued that through participation in a community, leadership development programs and knowledge sharing [12], leaders can influence their communities. By focusing on the impact of collaborative leadership on community engagement, leaders entrenched in traditional corporate hierarchy will have the opportunity to expand their creativity and find innovative solutions.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, an examination of collaborative leadership is performed, which addresses the concept of collaboration and the process of building engagement communities through collaboration. Next, a discussion of leadership development programs and their impact and purpose is conducted. The paper concludes with some recommendations for future research on building effective leadership programs.

## 2. Collaborative Leadership

According to Sinclair [13], most theorists recognize leadership as a process of influence and therefore can be executed by individuals throughout an organization. Though Raelin [14] addresses the American reputation of being self-reliant with an individualistic mentality, creating local networks of community members creates a climate where more people are willing to work toward a goal [11].

Fitzsimons, James, and Denyer [15] note that shared leadership is a collaborative process. Kramer and Crespy [16] use collaborative leadership and shared leadership interchangeably and acknowledge that creating collaboration may be difficult without the appropriate communication skills in place. In order for effective collaboration to occur, leaders must know the right conversations to have [17]. Therefore, it is argued that a collaborative leadership philosophy must be developed before the collaboration may take place [16]. When the collaborative leadership philosophy is communicated clearly, all interested individuals may understand their responsibility within the team and in this case, within the community.

If leadership is what the leaders and collaborators do together, by influencing change both substantively and transformatively [18], then collaborative leadership, supported through community leadership development programs, ensures a variety of stakeholder interests are addressed to produce positive, sustainable change for the community. As VanVactor [19] recognizes, “collaboration is so critical to success that every significant relationship should be treated as if it were a lifelong endeavor” [19] (p. 560). VanVactor [19] further supports the premise that collaboration “occurs when multiple individuals work together toward a mutual benefit” [19] (p. 560).

### 2.1. Building Engaged Communities through Collaboration

According to Weerts [9], community engagement is defined as a partnership and reciprocity of a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. In the case of community engagement, citizens are the building blocks of a community and their participation in community activities shapes the degree of an engaged community. Simosi and Xenikou [20] note that there is “a small number of empirical studies which have examined the relationship between organizational culture and commitment” [20] (p. 1602), as well as two empirical studies that found that culture strength and organizational culture norms contributed to organizational commitment.

With this sense of organizational commitment in mind, and with the idea that residents value the communities in which they choose to live, building engaged communities through collaboration can be evidenced by Wenger and Snyder’s [21] communities of practice, where people share a passion for a joint enterprise, in this case, creating a community with low crime, low unemployment, and low poverty. In order to move a community from unengaged to engaged, leaders need to change the way they address community engagement, realizing that they are entering into a dynamic relationship where control is shared [22]. Delannon, Raufflet, and Baba [22] also acknowledge the importance of corporate community relations between the companies and the local communities.

Participation in community engagement occurs at various stages in citizens' lives. For example, it begins early through service-learning, a community type service that is integrated through classroom instructions in schools [23]. Studies show that students' attitudes toward the importance of engaged citizenship measurably changes when faculty employ service learning in their classrooms [24]. If students learn the importance of community service through a collaborative approach from their faculty, the foundation will be set for their acceptance of a non-traditional, vertical leadership approach as they mature.

In this digital age, people are able to connect with a wider range of cultures and influences throughout the world. A global economy means a more complex networking system beyond communities. However, civic engagement proliferates through technology [25], builds awareness about politics and local issues [26], and culminates in citizen collaboration, which promotes effective communities through positive community change [27] and leads to positive benefits such as longer, healthier lifestyles [11,28].

Many young people begin with community service and volunteer opportunities through their school or hospital [29]. Colleges increase the drive for young students to engage in community service by focusing on service as part of their admissions application [30]. It is argued that this early initiation lays the groundwork for continued engagement into adulthood. As these adults locate and settle into their communities, they must recall the importance and value in supporting a collaborative, team approach to finding solutions. Savelsbergh, Poell, and van der Heijden [31] note that the cross-functionality of the community members "provide the opportunity for timely integration of critical information, not only from their functional background but also from various personal networks" [31] (p. 406).

Jalan and Ravallion [32] studied poor-area development programs, where the government transferred extra resources to areas labeled as unusually poor, and found that while the program successfully targeted poorer areas, it did nothing to improve their position relative to other areas. The gains prevented absolute decline, but different efforts, other than a government-issued poor-area development program, would be needed to see improvement in the poor areas. As noted by Fitzsimons, James, and Denyer [15], when individuals role share, they develop a shared cognition—and even affection.

Community engagement initiatives have tackled disproportionality within areas considered rife with family poverty, unemployment, and single parenthood. For example, once race, oppression, and poverty are addressed with community development projects and innovations for reducing disproportionality are supported, communities improve [33]. Furthermore, when leaders embrace engaging communities through collaboration, the quality of life improves for those communities [34]. Therefore, it is essential that leaders of those communities possess the necessary skills to support positive community engagement.

Empowering communities in the areas of adult well-being, positive youth development, locality development, and social change will enhance the community. Currently, the marginalized and oppressed struggle for community betterment [35]. Communities with strong local leaders tend to have a positive impact on social issues, such as lower crime rates, higher performing schools, and more effective government [36]. Part of the challenge in creating engaged communities is the lack of corporate social responsibility, and Groves and LaRocca [37] found that ethical values related to the level of corporate social responsibility and to the amount the company contributed to the sustainable development of the community.

## 2.2. The Role of Collaboration

According to Savelsbergh, Poell, and van der Heijden [31] there exist positive effects of maintaining a stable team. When teams are kept together, team members form an understanding of each other's capabilities, resulting in improved coordination of their actions. Working through a community leadership development program will offer the opportunity for everyone in the community

to collaborate in a cohort environment, which will create a lasting, diverse team from many different industries designed with the aim at solving community issues.

Leadership across a vast range of industries has the ability to create positive change, including at the social ecological level. Folta, Seguin, Ackerman, and Nelson [38] sought to identify specific and successful leadership skills in women and understand the best practices for training women leaders to maximize their effectiveness in creating social change. They found that mentoring proved to be critical to the women's success and growth as leaders.

Extant literature shows that charismatic leaders influence their followers in a lead-by-example way. For example, Groves [39] found a relationship between charismatic leaders, their followers, and their willingness to follow specific types of leaders. This relationship between the charismatic leader and their followers proved beneficial for leaders seeking to create or maintain sustainable, engaged communities.

Furthermore, according to Muyia and Kacirek [40], "there is increasing recognition that effective leaders require a combination of technical, conceptual, and human skills" [40] (p. 704) and are found throughout multiple levels of an organization. This realization is critical, because the implicit theory of leadership posits that when individuals see someone as a leader, they use preconceived notions to attribute characters to that person to fit a prototype of a leader [40].

The two characteristics most closely associated with leadership are intelligence and creativity. As a result, since poor community engagement leads to poverty, crime, and low education levels [10], it is essential to draw on the entire community to produce creative, sustainable solutions to positively impact communities. When searching for a way to train leaders, self-discovery through real-life leadership scenarios have proven to be an effective method [41]. While critiquing other leaders may also provide valuable analysis of the necessary traits needed to be an effective leader, the inclusion of real-life leadership scenarios such as community-based or university-based projects prove to be instrumental in achieving self-directed learning.

In order for communities to thrive, leaders of the communities need to possess both intelligence and creativity to form successful solutions to local challenges. In a study that examined a long-term service-learning program, Einfeld and Collins [42] discovered that the participants felt the program increased their awareness of social justice, multicultural competence, and civic engagement. Community members would benefit from participating in a program that educates them in characteristics beyond the individual skills of a leader and focuses on experiences that provide a more comprehensive understanding of citizenship and creating a culture for civic engagement.

### 3. Leadership Development Programs

Leadership development programs exist in many communities, at the city and county level [43]. The programs provide a formal and local program for emerging and current leaders to gain the applicable skills necessary for serving their communities. As Hackman and Wageman [44] note, "Ideally, leaders would be motivated to behave in ways that foster their own continuous learning from their experiences" [44] (p. 46). Many community leadership development programs are designed to build a broad-based network of community leaders through continuing education. These programs are designed for elected officials, nonprofit leaders, business owners, and other emerging leaders.

#### 3.1. Purpose of the Programs

Through continuing education, leaders are able to enhance their leadership abilities, share perspectives on relevant issues, and work toward solutions in the public interest. Many leadership development programs encourage community involvement, and through hands-on experiences, participants learn about the societal and economic challenges facing their community [36]. With a decline in civic and social connectedness over the past forty years [45], communities face challenges where their leaders lack the capacities to address the issues through civil discourse. Communities need leaders working in collaboration to address the challenges and promote local strengths.

Eich [46] studied attributes of leadership programs and identified three clusters of attributes for high-quality leadership programs emerged: Participants engaged in building and sustaining a learning community, student-centered experiential learning experiences, and research-grounded continuous program development. The study also showed that organizations of all sizes face challenges in regards to leadership training and implementing successful leadership development programs. Groves [47] introduced a best practices model for leadership development that is inclusive for succession planning in organizations but is also applicable to community leadership development programs, all based on ensuring active participation and engaging managers at all levels of leadership development.

### 3.2. *Impact of the Programs*

Community leadership development programs provide the participants with personal growth and efficacy, community commitment, shared future and purpose, community knowledge, civic engagement, and social cohesion [48]. Graduates of such programs have an improved understanding of their local community and the networking in place to work with other leaders in their communities. Kirk and Shutte [49] found that when community leadership development programs function successfully, three key components are addressed: Leading change through dialogue, collective empowerment, and connective leadership.

Social network theorists understand the value in networking, and as Collins, Neal, and Neal [50] present in their study, civic engagement and bonding social capital both have a direct positive relationship relating to collective efficacy. Saegert and Winkel [10] recognize that social capital “inheres in the aspect of social network and norms that facilitate trust and the ability to achieve individual and collective goals” [10] (p. 220). In regards to leadership and education, Alford and Scoble [51] studied political involvement and education, finding that leaders—governmental or otherwise—were most frequently drawn from those with the highest education, occupational status, or income. As a result, it is argued that if leaders are part of the highest class of society, then they will benefit from community leadership development programs through exposure to the local issues they might not otherwise see.

## 4. Conclusions

Poor community engagement is characterized by high crime rate, high poverty, and low education levels [10]. A community that is highly engaged will have solved such problems. As a result, it is critical to determine the variables that positively impact community engagement. Based on the literature surveyed, strong leaders can unite a community, so it is essential for those leaders to collaborate through community leadership development programs.

Limitations do exist with leadership development programs, such as the exclusion of participants outside their membership [52]. When community leadership development programs operate in a silo, they limit their diversity in program diversity. However, Houghton and DiLiello [53] who studied the role of leadership development, found that both adult and youth leadership development activities played important roles in unlocking individual creativity in organizations. This supports the argument that intelligence and creativity are critical characteristics for leaders.

Bono, Shen, and Snyder [54] conducted a longitudinal field study and found three motives contributed to individuals becoming involved as volunteer community leaders: Self-oriented, social, and altruistic. Their research further suggested that individuals who have participated in a formal community leadership program tended to become more involved in their communities, with the biggest impact occurring when programs focusing on knowledge and awareness of the community recruit participants who are not already engaged. Community leadership development programs should realize that individuals with altruistic reasons for community involvement will participate in more community and leadership activities, and that altruistic motives best predicted community leadership over a lifetime [54].

Finally, extant literature posits that organizational members input their skills and effort with the expectation of a return which will further their personal goals [20]. Individuals are members of

communities, and therefore should have the opportunity to contribute to the formation and direction of the community. When communities support a collaborative leadership approach, each individual will hold a shared responsibility for the community. Community leadership development programs unite the emerging and existing leaders and will achieve the most effective outcomes by focusing on topics that relate to knowledge and awareness of the community.

This position paper expanded the scope and theoretical model of prior research on the impact of leadership skills on community engagement [55]. It also examined the role of leadership development programs in the development of collaborative leadership style and argued that such leadership fosters engaged communities. Future research should examine the strength of relationships between the proposed variables and provide recommendations for building the most effective leadership programs that lead to the development of engaged communities. Future research should also build a relationship model between the examined factors to determine the strength of impact of these factors on the nurturing of engaged communities.

It is also important to point out that the relationship between variables such as community engagement, quality of services, and community infrastructure is a complex one. Furthermore, public sector leadership development programs may differ in their training scope from leadership programs for communities with poor engagement. Arguably, such programs may also differ in the demographics of their participants. As a result, further research is needed to identify the breadth and depth of such differences.

Finally, future research should focus on examining leadership development programs within specific sectors, audiences, and the impact beyond career development for participants.

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