



*Rural Minnesota Journal 2012*

*Who Lives in Rural Minnesota:*

*A Region in Transition*

© Center for Rural Policy and Development

[www.ruralmn.org/rmj/](http://www.ruralmn.org/rmj/)

## **Rural Community Leadership:**

### **Three Cornerstones**

**Malissa J. Bahr & Valerie Shangreaux**

---

Community leaders are people who do what needs to be done to develop and sustain a healthy community. Today, rural community leaders face significant challenges that range from struggling economic conditions to changing demographics to quality-of-life issues. These are complex issues that can't be solved with previous strategies and require leaders to look at and think about their community. In order to address these issues, community leaders need to be not only willing to take action, but they also need to create broad social networks to successfully tackle the complex issues. One of the quotes frequently used in the Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP) is "leadership: you have to do it yourself, but you can't do it alone" (author unknown). This quote captures BCLP's approach to leadership development.

For the past twenty-six years BCLP has delivered leadership training with a twist. While the training contains individual leadership development, the application of skills taught is all focused on the participant's community of place. This design helps increase individual leadership capacity but also focuses on helping build relationships across the community or communities so that leaders don't have to act alone.

For the past year a group of Blandin Foundation staff and consultants have worked together to uncover the background assumptions that have helped sustain the viability of the program over the years. The background assumptions are made up of the thoughts and beliefs that define the conscious and unconscious cognitive framework.



Participants at a recent Blandin Community Leadership Program session.

This framework influences what we see and how we act, while these assumptions help us make meaning of situations and often help explain what we observe. Wheatley and Frieze in their book *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (2011) articulate the importance of assumptions and beliefs. In the book, they profile communities where members have used their beliefs and assumptions to walk into their future successfully. These assumptions have proven to be powerful influencers of action. Community leaders are called to action. Therefore, it became important for the Blandin Foundation to identify the overarching assumptions and beliefs we have about rural community leadership and how they have shaped and continue to shape the content and design of BCLP.

While a number of assumptions were identified during the research, this article will focus on the three overarching assumptions that help to guide BCLP's approach to community leadership and highlight some of the content and design implications.

## **Overarching Assumptions**

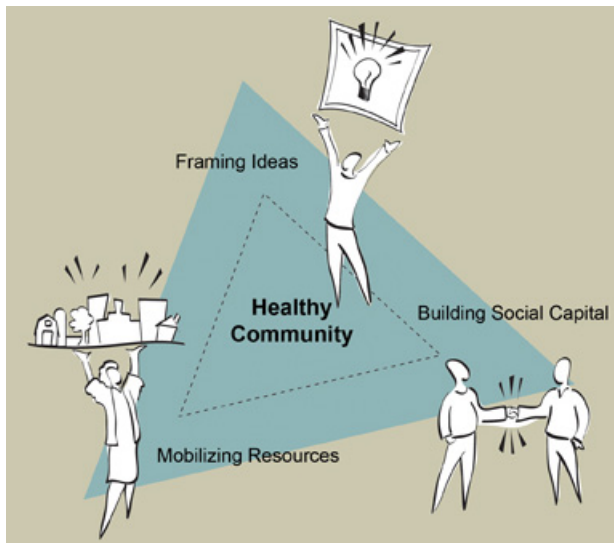
### **Building leadership capacity in rural communities is at the core of community change.**

Leadership matters. BCLP is based on the assumptions that leaders are a critical resource for communities and that in order to become a healthy community, the quality and quantity of leadership that exists in a community is indispensable (Raelin, 2010; Hazy, Goldstein, & Lichtenstein, 2007). Leadership is a catalyst for strengthening communities (Ospina, 2011). BCLP believes that individuals become agents of leadership when they work from formal and informal positions within the community and over time influence and change a community. This may seem too obvious to mention, but the program is called the Blandin Community Leadership Program. Twenty-six years ago the Blandin Foundation could have chosen other areas to focus on, like economic development or healthcare, but instead they chose leadership development as the currency a community needs to initiate and organize their ability to transform their communities. If a community has sufficient leadership capacity and capability, it can apply this unlimited resource to whatever challenge they wish to meet or change.

This overarching assumption, that building leadership capacity in rural communities is at the core of community change, has impacted the design and implementation of BCLP. Below are some of the design and content implications:

#### ***Core leadership competencies***

Helping community leaders increase their capacity for dealing with complex issues begins with core leadership skills. The Research Center for Leadership in Action at the Wagner School of Leadership at New York University recently published “How Social Change Organizations Create Leadership Capital and Realize Abundance Amidst Scarcity” (Ospina, 2011). They asked the question: How is collaborative leadership actually practiced? They discovered that three powerful leadership practices made the difference in helping communities transform themselves. They are: reframing discourse, bridging difference, and unleashing human



**Figure 1:** Three core competencies of community leadership.

energies. These three leadership practices are very similar to BCLP's core leadership capacities of framing, building social capital, and mobilization. In their research, individual leaders did not see their positional leadership as the cause for their community's transformation; rather they saw these competencies as leadership practices that could be used by anyone in the community. This research opens up a new way to think about leadership that is not focused on the individual positional leader, but on processes and practices that anyone in a community uses to achieve this result.

BCLP's use of framing, building social capital, and mobilization of resources is supported in the current leadership literature (Fairhurst, 2011; Halpern, 2004; Rasmussen, Armstrong, & Chazdon, 2001; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). The power of using these core competencies in BCLP is that anyone can use them to exert influence in their community. They do not need the power of positional leadership to be practiced. This choice of core competencies reinforces the belief that change can happen from anywhere

and that leadership is widely distributed in a community. Figure 1 shows BCLP's Core Competency Model (Krile, Curphy, & Lund, 2006).

### *Assessing individual and community readiness*

Intentional recruitment assesses individual and community readiness for developing leadership capacity and skills. The recruitment process assists communities with determining the best timing for a community and its leaders to engage in BCLP. Each community is unique; therefore, a series of questions is used to help guide recruitment efforts in rural Minnesota communities:

- Are key leaders from a cross section of the community on board and engaged in the community application process?
- If so, can they articulate why now? And why community leadership training?
- What does the community expect to be a result of the leadership training? Do their expectations align with our program purpose and outcomes?
- What is their population size? Is it possible to take twenty-four people from their community away for one week? If not, is there a neighboring community that is a natural partner to include in the cohort? Often we use a community area, as opposed to a specific community, because it allows more flexibility.
- Are there other Blandin alumni already in leadership positions in their community to help recruitment efforts?
- One of our goals is making sure diversity is represented at the training. Looking beyond Census numbers, are there sub communities that we need to tap into for the best community representation possible? If so, how long have they been established? Are they ready for a weeklong program such as BCLP?
- Has the Foundation done any other work with this community? If yes, when and what?

The answers to these questions help to assess individual and community readiness for developing leadership capacity.

### ***Increasing capacity***

Over the past twenty-six years there have been a number of communities that have had more than one cohort go through BCLP. The possibility of additional cohorts from a community increases the chances of developing networks capable of influence.

It is also important to link previous BCLP alumni with new BCLP alumni emerging from the program. The stronger the connections between cohorts in a community, the more likely their chances are to broaden their networks and influence change.

### **Broadening and deepening relationships increase individual awareness and relationship to community**

The Benedictines have a saying: We can only know ourselves in relationship to others. It is through the eyes of the other that we come to know ourselves better. This is also true for communities. As we come to know each other in our community, we build social capital with each other and learn about how others experience and perceive our community (Halpern, 2004). This helps us to have a more integrated understanding of our community and enhances our relationship to it. Halpern defines social capital as “Social networks and the norms and sanctions that govern their character. It is valued for its potential to facilitate individual and community action...” (p. 4). BCLP is a relationship-based program that often works with different cohorts from the same rural community over time.

BCLP is also a residential program by design. The power of residential learning is its ability to build and sustain an environment that cultivates relationship development in formal training sessions, over meals, and in the unstructured, participant-generated activities in the evening. The retreat and workshops maximize active peer-to-peer learning to help foster mutual trust and respect. These intentional strategies help to broaden and deepen the relationships



*Figure 2: “What was most useful for you during the week?”*

between individuals during the retreat, which they then take home with them. These relationships also change the way participants see their connection to their community (Block, 2008). Figure 2 shows a word cloud generated from BCLP participant responses to the evaluation question, “What was most useful for you during the week?” The words that stand out: Social capital, people, connections, others, community, etc. Participants clearly find the high value in relationships developed during the retreat.

### **Residential cohort program**

BCLP is designed as a cohort-based program that is taught in a retreat residential setting, which quickens the development of a “sense of community” (Fleming, 1998). The power of this choice is that it provides individuals with the opportunity to build their network on site in both formal classroom settings and in the informal social settings over five days. This design element recognizes that trust and social capital are built outside of the classroom. Social capital is understood, experienced, and built in the cohort over five days. This social capital and the common language generated by the retreat content allows for an active community network

to form that is focused on helping their community become healthier. In residential learning programs “relationships often form between individuals who normally would not meet or even choose to meet” (p. 260). The residential program provides many opportunities to practice the leadership competencies that are taught. The follow-up workshops reinforce the sustainability of the cohort network, while the action teams provide a way to apply these leadership capacities to improve the health of the community.

### **Increased self-awareness**

Personal and community transformation triggers emotions in people. When change occurs on an individual or community level, it releases emotional reactions that include hope, fear, confusion, ambiguity, trust, and conflict, among others. BCLP has learned from experience that there needs to be a place within the program for people to become aware of and manage their individual and collective emotions. Daniel Goleman (1995) introduced the term emotional intelligence in his book by the same name. Emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, managing emotions, individual initiative and motivation, empathy, and seeing and understanding group dynamics. Recent research in neuroscience has linked an individual’s self-awareness with their capacity to experience empathy (Rock & Page, 2009). BCLP acknowledges the importance of emotional intelligence and has created ways for participants to expand their self-awareness. For example, BCLP uses the Myers Briggs Type Indicator as a way for participants to better understand their own preferences in relationship to others. BCLP also provides the opportunity for each participant to meet with a leadership coach to help process what has been learned at the retreat and how they can best use the experience back in their community.

### **Recruiting a diverse cross section of participants is necessary for sustainable community action.**

BCLP strives to recruit participants that reflect the diversity of the community, creating a microcosm of the community with all its diversity. This strategy brings people

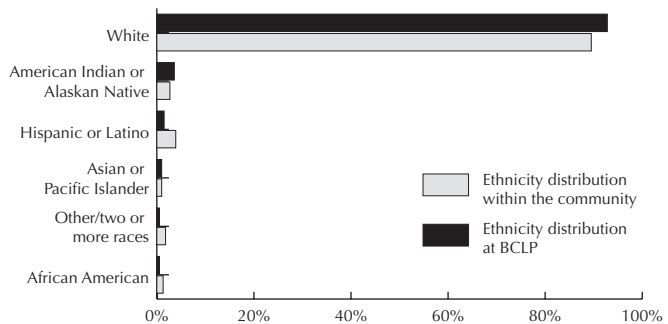


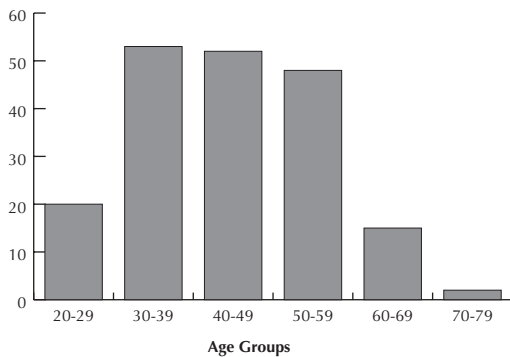
from a cross section of sectors into relationship with each other and allows their different perspectives and experiences in their community to shape how others see their community. It also presents an opportunity to create networks that reflect the whole community rather than community sub-groups based on homogeneity. One of the elements of a healthy community is inclusion. By creating an environment in the retreat that reflects the community’s diversity, participants can see each other as a resource helping the community move forward.

Sustainable community action is anchored in the quality and diversity of its connections. “Connection before content” (Block, 2008) has become an accepted principal of community change. Change flows along the lines of relationship in all human organizations (Allen & Cherrey, 2000). These diverse relationships build community networks that increase the ability to get things done. Over time these alumni networks create systems of influence in a community that lead to effective change (Wheatley & Frieze, 2009). As communities create rich and diverse networks, they demonstrate greater creativity, innovation and diversity of ideas and participation (Wheatley & Frieze, 2009). The quality of relationships defines the quality of community.

The Blandin Community Leadership Program continually monitors trends occurring in rural Minnesota communities and compares them to how well we are doing at recruiting and retaining diverse cohorts. Ethnicity and age are major factors in the demographic patterns that represent rural Minnesota communities. Figure 3 shows the ethnic diversity represented by community cohorts in 2011 in comparison to

**Figure 3:**  
Diversity  
of BCLP  
participants  
in 2011  
compared to  
the diversity of  
the community.





**Figure 4:** The age distribution of participants in BCLP in 2011.

the ethnic distribution in the communities served. According to a recent article written by Ben Winchester (2012), research fellow at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality, rural communities are continuing to experience a “brain gain.” This migratory pattern for ages 30-49 is connected to quality of life. This age cohort brings with them significant education, skills, and connections to people and resources beyond their community boundaries, which is an asset to rural communities. Therefore, age distribution in a cohort is important to making sure diverse voices are represented. Figure 4 shows the age distribution represented by community cohorts in 2011. This assessment data helps us to continually evolve recruitment and program design to best recruit and retain diverse cohorts.

These three overarching assumptions help guide the program content and design embedded in BCLP. The program is constantly assessed and evaluated and the assumptions tested to make sure that BCLP remains relevant to rural communities in this ever-changing world.

## Conclusion

In our approach to community leadership we have the expectation that participants in BCLP will initiate or participate in action that will lead their community toward better health. The mission of building leadership capacity goes along with supporting self-organizing action when influencing change in complex systems, and rural communities are

complex systems (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Senge, et.al, 2005; Wheatley, 1992). The theory of change that drives the program is this:

*If we recruit a representative group of emerging and current leaders from a community and engage them in relationship building, skill building, and personal development experiences in a retreat setting, they will apply the resulting new skills, confidence, and network capabilities in the direction of building a healthier community.*

This theory is supported by the relationship-based framework (Block, 2008) and asset framework (McKnight & Block, 2010) articulated in the research, and by the personal development necessary to transform relationships, networks, and human systems (Scharmer, 2007; Jewell-Larson & Sandow, 1999).

BCLP is organized around the goal of helping rural communities strengthen themselves. The program focuses on building powerful leadership practices of framing, building social capital, and mobilization as the means to help participants achieve what they want their communities to become (Ospina, 2011).

Community leadership matters to the future health of rural Minnesota.

## **References**

- Allen, K. E. and Cherrey, C. (2000). *Systemic leadership: Enriching the meaning of our work*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.
- Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Fairhurst, G. T. (2011). *The power of framing: Creating the language of leadership*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Fairhurst, G. & Sarr, R. (1996). *The art of framing: Managing the language of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fleming, J. (1998). Understanding residential learning: The power of detachment and continuity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(4), 260.

- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Halpern, D. (2004). *Social capital*. Boston: Polity.
- Hazy, K., Goldstein, J. A., Lichtenstein, B. B. Eds. (2007). *Complex systems leadership theory: New perspectives from complexity science on social and organizational effectiveness*. Mansfield, MA: ISCE Publishing.
- Jewell-Larsen, S. & Sandow, D (1999). Personal development: the key to change acceleration in global operations. *Association for Manufacturing Excellence*, 15-19.
- Krile, J., Curphy, G., & Lund D. (2006). *The Community Leadership Handbook*. St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.
- McKnight, J. & Block, P. (2010). *The abundant community: Awakening the power of families and neighborhoods*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Ospina, S. (2011). *How social change organizations create leadership capital and realize abundance amidst scarcity*. Retrieved from <http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/RCLASocialChangeOverview04.11.pdf>.
- Raelin, J. A. (2010). *The leaderful fieldbook: Strategies and activities for developing leadership in everyone*. Boston, MA: Davies-Black.
- Rasmussen, C. M., Armstrong, J., Chazdon, S. A. (2001). Bridging Brown County: Captivating social capital as a means to community change. *Journal of Leadership Education*. 10 (1), Winter 2001. PP. 63-82.
- Rock, D. & Page (2009). *Coaching with the brain in mind: Foundations for practice*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Scharmer, O. (2007). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publisher, Inc.
- Senge, P., Scharmer, C. O., Jaworski, J. & Flowers, B.S. (2005). *Presence: Human purpose and the field of the future*. New York, NY: Currency Books
- Snowden, D. & Boone, M. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. *Harvard Business Review*, Nov, p. 3.

Wheatley, M. (1992). *Leadership and the new science*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler.

Wheatley, M. and Frieze, D. (2011). *Walk out walk on: A learning journey into communities daring to live the future now*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Wheatley, M. & Frieze, D. (2009) *Taking social innovation to scale*. Oxford Leadership Journal, Dec. Vol 1 Issue 1, 1-5.

Winchester, B. (2012). *Continuing the trend: The brain gain of the newcomers*. University of Minnesota Extension. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/brain-gain/docs/continuing-the-trend.pdf>

