Turning Passion in Action: Key themes in effective community and grassroots leadership By Mark Creyton and Deb Olive

Community leaders play critical roles in building and maintaining healthy and effective communities and in enhancing the capacity of those communities. While the significance of community leaders and the role they play is receiving growing acknowledgment, little consideration has been given to the question of what makes for effective community leadership.

In this article the focus is on those who lead grassroots organisations and community initiatives based in the community or civil society. The aim of the paper is to identify and explore key themes around effective grassroots and community leadership. We do not suggest that the themes discussed in this paper apply to all leaders, nor is our aim to develop a prescriptive list of features that determine effective community leaders. Rather, it is hoped the ideas presented through this article will provide thoughts for reflection and will encourage discussion and debate by those engaged in community leadership as well as those involved in community leader development.

Materials for this article reflect the research and literature around leadership, as well as our work with community leaders and feedback from personal interviews conducted with a range of community leaders.

Over the past five years, we have worked with community and grassroots leaders across a variety of sectors throughout regional Queensland, Australia, and in Brisbane, Queensland. Through a variety of interactions with community leaders it has been observed that seldom do these people take on their work with the goal of becoming 'a community leader' – rather it is their passion for their 'cause' that ensures their initial involvement and often their continuing involvement in community based activities. Similarly it has been observed that community leaders do not possess an automatic set of skills or qualities; it is their passion to make a real difference that often forms a basis for their development of community leadership skills.

Community leadership differs from traditional leadership

The notion of traditional leadership is under challenge across all sectors, with the term often reflecting the practice of authority rather than the practice of leading (Russell, 1999).

Community and grassroots leadership is fundamentally different from other forms of more formal leadership. Community and grassroots leaders often work in a voluntary capacity, outside formal structures and systems of power and they often lack resources. Rarely, they have sought the leadership position in which they find themselves yet they are motivated by passion and a need to get things done. Unlike other forms of leadership, community and grassroots leaders often have had to create their own structure and support systems to enable action to occur (Kellogg Foundation, 2003).

Approaches to community leadership

There is no single definition for community leadership. While community leadership can be understood as leadership in and for the community, there are many diverse understandings and approaches to this area. Indeed definitions of both 'community' and 'leadership' themselves have and continue to receive very different interpretations.

According to Anderson, O'Loughlin and Salt (2001, p. 8) community leadership "is frequently based in place and so is local". However they note "it can also represent a community of common interest, purpose or practice" (p.8).

Central to many definitions is the idea that community leaders are active citizens involved in a range of roles rather than simply elected officials or those in formal leadership roles. Some researchers identify the main focus of community leadership as facilitating the collaboration of diverse stakeholder groups including business, government and the non-profit sector (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). Others argue community leadership has a critical and challenging role in providing strong leadership or advocacy for those who are least represented and most vulnerable (McAfee, 1993).

In the following discussion, a variety of approaches to community leadership will be explored.

Community leadership as leadership acts

Within community settings leadership is often shared and does not reflect formal roles. Reflecting on a study of successful regional communities, Falk (2002, p. 2) noted "leadership is distributed, dispersed and diffused rather than concentrated in one or a few hands".

Taylor (2003) suggests that shared and contested leadership coming from multiple positions is most appropriate and acceptable within indigenous communities. This concept of shared leadership reflects a range of leadership writing which moves from an individualistic perspective of leadership (eg. traits which make good leaders) to one that has as its emphasis the collective nature of leadership and the realisation that relationships are central to effective action (Chrislip & Larson, 1994).

Within the groups with which we work, we have noted quite often that a variety of people engage in leadership acts. Some are more focused on the action component and getting the job done, while others are more involved with the processes of building and maintaining how the group functions. It is evident, however, that successful community leaders are those people who encourage and support leadership acts by group members.

Community leadership as collaborative or process leadership

The role of community leaders is increasingly in process rather than setting direction. This focus on process is not simply around facilitation or encouragement. Leaders in these groups engage in many processes in an informal way which in larger organisations would be done through more formal mechanisms and with identified resources. While it may sound clichéd, many community leaders really walk the empowerment and enablement talk.

Chrislip and Larson 1994, p. 127) have defined collaborative leadership as the ability to engage others by bringing the appropriate stakeholders together, designing constructive processes to enable them to work together, and facilitating and sustaining their interactions. This approach is illustrated by the comments of the President of a Queensland nautical museum who noted, "I know nothing about boats, I'm a farmer but I use that to my advantage to involve a range of experts. I just get them involved".

The strategies Chrislip and Larson (1994) suggest include: inspiring commitment and action, becoming peer problem solvers, building broad based involvement and sustaining hope and participation particularly when the going gets tough. Similarly Heifetz (1994) suggests that for many issues, the problem itself is not clear or simple and that consequently there are no easy

solutions. Community leaders therefore act more as catalysts than problem solvers as they engage resources from within and outside the group to identify the problem as well as to work on possible solutions. According to Heifetz (1994) today's community leaders are inspired by a vision to work with those around them to solve issues rather than to deliver a particular solution.

Community leadership as enabling leadership

Central to much of the thinking around community and grass roots leadership are notions of "enabling", "power to" and "working with". Traditional leadership writing often reflects the leader as a hero, the change agent or as the only significant actor in a hierarchical structure. Community leadership writers offer an alternative in which a leader's key focus is questioning traditional power relationships. It is not 'power over, it is about 'power to'. In describing her leadership practice Chris Milne, who leads a bushcare group in the western suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland, illustrates this approach " I encourage other people to use their abilities to the best".

Falk (2000) suggests that in community work good leadership is focused on dealing with the particular situation and context and "achieving outcomes in the form of enabling others by connecting them to each other, to information and to their community" (p. 4).

Leonie Leong who lead a project involving diverse members of the Brisbane Chinese community reflected "one of the characteristics of good leaders and mentors, is the willingness to pass their experiences and knowledge on to others".

Community leaders - Linking and relational roles

Community and grassroots leaders are linkers and relationship builders. They know the various skills and interests of their groups and then link these skills to projects and one person to another.

As an example, Leonie Long brought young and older members of the Chinese community together while developing a record of Chinese community development and activities in Brisbane. The young people provided their information technology expertise and the older community members provided their cultural and historical knowledge. The two groups, who previously had little interaction, worked and shared together, both learning from each other and developing their skills and knowledge as well as a valuable resource.

Central to the linking and relational approach to community leadership is communication that is in line with the group's style and approach. This means that these community leaders are usually democratic in style and spend a lot of energy talking to people about what to do and how to do it.

In our experience, community leaders encourage participants to take on particular roles. They do this through personal engagement, suggestion and influence rather than through direction or formal delegation. Community leaders understand the importance of delegating projects and roles rather than tasks and they avoid prescribing how work is to be done. They link roles and projects to the vision and values of the group and communicate these links in language and terms that group members are familiar and comfortable with using.

Successful community and grassroots leaders encourage and engage new members in an increasing level of involvement. They encourage new members to be involved in a variety of ways while providing support to enable them to become comfortable and confident in their involvement without becoming overloaded.

The significance of the linking provided by community and grassroots leaders is also evident in the ways they create opportunities for members of the community to have a practical and hands-on engagement with an issue or cause that they may otherwise have supported but not known how to participate in. Whether it is tree-planting or campaigning, community leaders link people, the work and the results. Participation in community groups provides opportunities to translate passion into action.

Franscesca Lejunne who has been instrumental in developing the birth action movement in Brisbane noted "it's about connecting with people…about building relationships with people and about accepting people."

Community leadership - Creating identity and managing meaning

An increasing area of interest has been the importance of encouraging individual and group identity in building effective grassroots organisations. A cocktail of vision, passion and values, both personal and related to the bigger picture, are consistently at the core of effective groups.

Community leaders have a role in helping group members to make sense of the bigger picture and to develop frameworks for their activities within the broader community. "Leaders need to provide opportunities for people to be engaged in the processes that create the conditions for learning and create common ground." (Lambert et al, 2002).

Again Franscesca notes "it's about congruency, its being able to be true to live according to what your values are."

Margaret Gooch (2003) found that developing an ecological identity actually sustained many catchment volunteers. She said, "Identity…can be acquired through the development of shared values, beliefs and interests… (and) built over time through collective experience" (p.2).

Encouraging a sense of identify may involve supporting the development of shared values, beliefs and interests. Community leaders facilitate this by providing opportunities for joint activities and celebrations centred around activities, identification or an affinity with a particular place, opportunity for working with similar minded people, building a sense of connectivity of the group through memories, story-telling, local knowledge, sharing values, reflection and dialogue.

Identity is developed partly through the work and its impact but also through working with others. For many, a key satisfaction has been finding those with similar interests and passions, developing new relationships and making friends. Too often we undervalue the importance of personal connectedness and do not allow time for people to spend time together to converse. Volunteering can provide numerous opportunities for social interaction which actually enhance the work that people do as well as the experience and learnings for the agency.

Falk (2000) suggests that a key role for community leaders is to foster people's identity in ways that promote self-confidence and a willingness to take a risk and act for the common good of their communities.

Community leaders - Maintain commitment through the challenges

Central to much of the thinking around grassroots and community leadership is the importance of supporting and maintaining the group during times of conflict and stress. Chrislip (2002) noted a key element of successful collaborative leadership was the ability to keep a variety of people involved through periods of frustration and skepticism, and through conflict and difficulties.

The significance of the leader's role in maintaining commitment to community organisations is not always recognised or valued. From our experience of evaluating a community renewal project, we found time and time again that one staff member from council had helped the project significantly by bringing community members together and by providing emotional and skills support during the difficult times. Yet, from the council manager's perspective, there were concerns about this worker because it was felt he was not actually doing anything.

Community leaders - Create and manage informal processes

Community and grassroots leaders manage the work – they are aware of and coordinate people's different levels of involvement, they make things happen by driving the process. As alluded to previously, community leaders engage in many processes in an informal way which in larger organisations is done through more formal mechanisms. This is illustrated by the fact that in these groups people who want to be involved can have direct access. There is no elaborate paperwork or formal orientation sessions; in fact new members are warmly welcomed because there is too much to do and too few people.

Rochester (1999), at the Centre for Voluntary Organisations based in London, undertook a major research project on the capacity of small voluntary agencies. As part of the findings, the research team suggested one principle which greatly enhanced the effectiveness of small agencies and this was the ability to balance the informal and the formal. Effective agencies were those which maintained the informal nature of staff (paid and unpaid) relationships. These relationships were built on trust and respect. Effective agencies used approaches that encouraged and supported individual creativity, initiative and passion. At the same time, these agencies had clear and documented boundaries for all staff, clear areas of responsibility and authority and had established systems, policies and procedures to achieve their goals.

Community leadership - Capacity focus encourages and promotes success

Effective community and grassroots leaders focus on the strengths and capacities of the individuals involved in their group. In the initial stage of involvement, a community leader using a capacity approach identifies and works with the current skills individuals have as well as considering their capacity and potential. They focus on what could this volunteer do, with support, training and encouragement.

With a capacity approach, community leaders value the person's whole set of skills and find ways to engage people in roles which fit their skills and are meaningful to the organisation, rather than cutting the person down to a specific role definition. This matching and development of skills continues as an ongoing process rather than a one off match.

By focusing on the capacity of individuals and exploring how they can assist, community leaders identify a range of additional ways the organisation can achieve its goal. It also opens the organisation to new roles which otherwise would not have been considered. Opportunities mushroom in programs in which people work together.

Chris Milne, summed it up like this: "you have to be flexible enough with the people you're working with, and with your plans as well, because they change, … all sorts of things change. And then we've had really amazing things happen."

A focus on capacity results in groups that are able to solve specific problems. This creates positive feelings of success which lead to more and greater successes particularly as the number of individuals involved expand and the group develops a bigger picture of community.

Community leaders - Inclusive within the exclusivity of their interests

Boyte and Kari (1996) suggest that to build social capital and address the issues of community, much of what is required will be public work. That is the work of ordinary people, who together work on a range of projects which build, sustain or rebuild their communities. As they state, public work "solves common problems and creates common things" (p.3).

However they argue that the process of deliberation and discussion can often lead to other disputes and divisions as people seek consensus while having different values and frameworks.

"Public work provides chances to meet, work and talk with people with very different values and life experiences. Working together on public work projects "allows groups to put aside divisions for the sake of combined effort toward common ends... (with its) pragmatic, problem-solving dimensions that bring people together" (Boyte and Kari, 1996, p. 12).

We have observed successes achieved through just such inclusively in a number of projects. Mohammed Yusef lead a community group who built the Islamic Centre at Darra. Everyone in the community was invited to be involved - bricklayers to cooks, drink bringers to carpenters. When it was determined that 32 fans were needed for the Mosque, one person offered to pay for them all. Instead, Mohammed invited individuals and/or families to contribute one fan each. This resulted in a whole range of people being able to contribute to the project.

Successful community leaders then are those who are comfortable working with committed and diverse people to achieve agreed goals of the group. This in turn assists the community to build its own capacity.

Leonie Leong notes "leadership is about enriching and empowering…when you are breaking new ground, being innovative and changing things, it's hard for those who feel safe in their own values and thinking… to break out of their comfort zone. That's when mutual respect and acceptance is important, even if it is about mutually agreeing to disagree."

Can we identify key characteristics essential for community leaders to be effective? Probably not, what we can do is acknowledge the complexity of the roles that community leaders take on and that community leaders draw on a variety of skills, attributes and resources to enable them to make a difference.

For those of us who work with community leaders, we must acknowledge the complexity of the task and offer and provide the support and assistance that facilitates this work. This may not be the same support or resources provided by those occupying more formal and hierarchical leadership roles. It is incumbent on us to support and advocate for our community leaders so they may have access to resources that will make a real difference for them.

Our ongoing challenge is continually examining and reflecting on our practice and sharing our strategies with our fellow workers. And when we are questioning why we take on such responsibility in our community groups recall the passion that lead us to action in the first place.