

Shared Leadership: Creating Self-Organizing Capacity

Introduction

Organizations that develop core skills that support shared leadership among group members are more likely to allow individuals at all levels to be engaged in decision-making and actions that benefit the whole organization (Wheatley, 2006).

These organizations depend on both paid and volunteer staff and must understand the sets of leadership skills each need in order to create an effective group or agency. We offer a framework for thinking about how to increase self-organizing capacities through leadership practices and skill sets.

Essential Elements for a Shared Leadership Model

- Balance of Power
 - Know that power is relational, not positional
 - Build webs of influence rather than chains of command
- Shared Purpose
 - Articulate clear messages that align with the shared mission/vision
- Open Communications
 - Understand that information is dynamic and needs to freely circulate since it is nourishment (Wheatley 1999:101)
- Shared Responsibility and Accountability
 - Allow for flexibility in leadership roles—people and roles are not fixed entities
- Respect Process
 - Allow workers/residents to intelligently self-organize
- Embrace Differences
 - Embrace new forces and new information that comes from different experiences continually changing the situation and dynamics of how others respond
- Value Partnerships
 - Work together in complex, real world situations and valuing the partnership



Leadership Survey

In this study of leadership, we surveyed a total of 578 groups in Iowa and 320 of the 578 questionnaires were completed and returned, yielding a return rate of 55 percent.

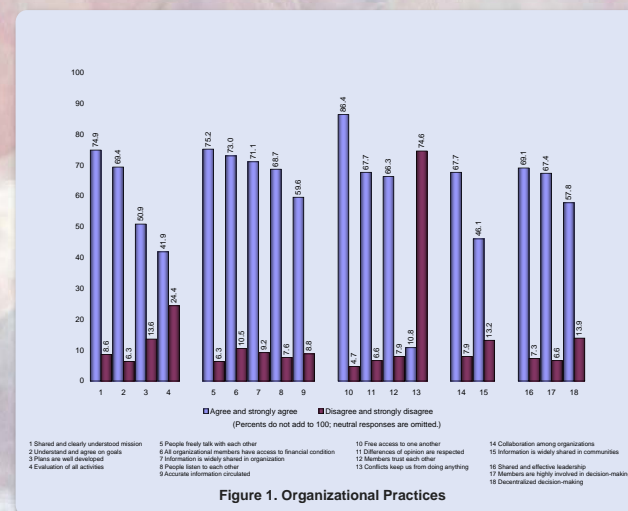
Findings

1) Benchmarking Leadership Practices

Results from this survey offer 18 benchmarks for leadership practices that build group capacities in organizations. In Figure 1, the benchmarks are clustered into five conceptual areas: 1) mission, goals, planning and evaluation; 2) communication systems; 3) trust and connectedness; 4) community networks; and 5) decision-making.

2) Identifying Training Needs

We asked a series of questions about training needs around a group of selected skills. Figure 2 offers a summary of skill training needs for paid staff and volunteers as reported by respondents.



3) Training Needs by Percent and Ranking

The skills with the highest percentages were ranked (Table 1) for volunteers and staff to compare priorities across groups. Both volunteers and paid staff have the same rank order for mobilizing resources, building teamwork and evaluation of programs.

The four skills receiving the lowest percentage points are also the same for both volunteers and staff. While decision-making and facilitation skills appear to be more important for volunteers than for paid staff, they were not deemed as top priority for either group.



Self-Organizing Capacity Framework

Figure 3 provides a visual depicting the components and related dimensions of a self-organizing capacity framework. The priority training needs identified by the respondents are grouped (skill sets) in relation to the organizational practices. These skill sets and organizational practices are those deemed necessary to move the organization towards self-organizing capacity (Wheatley, 2006).

As members of the organization strengthen their collective skills and employ these in a shared environment, creative ideas emerge, webs of relationships unfold, and communications have new meaning (Wheatley, 2006). Hence, there is a resiliency to changing environments and an openness to new possibilities.

Volunteer Staff			Paid Staff		
Skill Area	Percent	Rank	Skill Area	Percent	Rank
* Mobilizing resources	40.8	1	* Mobilizing resources	35.4	1
Visioning	38.0	2	Technology	33.2	2
* Building teamwork	34.5	3	* Building teamwork	32.3	3
Building partnerships	34.2	3	Visioning	29.7	4
* Evaluation of programs	29.4	4	* Evaluation of programs	29.7	4
Communication	28.5	5	Managing conflict	28.8	5
Managing conflict	25.9	6	Building partnership	27.2	6
Technology	24.1	7	Communication	25.3	7
Decision making	23.7	8	Evaluation of group process	18.7	8
Group facilitation	20.9	9	Group facilitation	18.4	8
Evaluation of group process	19.3	10	Decision making	15.5	9
Meeting skills	18.4	11	Meeting skills	12.7	10
Other	4.4	12	Other	5.4	11

Table 1. Training Needs by Percent and Ranking



Figure 3. Self-Organizing Capacity Framework



Conclusion

Our findings suggest that organizational practices and skills are interrelated. We find that all members of the organization, volunteers and paid staff alike, need similar skill training to move the organization towards self-organizing capacity.

The Self-Organizing Capacity Framework, along with a shared leadership perspective, provides a starting place for developing leadership training programs that can facilitate efforts toward capacity building in groups, organizations and communities.

Prepared by
Beverly Lundy Allen, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, Iowa State University
Graphic layout, Renea Miller, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University

March 2007

In the short run, it's often easier to just "do it yourself," but that doesn't build the capacity of your organization to survive and thrive over the long haul. If you don't share your power — stated more clearly, if you don't help others to find their own power — you lose.

Andy Robinson, *The Network*, Spring 2007