

# Making a Difference: Becoming a Community Leader

By Mark Creyton

We face many issues as a community at a local and a global level. We are often saddened, disappointed, frustrated and sometimes horrified by the things that happen in our worlds. Community leaders are those who decide they want to make a difference and don't want to wait for others to get things done.

There is still a traditional notion that leaders are those who lead from the front and give orders. We assume that leaders are the ones placed in important positions within organisations and communities. Yet community leaders are everywhere. They are those who take the initiative, facilitate effective action and voice concerns about unfairness and struggle for social justice. Leaders are those who recognise they can make a difference, that they can effect social change, further develop their communities or support those in need.

Community leadership is not always glamorous, is sometimes tedious, yet can be immensely satisfying, effective and empowering. So how we can we develop ourselves as community leaders?

## Be aware of your own capacity - Develop a personal leadership statement

As leaders we often need to make difficult decisions or balance competing requirements. We are role models to those around us. To do these things effectively, leaders need to be self-aware, have a vision of what they would like to achieve and be aware of their values. To do this we can write a personal leadership statement. Take the time to reflect on what you believe and what is important to you. Think about what are your essential motivations, your strengths and your weaknesses. Think about who inspires you and who leaves you cold. What are the most important things in your life? Through this reflection, you will begin to identify your values and the type of leader you aspire to be. Once you have this as a basis, you can think about what you want to achieve. Often people believe that they are powerless, that the issues are too big or the decision-makers too far away. It is important to dream, but it is also important to consider your sphere of influence, i.e. where and how you can be most effective. For some people a personal leadership statement might be a simple sentence such as: I wish to create a more environmentally responsible community through my own life and through my campaigning at a local level ... or your statement might really be a page of actions and reflections.

## Identify and develop the capacity of your group

Too often we see what needs to be done, what resources we require and what needs to change, without recognising what capacity we have within our own group. Before seeking new resources consider what resources and skills your group members have, so that you can build on your capacity within the group rather than look outside for expert assistance. Begin by mapping the assets of group members. Brainstorm what skills and interests each person in your group has, what people and organisations can you build networks or relationships with to extend your capacity and what resources are available in your local community. Remember to think broadly and be creative.

Max Du Pree (1997) speaks of effective organisations and groups as places of realised potentials. An inclusive voluntary sector offers a unique opportunity to value everyone's unique skills, talents and interests, and it can provide places for all people to develop their potential, As a leader you have a very particular role in encouraging and supporting the group to fully develop its capacity.



## **Develop your people skills - Practice the art of dialogue**

A key attribute for leaders is an ability to communicate effectively with a diversity of people. We need to engage in dialogue. Dialogue is more than discussion; it is based on trust and respect. It is taking the time to fully understand what the other person is saying, before responding with what you want to say. It provides a basis for reaching consensus, but also for challenging each other without losing respect or trust.

We know that many of the challenges we face require working with a diverse group of stakeholders, some of whom may come from very different value bases from our own. We will often need to seek common ground, finding solutions, which reflect what we have in common rather than those on which we differ. For this we will need to engage in a process of dialogue and be willing to explore a range of alternative solutions while ensuring we don't sacrifice what is critical and valuable to us. Aila Keto, a long-term campaigner to save Queensland's rainforests, summarises this new approach by noting "Conservation is often characterised by adversarial politics, but that has changed. We (needed) to ensure all parties worked together towards solutions based on agreed facts and mutual respect." (Noble and Dick, 2000: 17)

## **Know your topic**

Amnesty International has shown the importance of ensuring credible sources of information and documentation. Leaders must know their topic. They are informed about the issues surrounding the work that they do. They have reflected critically about the issues, considered alternative approaches and can address questions and challenges. It is important to understand what the general public is thinking. If you want to change people's views, you have to begin where they are and consider where they could be encouraged to go tomorrow.

## **Be strategic and action focused**

Henry Spira was an animal rights activist who was able to achieve more in two decades than many animal rights organisations had achieved in a century. Through carefully considered strategic campaigns, he forced cosmetic companies to fund research into non-animal testing, he stopped many bizarre and unnecessary research projects on animals and he successfully took on the fast food industry and the multinationals to reduce the suffering of millions of animals. He sought dialogue first but was always willing to follow with a public action campaign to achieve his goals. He sought to bring about meaningful change one step at a time. Before he commenced any project he would ask, "Will it work" (Singer, 1999).

## **Develop effective and healthy group structures and processes**

Strategic action requires that you work effectively as a group. In our work with many groups and committees we have identified five elements of healthy and effective groups. Firstly people stay focused on the reasons they got involved in the first place and don't get caught in the administration or week to week hassles. Secondly effective groups have effective structures and systems. This means people are clear about their roles, meetings have clear agendas, and the group has a planning process and a way to assess the effectiveness of their actions. Thirdly people in the group all give quality time but also recognize that they have lives outside the group.



Fourthly group members share the load. Finally groups celebrate their achievements and the achievements of individual group members. They know how to party! An effective leader can facilitate many of these processes.

## **Be innovative, look for opportunities and learn from everything**

How often do we hear, “we tried that and it didn’t work or it has always been that way, so don’t try and change it”. Leaders seek opportunities, they try things, they are innovative and they learn from everything. Peter Mansfield was living in Adelaide and was appalled at what drug companies and their marketing agencies were doing in third world countries but was told they were too big and too far away. He decided to do something about it. He wrote to the parent drug companies, discussed the likely impact of these practices if they were exposed in their main markets. He published in medical journals and wrote to doctors around the world. The drug companies thought he worked a well-funded large organisation, but he achieved it all from a desk in the corner of his room while trying to make ends meet (Noble and Dick, 2000).

To sum it all up, being a community leader means taking responsibility for attempting to make the world a better place and to address some of the injustices that occur. The world needs effective leaders committed to the principles of social justice and equity! Leaders who value people above profits or personal interests. Many of you are already on the way to being effective community leaders, engaged in these struggles.

## **References**

Du Pree, M. (1997) *Leading without Power: finding hope in serving community*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Noble, J. and Roger, D. (2000) *Australian Volunteers at Work: 100 stories*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press.

Singer, P. (1999) *Ethics into Action*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

