

IFAS Community Development: Identifying Local Power Structures to Facilitate Leadership and Community Development¹

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This paper is part of a series of discussions on community development. This series includes specialized papers on leadership development, civic engagement, community action, and other topics important to the development of community.

Introduction

An understanding of local power and leadership structures is important, because as we work through efforts to enhance our organizations and communities success is often contingent upon actively involved residents. It is therefore important to understand power and to be able to identify community power structures and decision makers. The ways that we go about identifying local power are important. There are several options that will be presented in this article, each of which offers a different insight into how local power can best be identified.

Identifying Leadership and Power Structures in the Community

In the process of community development, it is important to identify positions, organizations, and individuals of power. All types of power can serve as a source of empowerment for local, collective action or in more negative settings as a significant obstacle to the emergence of community agency, or the capacity for local of communities to act (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff and Swanson, 1995). There are several ways that extension and other change agents can identify these power structures.

The Positional Approach

A positional approach to identifying power structures focuses on the identification of individuals who hold formal positions in major economic, social, voluntary governmental, political, and religious institutions (Hyman, et al., 2000). This approach is based on the assumption that power lies in the positions of formal community organizations and institutions. Further, it is assumed that individuals

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holding such positions make the important decisions that ultimately impact the community and control precious local resources. By identifying the positions that local people hold in the community, assessments of their power can be made.

The Reputational Approach

The *reputational approach* is most often based on the selection of knowledgeable community residents. These individuals provide an assessment and listing of actors/leaders that they then rank according to their reputation for power. At the center of this approach is the assumption that power exists and is involved in all social relationships. The reputation of leaders is seen as an indicator of their potential to affect community issues, control resources, and shape local life. Individuals knowledgeable about the community can identify power actors as a result of their reputations. This approach traditionally identifies both visible leaders and those operating behind the scenes, the concealed power holders.

The Decision Making Approach

The *decision making approach*, traces the history of a local decision on at least one issue. Utilizing this approach, power holders are identified by their active participation in a concrete decision or issue settlement. This approach is based on the assumption that the social power to affect decisions is identifiable through participation in the local decision-making process. Utilizing this approach those people who were formally active in local issues are identified.

The Social Participation/Social Activity Approach

The *social participation/social activity approach* focuses on participants active in voluntary associations in the community, including those holding formal offices. Utilizing this method, it is assumed that the power to impact community decisions is acquired through active participation and holding offices in the locality's voluntary associations. This is done by identifying civic and voluntary organizations within the community and compiling a list of involved leaders. Individuals who serve with multiple agencies are then identified. Such

individuals are likely to hold power as a result of their diverse ties to positions of authority with numerous organizations.

Conclusion and Implications for Community Development

Power structures exist in all communities. In many places the distribution of power can be widespread and seen in diverse parts of the community. Maximizing these forms of local power necessitates strong local leadership and organized community capacity.

This article presents several techniques for identifying local power structures. The technique you choose will likely influence the types of leaders identified. The strength of the positional methods is the identification of institutional, office political, and visible leaders. The strength of the reputational methods is the identification of reputed leaders, more general leaders, and visible/non-visible leaders. The decision making approach fixes on specialized activists, actual leaders, and visible leaders.

Extension and other outreach efforts can provide a host of training and leadership development expertise. Through such efforts the various power structures can be harnessed to contribute to community building efforts. The ability to identify and understand these is of vital importance to community action efforts and the emergence of community action, and ultimately community itself.

References and Useful Reading

- Luloff, A.E. and L.E. Swanson. 1995. "Community Agency and Disaffection: Enhancing Collective Resources." Pp. 351-372 in *Investing in People: The Human Capital Needs of Rural America*, edited by L. Beaulieu and D. Mulkey. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
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