Best Practices in Leadership Development for Community-Based Organizations
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Executive Summary

This report is the result of research conducted on grassroots leadership development methods. Based on this research, best practices and general recommendations are identified to assist community-based organizations in leadership development strategies and support. Community and organizational leadership practices are included as important categories of leadership development. Two brief case studies are included to provide successful examples of these strategies being executed by local Pittsburgh organizations. An organizational tool consisting of two charts is included to assist with organizing and tracking prospective and committed community volunteers and leaders.

Methodology

Research was conducted by interviewing staff of eleven community development intermediary nonprofits and community-based organizations located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Organizations selected for interviews were identified by PGRG staff and members as exhibiting successful or unique practices in leadership development. Individuals were also recommended based on professional knowledge and experience in the same focus area. Interview questions were created based on the person’s or organization’s field of expertise, programs provided, and practices related to leadership development. The information provided in the interviews was recorded and reviewed, and best practices and strategies were created from commonly mentioned practices, programs, and advice. Online research helped guide the creation of interview questions and confirmed certain best practices. Two case studies included provide examples of successful grassroots leadership development programs that engage residents and allow them to lead community development projects. The tool included consists of two charts to be used together. They provide a way for organizations to organize and track community members with desired skills, personalities, and leadership characteristics.

How to Use this Guide

This report has identified nineteen leadership development best practices, each of which can be tailored to fit your organization. Consider your organization’s size, capacity, and needs to determine which best practices can be implemented. While a variety of best practices and suggestions are provided, it is not meant to be prescriptive or all-inclusive. Rather, this guide is meant to help organizations quickly assess their performance and capacity and then set realistic goals to improve their operations and structure.
**Community Leadership**

Community-based organizations provide vital resources and services to the communities in which they are located. They only succeed, however, if they have the support from the residents in the communities. Ultimately, the organizations’ programs and efforts should be driven by the vision of what the residents want to see happen. Working with and for the residents will build their trust and support, hopefully so much so that the residents become empowered to take action alongside the organizations. The process of creating community leaders must be in the grassroots fashion and cannot be forced. Residents must want to see change in their community and personally take ownership or be involved to ensure that change is sustainable. There is no single greatest strategy to encourage community leadership, but there are many best practices that can help the process.

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**Community Engagement**

1. **Create conversations by talking and listening to residents to start the community engagement process**

The process of community engagement has not changed. It is as “simple” as going and talking, but also really listening, to the residents in the community. Every aspect of community work starts with creating genuine relationships with the community members. Starting conversations with them about what they love about their community as well as some of their concerns will provide guidance to the organization’s focus and goals.

2. **Consistent engagement efforts show dedication and get noticed**

When trying to engage residents and create community action, consistency and persistence is important. You must be noticed and acknowledged for your efforts in the community before any engagement or change can occur, and that only happens with constant community interactions. It is not a secret that this process could take some time and will vary with every community. As support grows, word will eventually spread throughout the community until many of the residents are engaged and supportive.
3 Observe attendees of meetings and community events to find consistent supporters

There are many different types of people that will support an organization and its community work, and it is important to recognize all of them. Natural supporters and friends could emerge right away and help with the initial community engagement efforts. Once meetings and activities are established, it is easy to notice those who speak up at every gathering. These people help create conversations and still have leadership potential, but not all ideas could be useful. Attention should also be on those who attend and support every effort but may not speak up all the time. With great leader potential, encouraging them to take on little roles will help them gradually become prepared for larger responsibilities and decisions.

4 Consensus building amongst residents leads to establishing a common goal

Consensus building brings people together to collaborate and make decisions. Creating a general consensus means an agreement of ideas and goals amongst the community as a whole is achieved. It is important for everyone’s opinion to be heard before finding a solution. New ideas often arise when everyone contributes their thoughts. Consensus building creates teamwork to solve problems in the community.

5 Have empathy when interacting with residents to better understand the community’s needs

Empathy is an important characteristic to have when working with community residents. The organization, as well as leaders, must be able to connect with those they are working with in order to provide effective and meaningful support.

Community Meetings

6 Accommodate meetings to all residents to receive the highest attendance as possible

Community meetings allow for a space and time to bring the residents together to discuss specific opportunities and concerns in the community. They provide a space for the community’s voice to be heard. It is important to consider the characteristics of the community when creating meetings in order to accommodate to all residents. Such details include time and location. Determining availability during the day or after work hours is important, as is providing a centrally accessible location. It may be necessary to alternate meeting times and locations, or host two separate meetings to allow for full community participation. Once the best time and place is determined, keeping that meeting schedule as consistent as possible will help with steady attendance.
Provide services to encourage and support attendance

Incentives or complimentary services will help encourage attendance and further provide accommodations for all residents. The more commitments and excuses people have, the less likely they will be to attend meetings. Serving a free meal would provide those coming from work with dinner. Donated food or a potluck style meal could alleviate some costs. Providing child care during meetings would also allow parents to attend without worrying about finding a babysitter.

**Community Leadership Development**

Established desired characteristics and roles help develop the perfect leader

The first step to leadership development is determining and agreeing upon what type of leader would be most beneficial to the organization. There are leaders to provide a certain expertise and run a particular program within the organization. There are also leaders who are able to create civic engagement within the community and bring support to the organization and its mission. If the organization is unsure of which leader it is interested in, it should not begin searching for or developing that leader. Since both types of leaders are important, each should be established and developed.

Consider formal leadership development programs for additional knowledge and experience

Formal leadership development programs are available locally, regionally, and nationally for both organizational staff and involved community residents. While every program differs, each one introduces the hot topic areas around community challenges and opportunities and the skills necessary to pursue a leadership role within the community and in organizations. These programs also allow for networking and relationship building between the participants.

Example:
Pittsburgh Leadership Development programs include: NeighborWorks Leadership Collaboratory, Coro Pittsburgh (Women in Leadership, NEXT Neighborhood Leaders), New Leaders Council, Leadership Pittsburgh, Inc., and Neighborhood Allies Leadership Forum

Linking program participants with community organizations builds capacity

While very beneficial, larger formal leadership development programs pose a concern of the next steps for the participants after they complete the course. Though they have developed leadership skills, the question exists if there will be anywhere for them to put those skills into action. Some may hope to go into a more professional setting and others would enjoy community-level involvement.
Some organizations directly develop leaders while performing community development. There are leadership development programs provided through community organizations focused on particular neighborhoods. They strive to create local leaders to empower other residents into action and support the community on a smaller scale. While the organization may provide guidance, the main objective is to create a community voice with resident-led and inspired projects. Organizations focused on these efforts include PCRG’s Reimagining Communities Initiative, Operation Better Block, and GTECH Strategies, as all three foster resident participation to spearhead community development projects.

**Organizational Leadership**

Leadership development can happen in many different forms, styles, and levels depending on an organization’s ability and capacity. While the more formal the better, any practice put into place can help an organization, with and without staff, become more sustainable and successful. While leadership development practices are appreciated by the board and volunteers, the organization also benefits from them by creating more knowledgeable and experienced individuals.

Example: *Coro Pittsburgh* is attempting to tackle this issue in the professional sector with their newly developed Coro Executive Fellowship. It offers an advanced leadership training experience to graduates of Coro Fellows in Public Affairs and Public Allies. It strives to address the rising need for collaboration across business sectors.
Organizational Activities

12 Individuals can take on additional responsibilities to develop new skills

Any extra effort to push an individual to the next level is considered leadership and professional development. Efforts the staff or board can take include attending additional meetings and leading a portion of or presenting at a meeting. Managing and training volunteers and interns as well as organizing an event provide experience in supervision and taking initiative. Internal functions can include developing newsletters or blog posts, and assisting with grant proposals and drafting reports. Lastly, volunteering in additional areas of interest expands knowledge and experience.

13 Mentorships provide knowledge from experienced individuals

Interactions with more experienced professionals, inside or outside of an organization, are an important aspect of leadership and professional development. Activities can include shadow days, mentorships, and weekly one-on-one meetings. Gaining knowledge and advice from those individuals provide examples of practices to adopt and avoid.

14 Provide professional development activities for additional training and learning opportunities

Organization-wide efforts include professional development days or retreats. These can be staff or board created trainings where different individuals within the organization present on their area of expertise. Outside presenters can also be hired for areas the organization needs more education on. Attending seminars and conferences provides professional speakers and successful examples of projects in the field.

Example:
PCRG Community Development Summit: PCRG coordinates an annual, two day community development conference with prominent speakers from the field and educational sessions. The conference is not only beneficial to professionals, but also allows community leaders and residents to learn about successful practices and programs in other communities and the wider regional area.

Retention Planning

15 Retention planning can influence an organization’s success

Board members and volunteers are more likely to stay at an organization if they enjoy the work they are doing, feel valued and respected, or believe they will receive acknowledgement or incentives. Retention strategies performed by organizations will help increase those feelings and keep individuals involved.
They also help the organization experience higher levels of productivity, improve organizational engagement and satisfaction, create better work experiences and communication, and grow the reputation as a desired organization to be a part of.

Retaining staff is a common problem even with paid staff organizations, so having plans in place for organizations with little to no staff are highly recommended. The lack of a retention strategy makes it difficult for nonprofits to retain the talent they have, which ultimately affects an organization’s ability to deliver its mission and organizational objectives.

Organizational retention strategies should be practiced to encourage continued involvement

Retention strategies include creating a comfortable and respectful work environment (human, space, and amenities). Scheduling options like telecommuting and flexible work hours are also greatly appreciated. Providing challenging and rewarding assignments keeps individuals interested and involved. Simple actions to express appreciation and being valued are also important. This includes keeping everyone informed and included on decisions, actions, and upcoming events. Allowing assistance on various tasks, identifying organizational challenges, and finding solutions are also additional actions.

Another effort is as simple as acknowledging hard work and accomplishments. Lastly, providing a balance between work and personal engagement is important, as nonprofit work can be physically and emotionally draining. Non-work related staff engagements include lunches, happy hours, and other local indoor and outdoor activities. Interactive activities within the office also rejuvenate and boost morale.

Succession Planning

Determine what skills the organization is losing in order to find an appropriate replacement

Everybody leaves a job or board at one point or another. It is important to have an established plan to replace that person and to determine the necessary skills needed to fulfill that position. With defined desired skills, current volunteers can work on building up those skills to fit the position. There are two types of skills that could be required, including hard and soft skills. Hard skills are the expertise and knowledge in specific areas (financial, real estate, marketing, etc.). Soft skills consist more of the day to day personal skills (public speaking, communication, problem solving, etc.) Both hard and soft skills are desired for every position.
Properly introduce and provide all necessary information to the new individual

Outside expertise is sometimes needed to fill a position. If this is the case, it is important to provide that individual with all of the necessary information about the organization. A written history of the organization as well as all of its programs, projects, efforts, and points of view would be helpful to get the individual up to speed. Additionally, all parting individuals should provide a how-to, individualized succession guide of their responsibilities. This can contain their day to day functions as well as more detailed information including the specific projects and programs they ran and contacts with emails and phone numbers. Having all of the information organized will help the new individual have a fluid transition without any setbacks, for them and the organization.

If a prospective replacement is already involved, training days with the parting individual ensures all information gets passed on

Not only would an already involved individual be knowledgeable of the organization, but it also provides that person an opportunity to meet with the parting individual. Information and knowledge would be able to be passed directly to the replacement, allowing for the opportunity to have questions answered and additional assistance or training provided.
Putting It All Into Practice

A community-based organization’s work is only successful if it is initiated and supported by the residents who live there. This means the more active, involved, and concerned the residents are in a community, the more work and changes can be done. Establishing and supporting community leaders can help even more work get accomplished and hopefully encourage resident involvement. This begins with community engagement with as many residents as possible in order to increase organizational visibility in the community, as well as become familiar with the residents and their concerns and visions for the community. The main aspects of effective community engagement include listening to and showing empathy toward people’s concerns, providing consistent interactions with the community, and building consensus among residents. Providing community meetings that are accessible to all residents are also important. Through the engagement process, the organization will begin to identify potential community leaders that either already have a following in the community, are very passionate about the community work, or provide some professional or volunteer experience in related areas. The organization can involve those residents in more activities and decisions until hopefully they are running their own events and projects in the community. This is great for low to no staff organizations, because it increases their capacity and allows for more work to get accomplished.

Just as important as community leaders are the leaders of the organization. An organization is only as successful as the people involved with it, and for organizations without staff that means the board of directors. A strong board is created by being aware of the skills and professions needed and finding those people through connections and community interactions. Outlining responsibilities and allotting time for each help keep the organization efficient and running. Since board members only serve for their determined term, having a plan in place to secure the next group of qualified individuals is important to keep the organization running smoothly. Providing professional development opportunities helps increase the board’s capacity as well as the members’ skills and expertise.
Case Study

GTECH Ambassador Program

The mission of GTECH Strategies is to “work with people to transition land use liabilities into community assets and improve the economic, social, and environmental health of our communities.” They fulfill their mission as well as provide leadership development opportunities through their Ambassadors Program.

The Ambassadors Program is a grassroots process focused on people and place. An area of multiple neighborhoods with a high vacancy of land is chosen as the project location. While the area is usually underserved with limited resources, the residents do no follow this description, as GTECH looks for enthusiasm and desire for community work from the people.

GTECH talks with local organizations and residents to understand the concerns and wants in the community. Through an application process, ten to twelve ambassadors are chosen to participate, with each one representing a different neighborhood.

The first eight months of the ambassadors’ term consists of an educational curriculum, providing knowledge and skills on designing projects, gathering community support, and recruiting and managing volunteers. Project implementation follows, occurring during the spring and summer months. While GTECH’s relationships with the ambassadors are “hands-on”, the amount of support they provide is situational on the ambassador’s skills and knowledge on the project being executed, as the project should be as resident-led and involved as possible.

Once the project is complete, GTECH provides follow-up with the ambassadors for any assistance needed. The goal is for the ambassador to continue to be responsible for project upkeep, resulting in a sustainable, active community. Not only do ambassadors support community participation during their term, but most continue to be empowered to be involved after their term by joining community groups to share their skills and expertise.

GTECH has found that there is more community action and care for the space and environment once even one project is put into place with residents planning and running it. The feelings and actions are infectious, causing other residents to take on projects or help with an existing one. It is through these efforts that residents will come together to take on challenges and grow as a community.
Case Study

Operation Better Block Cluster Associations

Operation Better Block’s mission is “to strategize, organize and mobilize, block by block, to benefit the Homewood Community”. One such effort to satisfy their mission is the Cluster Planning and resulting Cluster Associations.

The Cluster Planning Process came about to provide change the residents wanted to see, and resulted in the creation of a detailed land use vision for Homewood’s future. Homewood was divided into ten clusters to allow for a more focused plan in each cluster, tailored to its specific needs. Three public meetings followed by door to door outreach to gather resident feedback were used to collect the information, concerns, and opinions to create the plan. Resident-supported community development principles were also determined to guide the planning process. All ten cluster plans were compiled together to create the Homewood Community-Driven Cluster Plan.

Throughout the cluster planning process, Operation Better Block exhibited many community engagement best practices. Ultimately, the whole plan was developed with the residents’ concerns and visions as the driving forces. Meetings were held in each cluster, ensuring they were accessible to everyone. For those unable to attend meetings, staff went door to door to provide information as well as receive feedback. Over 2,200 doors were knocked on after each meeting. This consistency and persistence proved to be useful, as 80 percent of households in Homewood were reached through those efforts.

After the plan was finalized, Cluster Associations were created to keep the residents involved in putting the plan into action. “The goal of creating Cluster Associations was not only to see each cluster plan vision implemented, but also to help residents stabilize their blocks, become agents of change and create a resilient social network that enhances the community’s strength and vitality”. Starting in February 2016, the associations began holding monthly meetings. Through the planning process, leaders were established. These leaders assist in holding the meetings and communicate with OBB as needed. The main responsibilities of the clusters are to assist with short-term projects that produce quick wins, including cleanups, identifying vacant lots for maintenance, and connecting homeowners with programs. OBB is more involved with long-term projects, and provides the connections between professionals, programs, and developers with the clusters and allows for them to meet at the same table.

Clusters are educated by OBB staff on relevant topics, including zoning, development, fundraising, and policy. A small budget is also provided to each cluster, which decides how and what to spend the money on. OBB also walks the residents through certain processes of decision making and problem solving, instead of doing it for them. This provides the residents with new skills as well as the ability to perform those duties on their own in the future.
Leadership Development: Acquiring Leaders Chart Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program/Work Area</th>
<th>Outreach</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>5/1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Garden Program</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harvest</td>
<td>Prospective Leader</td>
<td>Name (Golden)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td>Date (3/17)</td>
<td>Actions Taken to Acquire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Friend and exec director</td>
<td>Board member referral</td>
<td>Board member referral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Director referred John (3/17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Date (4/25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Date (3/17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use this chart to keep track of potential and committed community volunteers.

The “actions taken to acquire individual” include all community engagement strategies. Recording these actions help the organization track successful and unsuccessful methods that can be used for future reference. Use broad engagement strategies to attract the most diverse population.

The “acquiring leaders” and “Duties and Skills” charts are to be used together to keep a detailed record of community engagement and leadership efforts. Both for the organization’s reference as well as funding opportunities.

Use this chart to keep track of potential and committed community volunteers.

The “actions taken to acquire individual” include all community engagement strategies. Recording these actions help the organization track successful and unsuccessful methods that can be used for future reference. Use broad engagement strategies to attract the most diverse population.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program/Work Area</th>
<th>Prospective Leader (Name)</th>
<th>Relation (Meeting, Board, etc.)</th>
<th>Actions Taken to Acquire Individual (Dates Included)</th>
<th>Committed (Date Confirmed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leadership Development: Duties and Skills Chart Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Program/Work Area</th>
<th>Duties</th>
<th>Time (per week)</th>
<th>Characteristics/Skills</th>
<th>Trainings/Orientations Needed</th>
<th>Other Ongoing Obligations (Jobs, Personal Life, etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>Interact with community to promote the organization and other outside obligations</td>
<td>4 hrs</td>
<td>Personable, Passionate, Persuasive</td>
<td>Volunteer recruitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community garden</td>
<td>Supply inventory</td>
<td>1-3 hrs</td>
<td>Gardening, Organized</td>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coordinating volunteer coordination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community garden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organization orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteer recruitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use this chart to organize community volunteers and their tasks with the organization. These volunteers are given a specific and ongoing responsibility, in hopes of creating community and organizational leaders.

The expected "time commitment" of each individual should reflect their specific duties, but also consider their volunteer status and other outside obligations (jobs, personal life, etc.).

Consider "Trainings/Orientations Needed" for the individuals to enhance their knowledge and skills to better perform their duties for the organization and future endeavors.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Program/Work Area</th>
<th>Duties</th>
<th>Time (per week)</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Characteristics/Skills</th>
<th>Trainings/Orientations</th>
<th>Needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Leadership Development: Duties and Skills Chart
## Contact List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie Hale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael Surmick</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shikha Jerath</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Butcher</td>
<td>GTECH</td>
<td><a href="https://gtechstrategies.org/">https://gtechstrategies.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Snow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie Gardner</td>
<td>Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management</td>
<td><a href="http://bcnm.rmu.edu/">http://bcnm.rmu.edu/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara Halderman</td>
<td>CTAC (former employee)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>