



Building a Common Future: Developing Volunteer Leadership

By Bandana Shrestha

Introduction

Everyday across the country, leaders are making the world a better place to live. Through their vision, dedication, and the gift of time and talent, these individuals are changing the lives of millions of people. However, most of the time when we hear the word "leader," we think about elected officials or the leaders of big organizations. We think about Bill Gates, Nelson Mandela, or other well-known public figures who have

made a mark in history. We think about people who set national, international, and organizational agendas and individuals those whose actions and thoughts impact others. Seldom do we think about the people who, without the glory and name recognition of these larger than life personalities, work quietly on a daily basis in our communities to make our neighborhoods better places for children and families. We seldom think of volunteers as leaders.

But What Are Volunteers, If Not Leaders?

If traditionally recognized leaders are affecting the lives of others through their work and thoughts, so are our neighbors who give their time and talent in formal and informal settings and make contributions in large and small ways. However, the common belief that says "leaders" and "leadership" are the domain of a few larger-than-life super achievers means that the outstanding individuals making a difference in our communities are not getting their due recognition. In addition, millions of other talented and committed individuals are being excluded from the opportunity to develop their leadership capacity further in order to realize their potential as leaders and to serve their fellow citizens.

As long as "leaders" and "leadership" are relegated to the sphere of an elite minority, communities and community organizations will have to make do. They will have to do their work without the benefit of having as partners those individuals who best understand the issues faced by their communities and who can effectively serve as their advocates.

This issue of *Working Solutions*, titled "Building a Common Future: Developing Volunteer Leadership," focuses on the topic of volunteer leadership development. Building on the Points of Light Foundation's research on volunteering and leadership development in low-income communities (supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation), this paper explores the basics of how volunteer organizations can take a functional approach to cultivate, build, and strengthen leadership of volunteers and community residents to build a common future.

This theme of developing volunteers as leaders will be explored throughout 2005 in additional publications, tip sheets, and teleconferences. Please watch your inbox for more information and check your members only section of the Points of Light Foundation website for the growing archive of materials on this topic. The Foundation also seeks your effective practices on developing volunteer leaders. Submit your practices to www.PointsofLight.org/epractices.

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Leaders and Leadership

Through its work in local communities, the Points of Light Foundation has learned how important a role that leaders and strong community leadership play in mobilizing communities for change. We have learned that organizations that seek to address local challenges through volunteer solutions, not only have the opportunity, but an imperative to develop volunteer leaders and strengthen the leadership of community volunteers.

But what do we mean by “leaders” and “leadership?”

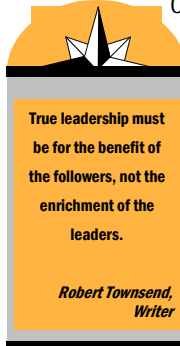
“Leaders” are generally defined as individuals who guide and have influence over others. In the context of communities and volunteering, volunteer leaders are community members who inspire, motivate, and mobilize other community members to take action around a particular issue or cause. Leaders are champions and volunteer initiatives depend on such champions to reach, advocate for, and organize residents.

“Leadership” is commonly understood as the capacity or ability to lead, provide guidance, and direction. In the context of volunteering and community-based volunteer programs, leadership means the ability to lead neighborhoods toward an intended goal, to generate a shared vision of a better community, and to inspire others to work collaboratively toward achieving that vision.

Leadership is not position, power, or authority; rather, it is a combination of skills and attitudes that enables a leader to help others help themselves and to lead residents and others toward positive change in the community.

Leadership is especially important in low-income communities. To work effectively in these communities, it is critical for outside organizations to form partnerships with existing community leaders, to work with emerging ones to hone their leadership skills, and to cultivate a new generation of leaders. Community leaders are often called to play an important role in engaging community members around addressing a given need. These leaders help unify neighborhoods, engage residents, and tap other volunteers’ unique skills and talents for neighboring initiatives that address issues that matter to them most.

Residents look to leaders for guidance in resolving conflicts between neighbors and providing leadership on community initiatives, interfacing with outsiders, and advocating for the well-being and interest of residents. Thus, volunteer leaders can be the bridges to building community trust and to ensuring that local perspectives and experiences are considered and understood by organizations. Volunteer leaders are effective allies in reaching out to and mobilizing a community.



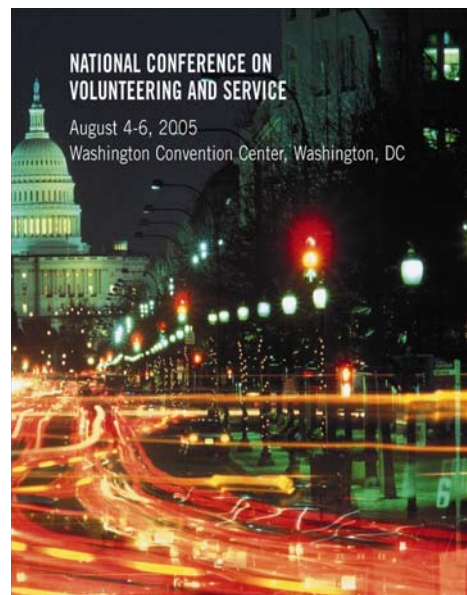
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Competencies for Effective Volunteer Leadership

Contrary to popular belief, leaders aren't born. While some people have certain natural abilities and innate talents that predispose them to developing into a leader, leadership can be learned and nurtured. For volunteer organizations, developing leaders means strengthening the internal capacity of local people to set their own agendas and to enhance their effectiveness as agents of change within their own communities. By developing leaders and leadership skills, volunteer organizations ensure the sustainability of community efforts and become important catalysts for empowered communities.

With the input from a diverse team of community leaders across the country, the Points of Light Foundation has identified ten critical competency areas to help increase community and volunteer leaders' effectiveness. The relevance and importance of each competency area depends on the task at hand and the leader's role in a particular effort; however, each area calls for developing a specific set of skills that, when taken together, provide the basic tools necessary for community and volunteer leaders to succeed in their roles as champions of local volunteer initiatives, resident mobilizers, and advocates for the community.

- 1. Envisioning:** This competency calls for the ability to create a powerful image of a better future. Leaders have to believe in an alternative positive future and be able to set a clear personal vision to guide and direct work. To be effective in this area, leaders also need skills that motivate and lead others through a collective community vision.
- 2. Planning and Organizing:** To be effective, leaders must be able to focus on problems, and they must know how to find solutions to resolve them. Leaders must have the ability to develop goals and action steps to address needs and opportunities. This area calls for the ability to carry out plans and to follow-through on promises.
- 3. Motivating and Mobilizing:** Effective volunteer leaders seek to understand people's needs and motivations. They value residents' unique strengths and assets. To be truly effective, leaders must have the ability to inspire and mobilize others to participate in community activities.
- 4. Managing:** This competency area calls for leaders to gather and disseminate information to meet a goal. Effective leaders provide guidance and direction to people in their charge and have the ability to develop the necessary systems and protocols to achieve results.
- 5. Communicating:** The ability to listen to constituents' and partners' needs and desires is a critical skill for leaders. Effective leaders exercise diplomacy and share information freely. They have the ability to communicate and advocate for stakeholders needs.
- 6. Facilitating:** This area calls for the ability to build consensus and find solutions through group processes. Effective leaders convene, empower, and enable stakeholders and help them embrace change. They have the skill to mediate and resolve conflicts.
- 7. Mentoring:** Effective leaders are role models for current and emerging leaders. This competency area calls for leaders to empower others to lead; but it also calls for the ability and openness to seek mentors and to be coached.
- 8. Decision Making:** Effective leaders can analyze situations, and they can take a stand on issues to make them effective advocates for the community. The abilities to make decisions that are in the best interest of the community and to engage stakeholders effectively in collective decision making processes are critical competency areas for leaders.
- 9. Partnering and Collaborating:** This area calls for the ability to develop and strengthen internal and external relationships within the community and in organizations. Effective leaders have the skills to build a shared vision to achieve mutual goals. They value, respect, and acknowledge differences.
- 10. Learning:** Effective leaders are curious, vigilant, and forward thinking. They are committed to continuous learning and personal growth and have the ability to help others learn and grow.

I Am Your Overlooked Asset



Some of the best resources to provide your services are already in the communities that you serve – neighbors helping neighbors.

The residents of tough communities aren't just the receiving-end of your efforts. They can read to children in an after-school program, cook for an elderly neighbor, mentor children and young adults, or share invaluable insights into the community. The possibilities are endless.

To learn more about how your organization can form more effective partnerships with low-income communities through volunteering, visit www.PointsofLight.org or contact Bandana Shrestha at BShrestha@PointsofLight.org.


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 A nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to engaging more people more effectively in volunteer service to solve serious social problems

Functional Approaches to Developing Leaders

Understanding the critical role leadership plays in communities and in the success of community volunteer initiatives, volunteer organizations have an opportunity, if not a mandate, to not only start thinking about volunteers as leaders, but also to create the opportunities to foster and nurture new and emerging volunteer leaders.

With some forethought and effective planning, nonprofits, government agencies, faith and community-based organizations, and other volunteer organizations can build and strengthen leadership among community volunteers through existing programs and infrastructure. The experiences and knowledge of grassroots leaders and community volunteers can be strengthened and leveraged when volunteer programs provide opportunities for them to grow and build skills by asking them to take on new responsibilities and by providing access to training, coaching, mentoring, and other leadership development interventions. There are three primary functional approaches that volunteer organizations can take to help develop volunteer leaders.

1. **Project-based:** Volunteer organizations rely on volunteers to provide services to clients and meet particular community needs through their involvement in projects. However, only a few organizations actually engage volunteers in leadership capacities as project leaders. Most of the time volunteers are just the doers: managed, supervised, and directed by paid staff. The project-based approach to volunteer leadership development calls for engaging and developing volunteers as leaders through their engagement in existing or new projects and volunteer initiatives.

Volunteer organizations have a great opportunity to strengthen the leadership capacity of existing volunteers by creating opportunities for volunteers to take additional leadership responsibilities. The project-based approach not only builds the skills of the volunteer leader, but can also be a catalyst for increasing community and volunteer ownership of a program. In this approach volunteers are not just the doers, but also set objectives, make plans, and mobilize resources to achieve project goals in a timely manner.

Rural Transportation Program

An Example of Project-based Volunteer Leadership Development

Though it is the only health facility within a 50-mile radius, a rural nonprofit health clinic finds itself under utilized by area residents. The clinic convenes a community forum to understand the issue and learns that transportation is the biggest obstacle. Without public transit, accessibility is an especially big challenge for low-income residents who often don't have reliable vehicles. As a response, the clinic initiates a transportation program. By engaging area residents from the onset, the clinic is able to develop community ownership of the program, which becomes a powerful tool to develop volunteer leaders.

The program is based on community volunteers taking turns in coordinating the program: work which includes managing the schedule in coordination with the clinic's appointment staff, finding other volunteers to do the pick up and drop off, as well as finding new volunteers who can take on the leadership role.

Through this program, not only is the clinic increasing its effectiveness in serving the community, it is also providing an important opportunity for community residents to lead the initiative by providing necessary support, training, and mentoring. The clinic is developing leaders who can use their newly honed skills to be better advocates for their neighbors and to improve their community further.

This approach calls for clarifying the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of both staff and volunteer leaders, including the time commitment asked of volunteers and the authority of the volunteers to make decisions about project directions and organizational resources. It is also vital to identify core competencies and skills necessary for volunteer leaders and establish the minimum ability level required for new leaders. Based on this model, the organizations have to have a clear plan and commitment to train, orient, and support volunteer leaders.

2. **Organization-based:** The organization-based approach to volunteer leadership development calls for creating opportunities for community residents to play leadership roles in your organization through involvement in boards, committees, councils, or in other advisory functions. Often nonprofit boards are valued primarily for their resource

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generation abilities and for raising the profile of the organization among the movers and shakers in the community. In limiting them to these roles, nonprofits often lose a very valuable opportunity to develop volunteer leaders.

Engaging a community resident that is not a bank or big business representative should not be seen as a loss of a valuable resource, but rather an opportunity to have an important advocate for the community on the board: one which can communicate the priorities and interests of the community to the board. Engaging and strengthening resident leadership through this approach can also be a way to model your commitment to the community. In addition to being a voice of the community within organization, this leader can be your advocate, a bridge who builds trust and credibility in the community, helps increase your organization's profile, and garners support not only with residents but also with other community stakeholders.

Similar to the project-based approach, it is also critical to have clarity in terms of the roles of the volunteers: both for expectations and the commitments required. In addition to providing the standard board orientation and training (depending on the skill level of the community members), board members may also need additional training and support to be effective participants in their new role as effective advocates for the community. In taking this approach, it is important, however, not only to build the skills of the individual resident leader, but it is also critical to create a climate and culture within the board or advisory body that values diversity and recognizes individual strengths and contributions.

3. **Community-based:** This approach calls not necessarily for creating opportunities within the organization for volunteers to build leadership skills, but rather for identifying existing or emerging community leaders and strengthening *their* leadership capacity to lead volunteer initiatives and take on leadership roles in the community at large that meet community needs and also address your mission.

Community Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization Advocates

An Example of Community-based Volunteer Leadership Development

A local nonprofit works in an urban low-income neighborhood to improve housing accessibility and conditions for tenants. It began a community leadership development program to empower and support neighborhood residents interested in housing and urban revitalization issues. The program, which complements the organization's existing volunteer program, centered on tenants education and assisting families in finding fair and affordable housing. It provides a basic leadership training to community volunteers and educates them around housing issues. The organization also continues to provide technical assistance and support to community leaders around their efforts to advocate for neighbors in their community. As a result, these community resident leaders have become an active participant in the area's neighborhood revitalization and community development efforts. They have engaged and mobilized other neighbors to become part of community meetings and hearings and have been successful in bringing the voices of their fellow low-income residents to the forefront affecting policy, resource, and development decisions.

Solid Waste Management and Recycling Advisory Council

An Example of Organization-based Volunteer Leadership Development

A local City Public Works Department is faced with a critical challenge posed by overflowing community dumpsite. The Department's Solid Waste Management program initiates a long-term plan to identify and create a new dumpsite; however, there is an increasing pressure to find shorter term solutions, and finding a new site is further set back with controversy and lack of buy-in from neighborhood residents living in the three potential site areas. The Department starts a local community advisory council of community stakeholders including residents from the potential dumpsite neighborhoods to address the issues. The Department invests in a leadership retreat and training for the council members and invites the volunteer leaders to provide input and direction on both long-term and shorter solutions. With advice and guidance from the council, the Department conducts a community survey and, as a result, initiates a local recycling volunteer program to promote recycling, composting, and other innovative practices to ease the pressure of the existing dumpsite.

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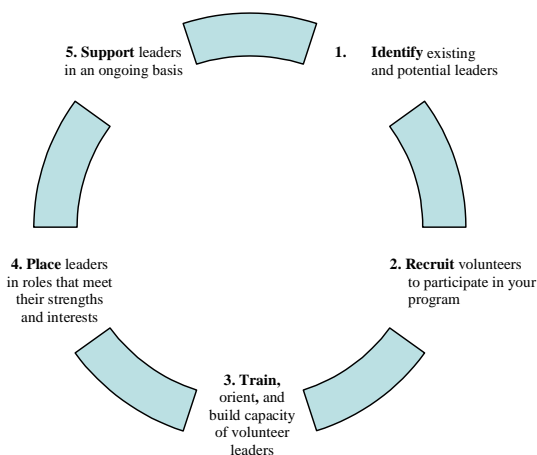
This approach can vary in scale and scope, from organizations initiating flagship leadership trainings for community members to provide focused technical assistance, consultancy, coaching support, or just networking opportunities that increase connections among community leaders.

Through this approach of strengthening community leadership, organizations can have an impact on

community issues that the organization does not address programmatically. Identifying existing and emerging leaders, building on and leveraging ongoing efforts to strengthen leaders' efforts are part of this approach. By sharing effective practices and being a resource to community leaders through providing technical assistance, connections, volunteer programs can enhance community leaders' effectiveness and leadership capacity.

The Cycle of Leadership Development

Whatever the functional approach taken, organizations that commit to volunteer leadership development will benefit by working in a framework of a five-step cycle.



While identifying existing and potential volunteer leaders might seem like a simple task, this first step is one of the most critical. As discussed earlier, the mainstream view on leaders and leadership is often the biggest hurdle in this phase. In identifying existing community in low-income communities, for example, the leaders who have the credibility and trust of the residents are not necessarily the ones that control the resources or who have authority to make decisions. This calls for reaching out in diverse ways and places. In addition to established local institutions, schools, PTAs, small businesses, churches and other places of worship, and neighborhood groups are effective ways to reach community members.

Like other volunteers, volunteer leaders also have to contend with challenges in getting involved. Time is always

a scarce commodity, especially in tough communities where residents often have to hold more than one job and also have care giving responsibilities. Additionally, community leaders are often already active in the community through informal neighboring or other obligations, such as through their places of worship. Recruiting emerging leaders and resident volunteers call for understanding these prior obligations and challenges, as well as addressing the motivations and priorities of these individuals.

Training and capacity building is critical in the leadership development cycle. The opportunity to grow skills can also be some of the most effective incentives for volunteer leaders. However, except for the specific programmatic and task specific skills that might be required, the basic competencies and skills required for effective volunteer leadership are similar across the board. To be effective, capacity building has to be ongoing and can include one-time trainings, mentoring, coaching, and support in the form of technical assistance, effective practices, and other learning opportunities.

Government-Based Volunteer Program Managers

GOV-VPM is a moderated list serve for individuals working with volunteers in government-based programs. To join, send a message to:

Listserv@listserv.PointsofLight.org

**With the following text in the body:
Subscribe gov-vpm <your full name>.
If in need of assistance, contact the list master: Nonprofit.gov@PointsofLight.org.**

Some Final Questions to Consider

Developing and strengthening volunteer leadership can be an effective way of meeting the objectives of your organization while empowering the community and its residents. With the commitment to support community volunteers who become leaders and some careful planning, volunteer organizations are well on their way in helping to build a strong common future for communities.

The following are some basic questions volunteer programs can begin with when taking any one of the approaches. The questions are not necessarily mutually exclusive to the specific approach under which it is listed and may also apply to a different approach.

Project-based

- What role did community leaders and residents play in planning the project?
- What are the needs of the community that are not currently being addressed?
- What projects would you take on if you had more leadership?
- What is the specific role and responsibilities of the volunteer leader?
- What are the minimum skills necessary for volunteer leaders?
- How will you support and supervise the volunteer leader?
- How will you resolve any staff and volunteer differences that arise?

Organization-based

- What is the time commitment you are asking of the volunteer leader?
- What is the specific need that you are seeking to address within the advisory body in which you are engaging the leader?
- What are meaningful benefits and incentives you can provide the volunteer leader?
- How will you help the leader develop or strengthen necessary skills to fulfill her role?
- How will you ensure a culturally competent board that respects and recognized diversity?

Community-based

- How will you identify the leader?
- What are the specific needs and priorities of the community?
- What skills and abilities will the volunteer leaders need most to be effective in leading efforts that meet community needs?
- How will you help leaders develop skills and provide them with ongoing support?
- Are there existing community groups and neighboring efforts to which you can be a resources to strengthen existing leadership?

Resources

Points of Light Foundation*

- **Neighboring Online Action Kit** – contains a wealth of information, tools and resources for organizations and volunteer leaders working to engage volunteers in low-income communities. www.PointsofLight.org/neighboring
- **CommunityINVOLVE** list serve – a moderated listserv geared to the needs of volunteer managers, grassroots leaders, and community organizers engaged in community building work that strengthens families and transforms neighborhoods. To join, e-mail CommunityINVOLVE-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.
- *A Matter of Survival: Volunteering in, by, with Low income Communities**
- *Leadership Skills Manual for Community Leaders: Increasing Leaders' Capacity to Mobilize Volunteers**

- *Essential Strategies for Partnering with Volunteers in Low Income Communities: Building Effective Partnerships**

*Available through www.VolunteerResource.org

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

- Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) www.aecf.org/tarc
- Resident Leadership Resource Site www.aecf.org/initiatives/ldu

Other Online Resources

- **Leadership Online** - W.K. Kellogg Foundation site has a wealth of resources on leadership www.leadershiponlinewkkf.org/, including a recent report on grassroots leadership www.wkkf.org/Pubs/GrassrtsSptFndrs2PC_2003_01_21_00439_00814.pdf
- National Community Building Network www.ncbn.org/
National Training and Information Center www.ntic-us.org



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