

Studying Leadership within Successful Rural Communities in a Southeastern State: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Many rural communities are experiencing a diversity of issues, but what part does leadership play in these communities? This qualitative study describes the environment within two communities in the southeast focusing on community variables of psychological sense of community, community leadership, and social capital. Leaders were identified and a qualitative data analysis identified several themes within these variables. Leaders strongly felt “sense of community” was in the surrounding county and a strong moral compass was provided by schools and churches. Leaders showed a sense of service to their community stressing the importance of involvement in the community. Local community groups provide the greatest opportunity for community action. Finally, they relied strongly on relationships as the backbone to the community. Effective community leaders are important in developing important relationships, establishing communication, and providing the community with direction. Further research should be done with an emphasis on change and development.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Sadly, many of today’s rural areas are in trouble. Issues facing rural communities include decline in areas such as the loss of family farms and small farming communities resulting in ever-dwindling populations that may not be able to actively support a community to rapid growth and how to protect surrounding environments and the small town culture. Furthermore, demographic shifts and economic restructuring threaten to dramatically alter the lives of rural people and their communities (Brown, Swanson, & Barton, 2003). On average today’s rural communities differ more from each other than urban areas (Flora & Flora, 2004).

Therefore, addressing these problems will be particularly complex; a “one size fits all” approach will not be effective.

Within many rural communities today, local leaders are concluding that if economic and community development is to occur, it is their responsibility to make it happen (Bell & Evert, 1997). In areas such as public education and job training; technology; networking with state and regional agencies; health care; leadership; and, strategic planning, communities are learning that community development is not the responsibility of any one group, but a community wide effort.

Furthermore, many argue that leadership may be the catalyst through which these changes occur. Communities that are creative, entrepreneurial, and committed to building a shared vision and consensus are found to be better prepared to address community needs (Bell & Evert, 1997). For rural communities to remain there is a call for local leadership to take charge and guide the way into the future (Cugliari & Earnest, 2007). The leadership capability found within a community is considered a valuable asset; as such, it is these leaders who are expected to build local partnerships for managing change in today’s diverse communities (Bolton, 2004; Tabb & Montesi, 2000).

Even more importantly for the future of today’s rural communities are the presence and action of leaders who can “fit it all together.” Positioning a community for a viable future does not mean just solving complex problems and planning for successful social change; it also means aspects such as increasing individual well-being, motivating community members towards developing social capital, and sustaining a community’s unique culture (Bolton, 2004). This is the complex side of community leadership.

Three important variables are included in the theoretical framework of this study including psychological sense of community, community (servant) leadership, and social capital. Beginning with psychological sense of community, this variable is based upon the more social, relational aspect of community. Formally defined by McMillan as the feeling of belonging and importance that members have within their community, it has four measurable components: (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (d) shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

As defined for this study, servant leadership most closely embodies how leadership often plays out in the context of community. This leadership theory provides for a human element of community interaction that is often lost within other definitions. According to Robert Greenleaf (1996), a leader operating under servant leadership begins with the feeling or desire to serve first, followed by the conscious choice to lead. Laub (2000) takes Greenleaf’s definition one step

further by identifying six factors that clearly describe a servant leader. A servant leader is one who values people, develops people, builds community, displays authenticity, provides leadership, and shares leadership.

The third salient variable in the study, social capital was seen by the researchers to be an important link in describing how successful communities interact. Fundamentally, social capital places a value on the relationships and interactions found within a group. Within the community field, “for the greater good” is undertaken with the general community interest in mind, not one specific interest. According to Kim and Schweitzer (1996) social capital is best summarized by Putnam, who defines social capital by the existence of a group’s networks, norms, and social trust that works toward coordination for mutual benefit. That being said, the components outlined to describe social capital as a variable were components pulled from the theoretical underpinnings of the Social Capital Benchmark Survey, researched and designed by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America). The components found most appropriate in outlining social capital for this study were trust, organizational involvement, and community involvement.

Purpose and Objectives

As Patton (2002) indicates, qualitative research may be used to garner insight about a phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the purpose behind this study was to thoroughly illustrate and describe the current environment within two rural communities in a southeastern state, with particular interest in describing the influence leadership and sense of community have upon the development of social capital leading to a more viable community.

As this is a piece of a larger study, one unique objective served as the basis for this study – to compare each viable community according to the variables of psychological sense of community, community leadership, and social capital.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used to gather and interpret data. Using specific community selection parameters, two communities were selected according to their highest scores on the combined criteria for community viability. A third community was identified for pilot study purposes.

Once study communities were determined, interview participants were chosen purposefully to address specific research goals (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Therefore, an initial expert panel of leaders was identified within each community from a breadth of fields. These participants were identified because of their

professional or volunteer positions within their particular counties that placed them in positions of leadership (i.e., county sheriff, mayor, county commissioners). This expert panel was interviewed and asked to name prominent leaders within their community, and so on, as a snowball sampling technique ensued. Key leader interviews continued until names began to recur within each community. This took from three to four total interview rounds. A total of 49 interviews were carried out in the study.

An interview guide developed by the researcher was used to conduct standardized, open-ended interviews. This guide allowed for structure and provided a congruity to assure consistency of data among sites and individuals interviewed. Within this study the questions were pulled from three different sources: the Sense of Community Index (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), the Organizational Leadership Assessment (Laub, 2000), and the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (the Saguaro Seminar Civic Engagement in America). Questions were then modified by the researcher in order to more effectively test toward the study objectives.

Initial contact was made with potential participants through a letter. As suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1981), personal contact through telephone calls was next in order to establish an interview schedule and stimulate rapport and cooperation with each interview participant. The next contact was made through an on-site interview following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) steps for carrying out an evaluative interview.

Interviews were transcribed following each interview. Transcriptions were compared to interviewer notes and observations made during each interview to check for completeness and accuracy. Data was compared between communities directly comparing the participants within their respective stages and areas within each community.

The qualitative data were analyzed and reported using a five-step procedure as recommended by Creswell (1998), and used by Kelsey and Mariger (2002):

- *Organization of data.* Facts about the case were arranged in a logical order.
- *Categorization of data.* Categories (major themes) were identified, and the data were clustered into meaningful groups via cutting and pasting.
- *Interpretation of codes.* Specific statements that fell into like clusters (groups) were examined for specific meanings in relationship to the purpose and objectives of the study. Example statements were identified that helped with interpretation. Data were examined within and among groups for similarities and differences.

- *Identification of patterns.* The data and their interpretations were scrutinized for underlying themes and patterns that characterized the study and allowed the researchers to draw conclusions.
- *Synthesis.* An overall portrait of the study was constructed where conclusions and recommendations were drawn based on the data presented.

Finally, throughout the entire research process, care was taken to overcome potential sources of bias within qualitative research using steps identified by Patton (2002) and Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Findings

Within this study there were several distinctly emerging categories and themes identified through the qualitative analysis process. In order to make the data more manageable and to provide a meaningful context, themes were identified within and limited to each variable. Under the heading of each variable the environment of each of the study communities will be more thoroughly illustrated through themes compared and contrasted between the communities. Ultimately, the goal was to provide a more meaningful description of the identified successful rural communities.

Psychological Sense of Community

Based on the more social, relational aspect of community, this variable has been formally defined by McMillan as the feeling of belonging and importance that members have about their community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Not surprisingly, each community proved to operationalize sense of community slightly differently, but provided two primary themes important to the leaders' sense of community.

Strong leadership from schools/churches helps to provide a moral compass within the community and encourages a desire to help people: Within Community A, schools and churches proved to be very strong, apparently in order to provide support and leadership for the community. This also provides the likely link as to why the community shared strong biblically based morals and values. Civic clubs such as the Kiwanis club and community churches placed a strong emphasis on helping troubled people through projects like the anti-substance abuse effort "Case Coalition."

Within these situations, community leaders expressed the amazing ability of community members to band together to help those in need. One participant stated, "You know, something really stood out – it's so simple . . . when you

asked earlier ‘Do people really care if there’s a disaster?’ I’ve never seen people come together like these people in my life. Everyone wants to give you the clothes off their back, and their house, and want nothing in return.”

Sense of community in Community B is similar, yet distinctive in some aspects. As within Community A, churches and schools play an important role in the community, as well as sharing a particularly strong bond. This also contributes to the Christian values that are strongly integrated into the community. A participant noted, “I live here because the morals, the culture, the community values, the collective consciousness of this community, is pretty well representative of the morals I personally hold to, and the ethics I try to demonstrate toward others.”

Furthermore, individuals appeared to be more independent in Community B because there are more opportunities for involvement and organizational participation is much more segmented. This contributes to there being much weaker civic clubs and organizations. Nonetheless, there is still a strong desire to help people within the community. As one participant said, “I just think it’s rewarding to live here. Because you do feel loved and that what you’re accomplishing means a lot to other people. You’re not out there doing it for you, but you’re doing it to bring some happiness to enough people that make it worthwhile.”

Leaders define their community as larger than the town; it encompasses the county: For many in the community, Community A itself does not define the boundaries of their community. To them their community extends to the entire county. Their sense of community is strong, and everyone is willing to give a helping hand to anyone across the county in need. This Community A member suggested, “I’m quite fond of this community. We may be poor, but we’re good folks.”

One leader termed it as “psychic income,” explaining why he would rather stay in his community to work and raise his family, regardless of numerous financial opportunities in a larger city because as he claimed, “our people is our greatest asset.”

Similarly, Community B community members often identified the surrounding county as their community, as opposed to just identifying themselves with Community B. Even further, family ties within Community B account for a lot more of the sense of community than just shared relationships with community members. One claimed, “we’re a close-knit community. We have large family ties in our community, and strong families. Our community has grown immensely in the last couple years . . . I don’t see a great change in it (our community). We’re not losing the hometown that we’re used to having by the increase.”

Community Leadership

Community leadership, as it was defined for this study, was exemplified through servant leadership theory. According to Robert Greenleaf (1996), a leader operating under servant leadership begins with the feeling or desire to serve first, followed by the conscious choice to lead. Seeing one's self as a servant to the community and stressing the importance of community involvement were two themes that came out especially clearly.

Leaders felt it particularly important to get involved in their community:

Within both communities, leaders expressed the attitude that everyone can get involved in the community if they have the desire to. Many of the Community A leaders took this further, expressing that for anyone who wants to become involved in the community, it is important and easy to get involved. As a member noted, "All you have to do is get involved. I also pastor a church, and one of the things I tell people is it doesn't matter what your talents are, what your educational level is, what your abilities are, what your income is . . . all that matters is your being willing to get involved."

Leaders within Community B also stressed the importance of getting involved within their community; and unlike Community A, many of those interviewed do see themselves as leaders. In community B a participant stated, "Well, I think any type of (leader), being a public school teacher, coach, community leader – I think you have the responsibility to set an example and understand that being a leader, that you have the power of influence. And certainly my goal . . . being a community leader is to influence younger people, and also my coworkers to, you know, have good values."

It is important for these individuals who care about their community to be a good role model and get involved. For these people, they willingly take on the responsibility of leadership within the community, particularly when it comes to serving the community and its members.

On improving the community, a participant indicated, "I think everybody has a part to pay in it. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and that certainly . . . To encourage everybody in the community to be their best, and to be the strength that they can be is an ongoing challenge for all community leaders to do that. It certainly is a necessity through, if we're going to come together and advance as a community, we've got to have that strength and we've got to pull together. So I believe everybody can make a difference if they try."

People trust in the fact that their leaders will pull the community through the hard times, and into a better future.

Many leaders saw themselves in a servant leadership role for the community – particularly as a role model: For the leaders interviewed, many see themselves as making an impact; however, not necessarily as a community leader. Something that proved even more important to them was the ability to be a good role model for the community; to serve the community. As one person put it; “We’re a small enough community that I think people know your lifestyle; not just know of you, they know you. I think over a period of time, your life that they see from day to day makes an impression.” And, another noted, “because I have to set the example. I mean I’m a leader in my community and if I set a good example for my people then they’ll, hopefully they’ll follow.”

Fortunately, many of these leaders also see themselves as servants of the community, a theme that was very powerful through the interviews. Statements such as “I think people like me need to stand up because we need to lead by serving – that’s the bottom line” and “You have to be willing to serve. You don’t get up there (in leadership positions) because of money, and people that serve on commissions like this and like the chamber of commerce . . . you know they’re earnest and wanting to serve and it’s not for myself, or gain” were common among the response from the participants.

Furthermore, these leaders truly care about the community. This is evidenced in this response from a leader: “I do care about the community. I think that if people do care about the place they live . . . you know, if you care about your property, you’re going to take care of it. If you live in this _____ County area and you care, this is our property, really, and we’re going to take care of it. Another leader responded, “I think my one thing about being a public servant . . . if I had worked as hard in business as I had in education, I’d be a multi, multi-millionaire. But that’s not where it’s at. I want to leave Community B and _____ County a better place. I want to know along the way I helped put stepping stones there to see it grow.”

Social Capital

Fundamentally, social capital focuses on the relationships and interactions found within a group. Often this is more generally termed as “for the greater good.” Within this study, Putnam provides us with the official definition, who defines social capital by the existence of a group’s networks, norms and social trust that works toward coordination for mutual benefit (cited in Kim & Schweitzer, 1996). As within the other variables, the themes found within this variable were strong and provided clear illustrations of the studied communities.

Leaders expressed high trust was felt within (and across) communities; there was a low distrust of fellow community members and leaders: Looking at social capital within each community, both proved to have a strong group of networks

and relationships at their core. Beginning with Community A, strong schools and churches formed the moral fiber from which much of the shared values and trust originated. Trust proved to be an important component in supporting these structures, particularly in developing the relationships needed for maintenance. As stated, “I trust my sister communities (surrounding rural communities). We interchange . . . because when I walk away, I feel like every community has honestly contributed and shared. I mean, you don’t find that a whole lot.” Yet, another stated, “There’s no one that I have complete distrust for. I think that’s what happens to a lot of people, and I think that’s why they’re looking for places like this (Community A). And I think that’s why we’re growing and increasing, and why our potential is so good, because people are looking for that. I think that that’s showing more and more. I think that’s not happening (just) here; I think it’s happening all over.”

People are looking for places to raise their families in communities where they can trust their leadership and feel safe. This is something of which Community A has no shortage.

Social capital within Community B was operationalized slightly differently. Specifically, while trust played a large role in the community, it was particularly strong in the relationships between schools and churches. As a participant reported, “The local ministerial alliance, which is very powerful here . . . They are spiritual minute men. They will come to the aid of any cause, any community effort.”

Student disputes are also often handled in a cooperative effort among the parents, ministers, and school officials. This helps to create a strong core of community support. As in Community A, trust was also important in relationships among the chamber of commerce, development commission, churches, local government officials, and the local civic groups, to name a few. Trust in Community B was felt very strongly by a majority of the community leaders, even across racial lines. This translated to no one group or organization garnering a large amount of distrust. Most leaders chalk up any distrust within the community to a few “bad apples” which seemed to exist in these communities, and may arguably exist in most communities.

Leaders asserted local community groups are the foundation of most notable community action, and a place to develop salient community relationships:

Within Community A, in regard to community action, service groups as well as church action appeared to be very strong. Nearly every Community A leader interviewed was a member of the Kiwanis Club, a powerful local group. Church clubs were also very active in this area. A notable situation involved the community recreation center and a major area church. Both the county and the city could not afford to efficiently run the local recreation center, so the local

church took over management. A Community A leader indicated, “Our church . . . took over the rec. center. County threw it down, the city threw it down, and the church took it over and has run it for five years now; so we’re very active from the standpoint of youth.” Another pointed out that “Our leaders realize that’s (our people) one of our greatest points here. Obviously we don’t have a beach, we don’t have a large industry, but we have each other. And we have our community. Our leaders realize that’s what our strength is...Because that is our greatest asset in this community, is our people and what we have, the camaraderie we have as _____ Countians.”

Community leaders involved in these activities, as well as other activities throughout the community, admit there is a lot of time involved. In fact, this was cited as the single greatest reason of why they may not be as involved as they would like to be. Even so, almost a quarter of those interviewed said they felt there were no obstacles – you could be as active as you wanted to be.

In Community B civic groups were one aspect where it differed strongly from Community A. While Community A had several strong civic groups, the strongest of which being the Kiwanis Club, Community B had no strong civic groups to speak of. One reason for this may be the plethora of available clubs and organizations in which to participate. Compared to Community A, Community B has many more organizations to which one could belong. Another potential reason for the lack of strong civic groups may be due to the strong family bonds within the county. Regardless, fewer Community B leaders were aware of or involved in community activities, when compared to Community A. A Community B leader responded that “We do care about (each other), I have a sense . . . because I’ve lived here my whole life and I’ve raised my children here, most of my grandchildren are here, and I want them to be raised in a place like Community B.”

Conclusions

Rural Communities A and B each have unique qualities that set them apart, while potentially making them more viable than many other rural areas. Three important variables that contribute to successful community interaction are highlighted within this study – psychological sense of community, community leadership and social capital.

Leaders within both communities have a strong sense of community. In each case, community schools and churches play a large role as to how the community operates, and in how its members interact. Within each situation, both towns identified themselves as part of a larger community, one that spans the county. Perhaps this is the case due to the advantages to having larger (area) communities

that include more resources available (both human and natural), more opportunities available cooperatively than in specific small towns, and for other reasons. Within each community, it was very apparent those in leadership positions felt their community was still close-knit and cared very deeply for its members. This may be an important aspect that continues to hold many rural communities together, regardless of the circumstances.

In general, community leadership within both communities is moving in a good direction. Using leadership responsibilities within the community in order to improve your community for the future or simply to serve the community itself are both noble aspirations, and each something that is being done within both communities. While Community A leaders had particularly strong attitudes regarding the importance of getting involved and being a good role model in the community, Community B leaders really stressed the importance of serving your community and its members to the best of your ability.

Within each community, the relationships developed and maintained through social capital proved to be an important aspect of community. Interactions among community members at civic, church, and school activities proved to be the most important arenas in which to develop trust. Developing trust across county borders was also deemed important. These accounts support Warren's (1972) assertion that communities must develop and maintain strong ties outside of the community in order to effectively accomplish action within the community. Within both situations, both internal as well as external relationships have proved to be a stronghold for the community.

In addition, while a handful of annual community wide activities were noted within each community, many community activities also occurred as singular events sponsored by service organizations, churches, and special interest groups. All of this activity assists in contributing to the strength of the community, because as Hofferth and Iceland (1998) declare it is the social relationships of a community that allows its members access to scarce resources. And even though Community B leaders appeared to have a much more limited grasp on what was going on in their community, it was still the relationships that give value to social capital and remained a primary reason for community leaders valuing their place of residence.

Strong relationships, people who want to give back to their community, and leaders working for the common good of the community are just a few of the features that help in making these communities unique. It is an active illustration that social capital as described by Putnam does exist in these rural communities; that having group networks, norms, and trust working together toward a common good is something that sets these rural areas apart (Kim & Schweitzer, 1996).

Because this was a comparative case study, specific to this research is the need to understand these communities and their situations, not to generalize the findings across all rural communities today. Nonetheless, many of the issues uncovered through this research can assist individuals in not only expanding appropriate community leadership development programs and literature, but can also help to create and improve community leadership training for the same rural communities.

Implications

The aforementioned conclusions lead to several important implications for leadership educators. Perhaps one of the most important implications of this study is encouraging policy change to include additional focus on providing effective leadership training available to all community leaders, regardless of community size. A particularly effective way to do this would be involving community leadership development educators within the extension offices in the county or district. By providing effective leadership training using community leadership as a foundation, and including instruction on how to address issues and problems unique to that area, rural community leaders can more effectively learn how to lead and serve their community.

Moreover, a good way to market appropriate community leadership training is to appeal to those already in leadership positions; particularly those with especially public roles or younger leaders looking to take over responsibilities. Leadership educators can take this opportunity to provide the needed contextual leadership knowledge, as well as assisting in developing new relationships. By appealing to some of these influential individuals within the community, effectual leadership training may become the standard rather than the exception.

One possible way to encourage leadership development within communities is to assist in the development of community and county wide leadership development programs. These development opportunities can be run by local community members who are in the unique position to be aware of community needs and issues. By combining this ecological knowledge with the knowledge of leadership (ideally provided by a leadership educator), local leadership development programs can be a particularly effective medium for building local leadership assets. Leadership development is important across all contexts; still, it is the context that determines the priority for the needed knowledge and skill development to be incorporated into the program.

A final implication from this study involves what components should be incorporated into the ideal community leadership development curriculum. Aspects such as a basic knowledge of the inner workings of social capital, how to develop and encourage individual sense of community, how to instigate

community action, and promoting trust and credibility development are vital to the success of today's community leaders. These aspects should play a role in providing the foundation for community leadership education, with other community-determined leadership specifics rounding out the program of study.

Ultimately, leadership educators have the unique responsibility to provide instruction to those destined to lead our rural communities into the future. While it is reasonable for community leaders and members to be expected to know what is important and needed within their community, leadership knowledge is our context of specialty; it is our responsibility to provide appropriate structures, knowledge, and resources to foster effective leadership development within communities. And taking on this responsibility should be considered no small charge.

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Biography

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