

Finding Leaders Within

The *LeadershipPlenty Training Program* assumes that everyone has the ability to be a leader. We live in communities of *LeadershipPlenty*—that is, with plenty of people with untapped talents to make their communities better places to live and work and raise families. Developing new leadership demands that both individuals and communities think in new ways about who can be a leader, how diverse leaders can work together effectively, and what action they can take.

BALANCING REFLECTION AND ACTION

A crucial task of leadership is balancing the need to think with the need to act. We cannot take action without thinking. However, we cannot simply think about problems without ultimately taking action. Striking a balance between thinking and doing is a challenge that faces individuals, groups, and communities. The first module of the *LeadershipPlenty* program introduces participants to the tasks of balancing reflection and action. The program positions the process of personal reflection squarely in the context of effective group work and community action. Communities and individuals learn to reflect—to think critically about their experiences and assets—so that they can take action in meaningful ways.

COMMUNITIES MOBILIZE “THE RESPONSIBLES”

Looking inward is a skill for communities as much as for individuals. Communities should look within and examine themselves closely to identify potential leaders they may have overlooked. There are leaders in every neighborhood, in every age and ethnic group, in every income bracket and occupation. Communities must “look within” themselves to find the wealth of people who can be leaders in their neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and civic organizations. These are the people that John Gardner refers to as “the Responsibles”:

All citizens should have the opportunity to be active, but all will not respond. Those who do respond carry the burden of our free society. I call them the Responsibles. They exist in every segment of the community—ethnic groups, labor unions, neighborhood associations, businesses—but they rarely form an effective network of responsibility because they don't know one another across segments. They must find each other, learn to communicate, and find common ground. Then they can function as the keepers of the long-term agenda.

—John W. Gardner, “You Are the Responsibles,” *Civic Partners*
(Charlottesville, VA: Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 1997): p 5.

The *LeadershipPlenty Training Program* is a tool to help communities look within and reach out by equipping both new *and* established leaders to play a greater role in civic life. Strong community leadership recognizes the wealth of capacities that people in the community possess. Many people who do not think of themselves as “leaders” nonetheless exercise leadership in their communities every day. But established leaders can benefit as well from opportunities to learn new skills, practice collaborative problem solving, and expand their networks. Innovative leadership emerges when communities inventory their wealth of citizen expertise and commit to renewing civic leadership with fresh energy and diverse experience.

REFLECTION MOVES LEADERS BEYOND “OFF-THE-RACK” THINKING

The *LeadershipPlenty Training Program* is also a tool to help individuals tap the expertise and insights that their experience of community has given them. By reflecting on their own experience and talents, individuals are able to reach out and work with others more effectively.

When training community leaders, there is a tendency to embrace a very limited inventory of “off-the-rack” skills, such as public speaking, board development, and fund-raising. Although these skills are useful, they don’t take into account the full challenge of community change, which is imagining a different reality or realities. Leaders look at what *is* and envision what *ought to be* or what *could be*. This type of vision demands creative and emotional energy. Therefore, leaders must take a long look within at the energy, both positive and negative, that they bring to community change.

By reflecting on their own experiences of community, people become more aware of what motivates them to participate in efforts to improve their communities and what gifts they have to offer. When people are more aware of their own attitudes, habits, and skills, they are better equipped to work with others. Working effectively in groups is crucial to improving our communities. Indeed, the *LeadershipPlenty Training Program* embraces the idea that only by working in groups can we develop long-term solutions to complex problems.

RECOGNIZING BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY IS IMPORTANT

We all bring positive and negative energy and attitudes to community work. The complex experiences that people have had both of belonging to and being excluded from community affects their development as leaders. Probably most people have enjoyed the feeling of belonging to a community and realize how it has enriched their lives. Many people have also felt hurt and excluded from a community at some time in their lives. This type of negative experience may also motivate them to work for change.

People become involved in their neighborhoods and communities because they want to make a difference. They want to help children have a safe place to play or families have decent housing or unemployed people find work. By confronting both their discouraging and encouraging experiences of community, people can move forward in their personal development and in their collaborative efforts to build stronger communities through concrete projects with specific goals.

Reflection enables people to think broadly about the wealth of experience and expertise they can contribute to community change. Leaders come from all walks of life and possess all sorts of skills. By reflecting on their gifts and how to contribute them to the community, individuals also learn how to help others recognize the skills they bring to community change. Looking inward allows us all to identify what is unique about our contributions and ultimately to recognize the uniqueness of others as well.

LOOK WITHIN TO REACH OUT AND MOVE FORWARD

For individuals, groups, and communities, leadership is fundamentally a balancing act between reflection and action. By looking within—to sources of energy and imagination—individuals can begin to reach out to the larger community.

Historians enjoy pronouncing that this or that great event resulted from the rare coincidence of a leader uniquely skilled to meet extraordinary challenges. What is more likely the case is that a group of people with diverse and wide-ranging gifts were looking for a way to contribute their energies to significant work. Reflecting on our unique experiences and talents prepares each of us to identify specific ways that we can engage in and improve our communities.

