



# Leaders to Follow

*International Leadership Institute: Providing Leadership Development Services and Programs in the US and Europe since 1985*

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## 3 KEYS TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

“Community leadership” is a popular buzzword these days. It seems to encompass the best of two worlds: leadership makes things happen, and, in this case, the leadership is rising organically from the community.

Community leadership can be seen as more authentic than leadership imposed by masters of red tape from remote institutions. It comes from the grassroots; it’s democratic, in the most fair sense; it’s cheap, because community leaders don’t typically expect the big salaries that bureaucratic managers do for similar work.

The question is this: what are the key elements to successful community leadership? Here are three elements to consider.

### #1: A NETWORK

When Barack Obama became a community organizer in the neglected neighborhoods of Chicago, he needed a network. Wisely, he approached the area churches and found what he needed. The churches, though struggling and not at all wealthy, nevertheless provided a framework, already in place, of people and communications that could be mobilized.

The people were those devoted folk who kept the churches open with their dedicated service in practical matters. They were the women who cooked and cleaned

after church suppers; the pastors who conducted Sunday services, funerals and weddings that brought the community together; the young people who congregated in the community rooms with pizza and a CD player to have some good, clean fun.

This network could be put to work, as Obama did, to make announcements to the neighborhood about elections and political matters that affected their lives. You could also “get out the word” about educational and recreational programs for children and senior citizens. Without the network, no communication takes place; the best ideas die for lack of human involvement.

### #2: A COMMON GOAL

The network will disseminate information, but unless the information is of interest to the neighborhood, nothing will happen. There must be an agreement that certain objectives are important, worthwhile and desirable to the community.

The traditional ways to set such goals are through surveys, ballots and town meetings. Since these are slow, labor-intensive methods, there’s a tendency to want to skip this step and go straight at whatever goal the organizers have decided would be “good for the neighborhood;” once the neighborhood sees how great the goal is, and how they benefit, they’ll naturally support it.

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Prasná Brána, Prague (ancient fortification)

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- REMAINS DEDICATED TO HELPING PEOPLE DEVELOP AND USE LEADERSHIP SKILLS
- OFFERS PERSONALIZED & EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES TO ENHANCE LEADERSHIP, CAREER, AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN THE US AND IN EUROPE
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### #2: A COMMON GOAL (CONTINUED)

No doubt the community organizers mean well. No doubt their goals are worthy, laudable and (most likely) unselfish.

However, goals imposed from above simply will not work in community development. There are no shortcuts here. If the goals don't develop from the community (neighborhood or whatever organization) itself, there will be no energy behind them and they will falter. I discovered this lesson as a teacher: whatever assignment I devised, no matter how interesting and educational, would have relatively little impact on my students unless I first "sold" it to them by gaining their enthusiasm and "buy-in."

The engine that fuels community development is the intense desire and passionate resolve on the part of the community to make the goal into reality. This engine will not run unless the community is driving it.

Which brings us to the third element:

### #3: HOME-GROWN LEADERS

The countries that comprise the old soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe provide a good lesson on "growing leaders." The communists had some good ideas for projects using community organization, such as cleaning up a neighborhood park and using schoolchildren to harvest crops including herbs and hops.

The only problem was that the leaders for these projects were not "of the people;" they were party hacks and authoritarian bureaucrats. Of course, these leaders were looked upon with deep suspicion by those they were assigned to lead, who saw them as spies and busy-bodies. At best, such leaders were tolerated; as worst, their efforts were ridiculed and sabotaged.

This is truly the heart of community development: selecting and grooming members of the community to become its leaders.

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Obama was very fortunate in Chicago, as he found leaders already in place in the churches, as well as communication networks; all he had to do was align his political community development goals with their existing goals to empower the community and improve the quality of life for those who lived there. Once Obama gained credibility with the church leadership, he could penetrate the heart of the community. He talked with people; listened to their dreams, hopes and needs; then restated his original goals to better reflect the true needs of the community. He succeeded as a community developer by learning from the people he was leading and helping them in areas where they needed and wanted help.

### WHERE TO START?

All three elements must be working together for community development to flourish. If they don't yet exist, where would you start?

I would say that establishing a common goal is the right first step. This is accomplished through dialogue with the community, listening respectfully to the needs of people, and choosing a small, simple goal to begin with. Hopefully, the goal will attract leaders and a network of communication, demonstrating to the neighborhood that it can solve its own problems with concerted effort.

Leaders will emerge in the process, often people who don't "look like" leaders! The network will grow naturally as interested people join voluntarily. The community leadership thus established can take on bigger projects, as it defines them on behalf of the neighborhood, creating functioning community development in the best of all possible worlds.

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