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## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

By Sara Tusek

President Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign was built on several bedrock beliefs that resonated with American voters. One key belief was that individuals living in a democracy have an obligation to contribute to the greater good of the entire society, rather than simply concentrating on their own wellbeing. This belief (and the actions that flow out of it) can be summed up in the phrase "community leadership."

### ***BUILDING CIVIC SOCIETY***

According to the principles of community leadership, although it's fine to put significant effort into one's own life in terms of building financial security, acquiring an education, attending to spiritual growth, and maintaining physical and emotional health, it's not enough to stop there.

For democracy to function correctly, each citizen needs to not only work for his or her own benefit, but also contribute to the wellbeing of the whole society. If citizens focus only on activities that are for their own benefit, too often the strong will overcome the less strong and leave nothing for those who can't fight as effectively for what they want.

In other words, unless capable people restrain themselves from snapping up all the social benefits they can, there will be no social benefits left for those with less capability. Stark inequalities resulting from this unbalanced competition make it difficult for each person to be an active participant in democratic institutions; for people to have enough time and energy to be part of the political process, their basic needs must be met.

In a functioning democracy, then, the socially strong will consider the needs of the entire society, and discover ways to improve the lives of individuals who don't have the social resources or inclination to take care of themselves.

For example, community leaders might organize day care facilities or health information fairs in their neighborhoods. They might develop programs and services for mentally ill or homeless people, or provide job-related advice to the unemployed. Such community activities supplement and may even take the place of governmental programs that are inadequately funded or insufficient for the needs of the citizens who are being served.

### ***COMMUNITY LEADERS***

The driving force behind the beliefs summed up in the phrase "community leadership" is the idea that the people who know best what's needed in a community are those who live in it. Rather than a top-down approach to social services in which the government assesses needs from a bird's-eye perspective and funds programs and services accordingly, community leadership starts from the bottom up, observing the daily lives of people and imagining what would most help them lead better lives.

Community leadership encompasses any number of activities that enhance and strengthen civic culture, creating a foundation of citizens who are actively playing a part in the society that surrounds them.

In his own career, President Obama gave practical expression to this belief through his job as a community organizer in a Chicago neighborhood. There he worked to unite citizens in taking actions that benefited the entire community. *To p. 2*

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# Leaders to Follow

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Community Leadership

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## WHO CAN LEAD?

Interestingly, community leadership has room for all types of people. Whereas national and international leaders are expected to have the complete package of qualifications (notable accomplishments, outstanding education, personal authority, attractive appearance, appropriate family, and so on), community leaders are often people who seem to lack at least some of these qualifications.

What these leaders do have, however, is the ability to get things done. Whether they have the full range of leadership skills themselves, or simply have a talent for finding and employing others who have these skills, community leaders know how to manage the process of taking an idea and “giving it legs.” These remarkable individuals can pinpoint the essential elements of a vaguely-articulated need and produce a program or service that meets this need, usually on a very small budget and with minimal resources.

From this standpoint, anyone can be a community leader, as long as he or she possesses sufficient enthusiasm and determination. This kind of leadership is, fittingly, open to anyone willing to lead—it’s a kind of democracy of leadership, in which each person is equally qualified to participate, just because he or she is a citizen.

## GAINING CREDIBILITY

To be a leader requires followers. People usually want some reason to follow a leader; leaders who can provide such reasons are said to be credible, or believable. Gaining credibility is not difficult for community leaders, since they are operating in a geographically enclosed area (their neighborhood or larger commu-

nity). Just one successful community project, carried through to the conclusion, can catapult a citizen into community leadership.

Becoming a familiar face in the community is essential for leadership. People tend to trust what they see repeatedly; those desiring leadership can gain credibility by showing up at community events and doing small, unglamorous jobs such as setting up chairs or cleaning after an event.

## CONTRIBUTING TO THE GREATER GOOD

Community leadership is not just a good idea, or a virtue to be sought for its own sake. President Obama’s emphasis on community leadership implies that only by the just use of the sum of many unselfish contributions of individual citizens will it be possible for all citizens to live according to this premise from the Decla-

ration of Independence: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

President Obama has repeatedly stated that it is simply not possible for everyone to have these inalien-

able rights in a society that promotes selfishness and greed. Community leadership, based on the belief that people have fundamental obligations to each other due to their common membership in a society, is essential for the proper functioning of a democracy.

Community leaders make democracy possible by going beyond their own selfish needs and acting for the greater good. President Obama’s example as a community leader in Chicago illustrates the bountiful results that can emerge from the ideas and programs of committed community leaders.

*INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE PUBLISHING HOUSE announces June 2009 publication of 21ST CENTURY JOBS*

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