KELD

Kentucky Extension Leadership Development

Community Power

Bringing the Right People to the Table

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Introduction

Power. To some, it's a dirty word. Often the term translates into leaders telling community members what to do or manipulating situations for their own benefit. At the very least, the idea holds a negative undertone for most people. Still, power plays a necessary role in all communities. Power within communities involves the distribution of resources or the lack thereof. Because of its connection to resources, power within communities may lead to confrontation, conflict or even a political divide.

But it doesn't have to. Empowerment—the ability to enable or share power—can be encouraged within the community context. Continue reading, and we will share with you a traditional definition of community power, how to outline a community's power structure, and a process on how to bring the right "power players" to the table.

What Is Community Power?

In general, community power can be defined as the ability to affect the distribution of both public and private resources within a community. How the distribution occurs depends upon the community. Traditionally, there are two distinct approaches to community power: *elitist* and *pluralist*.

Elitist

The elitist position perceives community life as controlled by a small group of leaders with economic or political power who initiate, direct and resolve most pub-

lic decision-making. In this perspective, citizen participation in community affairs either doesn't exist or is limited to efforts applied through a few relatively powerless voluntary associations.

Pluralist

The pluralist position sees power as spread among a handful of organized community groups with control shifting according to the issues rather than repeated control of a single group across all community issues. The role of citizen participation in this perspective is not completely clear; still, great emphasis is placed upon democracy in influencing political leaders and community member engagement through various community organizations.

Often power within a community can be enhanced by connections found outside the community—other leaders, groups or organizations external to the community. These collaborations can help expand resources available to the community and in turn affect the power structure within the community. Ultimately, who possesses the power and how widely available it is to citizen participants significantly effects the quality of life in a community.

Power Structure within the Community

Communities differ greatly in how power is concentrated and exercised by individuals (both local and absentee), businesses and organizations. Therefore, it is important to determine what the local power

"The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."

— Jane Addams

structure looks like; this can be done by examining how changes take place within the community as well as what methods are used to institute these changes.

Uncovering the power structure within the community can be accomplished by asking four key questions:

- Who can best represent this town to the outside?
- Whose support do you need to get things done?
- Who do you need to implement a project?
- Who can stop a project?

Questions such as these highlight opinion leaders or power players in the community. Many of the people discovered as a result of these questions will be part of the power elite described earlier in this publication.

Occasionally it might be necessary for community members to challenge the local power structure. Challenging the power elite is an empowering experience, because marginalized groups can learn to be successful through their action. Still, it can be risky; many power elites have control over opinions, norms and decisions within the community and could choose to retaliate by casting doubt on an individual's personality or character.

Bringing the Right People to the Table

Because of the effect of power on communities, it is essential to make sure the right people are involved in community processes. To do this successfully, it is important to identify the community power structures at work and name community participants accordingly. This general rule can apply to a community's decision-making, problem-solving, visioning or other action initiatives.

There are five general approaches to identifying community participants:

Positional

The positional approach focuses on identifying people in the community with titles—individuals who hold formal leadership positions. It identifies leaders across a variety of community fields and assumes that power lies within formal positions, with those people people who make decisions or allocate resources.

Decision-making

The decision-making approach traces a local decision and identifies power holders through their participation in that process. It has the ability to affect decisions linked with participation in local decision-making processes and helps to identify particularly active local power holders.

Reputational

The reputational approach is based on selecting veteran community residents to suggest community leaders according to their reputation for power. In this approach, an individual's reputation is seen as indicator as to how much they influence community decisions and their ability to possibly gain valuable resources. The strongest value of this approach is the ability to identify behind the scenes leaders (leaders without formal titles) as well as visible leaders.

Social Participation

The social participation/social activity approach centers around volunteers within a community, including leaders. It assumes that active participation in local groups leads to the power to impact community decisions. There are two different ways to identify leaders using this approach:

- Identify an influential civic organization in the community and compile a list of leaders within that organization.
- Identify individuals serving in multiple community agencies/organizations.

Growth Machine

The growth machine approach centers around identifying community members with "landed" interests. Primary examples include business owners, developers, real estate holders, and bankers as well as others with land, money, connections, and longevity in the area. Generally people with money have power and influence and should be consulted even if they have no vested interest in the community process.

At this point, we should mention there isn't one right way to identify community participants. In general, the appropriateness of each approach is determined by the power structure and the specific situation within the community. You may need to use more than one approach to make sure the identification process is thorough and complete.

Summary

As a community leader, it is important to understand the role that power plays within your community. While empowerment is the wave of the future, power still plays a large role in how we traditionally interact within communities. To successfully navigate the power structure of a community, it is important to understand what power is, how it is structured in your community, and how to choose an effective process for bringing the right people to the table in community processes.

References

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