

Keeping on Track: Strategies for Dealing with Controversial Public Policy

Leadership in the Public Arena

Part one of six



The leadership capacity of local government officials is critical to getting public policy adopted and to dealing with controversy. This publication identifies the foundation skills needed for effective public leadership, group decision making, and action. It discusses the basis of power and influence in the political arena and the interpersonal skill needed to bring about productive action.

What is Public Leadership?

Understanding public leadership begins with an understanding of one's self within a framework to guide the choice of style and tactics in getting things done. To understand public leadership, we begin by looking at two models of democratic leadership and four personal styles of leadership.

A traditional model of democratic leadership suggests a leader is chosen by peers or elected to serve as the chief authoritative figure within a group. The leader is empowered to direct the group toward the completion of some task or goal. In this model, the focus is on the task. Group members may be advisory, but the leader is responsible for the final decisions. Probably the closest local government model of this type of leadership is the "strong mayor" model.

A more contemporary model of leadership is group-centered leadership, where the dynamics of group functioning are often as important as the task. In this model, the leader both takes charge as well as inspires others on the board and in the community to action. It is not only *what* gets accomplished, but *how* it is done. This style of leadership may be more indicative of a rotating mayor council, where support for leadership initiatives largely depends on building support among a coalition of council members.

These leadership models are not mutually exclusive. A "strong" leader is often inspirational. The initial distinction, however, provides a first-cut in the formulation of strategies for getting things done.

About this Series

Public issues are matters of widespread concern in the community. They are resolved by group decision processes that create local public policy. We often assume the responsibility for resolving public issues is in the domain of government. But as society becomes more complex, and we acknowledge the limits of what government can achieve, we recognize the need for public and private interests to work together. Involving diverse interests in public issues, however, can often heighten local conflict and make the resolution of community issues more difficult.

Keeping on Track, a series of publications for local officials and community leaders, deals with managing controversial public policy. The issues vary, but all too often the problem is the same. Whether it's corporate farming, school bond issues, or new development proposals, communities often get bogged down in controversy, and nothing seems to get done. This series of publications presents strategies local leaders can use to navigate the minefield of controversial public policy so the community can resolve the issue and keep moving forward.

Styles of Leadership

An individual's preferred leadership style will affect his or her success in a leadership role. Most people instinctively gravitate toward a given style, although they may exhibit more than one style, depending on the circumstance. All styles have strengths and shortcomings. An effective leader will recognize when one or another style will be most effective in a given circumstance and have the capacity to assume qualities of the role. With



some reflection and practice, an individual can learn to assess the circumstances and exhibit different leadership styles as needed.

Supporting: Cooperative and idealistic, supporting leaders focus on principles and values. Their communication style is sincere and not critical. These people try to be dependable and accessible, but are at times easily influenced and judgmental. They may have a casual approach, but are usually successful in eliciting cooperation from others.

Controlling: Directive and urgent, controllers focus on action and results. They generally are task oriented and minimize small talk. A controlling leader strives to be confident and resourceful, but is sometimes impulsive and domineering. They may have a formal approach and are usually effective in organizing others.

Analyzing: Practical and logical, analyzers focus on facts and reason. Their communication style is unemotional and devoid of spontaneity. Striving to be orderly and thorough, they can be stubborn and critical. They are generally formal in approach, and usually think before acting.

Promoting: Flexible and enthusiastic, promoters focus on relationships and awareness. They communicate by being stimulating and sociable. Striving to be diplomatic and socially adept, they also may be indirect and temperamental. They may have a flamboyant approach, and usually promote win-win solutions.

Characteristics of Effective Public Leadership

Effective public leaders have a number of distinguishing characteristics. Among the most important is their attitude toward community change. Change is viewed as an opportunity to move forward rather than a challenge to be feared. In fact, effective public leaders are distinctly dissatisfied with the status quo. They are often willing to take risks to initiate improvements.

According to research related to business and organizations, effective leaders exhibit five qualities:

1. Leaders challenge the status quo by taking risks.
2. Leaders inspire a shared vision of common goals and promote a shared sense of possibility.
3. Leaders enable others to act, understanding different individuals' capabilities.
4. Leaders lead by example.

5. Leaders understand something about human nature, responding to emotional needs of individuals as well as task-orientation.

The **personal strengths** of a leader include:

- a strong sense of mission;
- enthusiasm for the task at hand;
- the ability to conceptualize an issue within the overall framework of the mission or mandate;
- communication skills, including the capacity to listen, to reframe an issue, and to be assertive.

The **skills** of an effective leader include:

- recognizing opportunity and knowing how to make the most of it;
- optimizing group effectiveness;
- understanding the basics of planning;
- the ability to effectively network;
- willingness to delegate;
- knowing how and when to challenge others;
- understanding the benefits of change and not hesitating to implement it when needed; and
- willingness to take risks.

Power and Politics

An overused word and vaguely understood concept, power can be about money, influence, sports, or business. It can be about tragedy or heroics. It is always central to politics. So, how is power defined and what does it mean for the local leader?

Power is commonly thought of as the ability to influence or inspire others and to delegate effectively. Power is not a moral issue. How it is used determines whether there are moral implications.

For a local government leader, power usually deals with facilitating decisions. Local officials have only as much power as the community will allow. Problems arise when what was assumed to be allowed is confused with what is wanted or expected.

For example, local government may be expected to address water quality concerns. When addressing them means passing tighter restrictions on septic tank installations, however, there may be an uproar. The community may want the schools to address a gang-related problem, but when the school board imposes new sanctions that include expulsion, the community may be dissatisfied.

It is one thing to have power; it is quite another to know how to use it well. There are three keys to using power effectively. You should:

1. Be aware of community standards and expectations, especially the unspoken ones.
2. Know the basis from which the power arises, both the tangible and intangible.
3. Make sure everyone involved is motivated toward completion of the goal.

Power is relational. Authority may be conferred by a title or degree, but it is the quality of the relationship a leader has with the community that determines actual authority.

How can local leaders legitimize their actual authority? Power in the public arena comes from many sources. From the standpoint of moving the community forward, forging consensus, and being effective in making policy, power is based on the individual capacity to lead.

The bases of power important for local public leadership are:

Positional power: based on the office a leader holds, such as director, mayor, or chair;

Expert power: based on the knowledge and expertise a leader has; usually refers to formal knowledge; experiential knowledge also counts;

Referent power: based on the leader's individual personality traits; creativity, efficiency, organizational capacity — may not be tangible but does get attention;

Information power: based on the leader's ability to glean and gather information important to an issue in a timely manner; may speak to a leader's connections; and

Connection power: based on a leader's ability to network and build coalitions.

Power exists both formally and informally within all groups. **Formal power** is what elections and appointments confer. It is known and obvious. **Informal power** is used by those not officially part of the system to influence those who are. Citizen lobbying is an example. There are hierarchies of power in every community. An effective leader must avoid being caught between active, involved citizens, and those whose money and education give them power behind the scenes. An effective leader learns to court both.

Effective Group Meetings

Local government and many community organizations do most of their work in group meetings. Whether the context is the formation of a new city commission, a joint city/county work group or some other community development organization, it is helpful to know something about group dynamics and what makes a meeting efficient and productive.

Group Development: Basic Member Needs

Every group consists of individuals who have personal needs that affect group interaction and the success of team building efforts. Failure to appreciate the individual can hamper the productivity of the group. The degree to which the following points about individual needs are relevant will vary in different group settings. Understanding what promotes personal satisfaction, however, can be an effective tool in promoting group success. Following are a few points to keep in mind.

1. A general feeling of belonging is vital. Even for groups that are created through election or appointment, the sense that one belongs to the group is essential.
2. A sense that the work of the group is worthwhile and productive is necessary. Involving all members in the selection of goals and priorities can help facilitate this feeling.
3. Involving everyone in setting the ground rules for deliberation and decision-making helps them feel more connected to the process and to one another. This can help establish mutual respect.
4. Clear expectations make a difference. Everyone should understand what the group is to accomplish and how it will go about doing business. Sometimes it is necessary to begin by establishing a consensus about the group's procedures.
5. Everyone should have a particular responsibility. It may be best to tie it to an area of personal expertise or interest.
6. Group members need to see progress toward their goals. Inertia, delays, and obstacles lead to group stagnation.
7. Confidence in the leadership is also an important part of keeping the group operating smoothly.

Group Development: Team Building

There are four elements essential to transforming a group into a team. A team is more effective in achieving common goals than a group of individuals.

1. There is meaningful interaction between all group members; important information is not restricted to coalitions within the group.
2. Everyone has a commitment to the purpose of the group.
3. Group members use personal expertise to further group goals and build common respect for one another's strengths.
4. Individuals identify with the group's overall identity and feel a part of it.

Group Development: Team Member Roles

A well-functioning group consists of interdependent members who rely on one another's knowledge, commitment, and dependability. The role expectations of each individual can lead to group cohesion and action. Each of the roles identified is a building block to team success:

1. In the **initiating** role, members encourage one another to get involved and think creatively. They help stimulate problem-solving ideas.
2. In the **listening** role, members encourage one another through active listening techniques. This aids in eliciting self expression and honest feedback.
3. In the **supporting** role, members respect one another's ideas and add to them with their own. This can lead to interactions where solutions emerge.

In a given instance of group interaction, people will fluctuate between these roles. The effective leader will recognize which role will be most effective in moving the group forward.

Group Development: Barriers to Organizing Effective Groups

When groups form or reform, some members may be initially hesitant to get involved. The leader can overcome this hesitancy and bring the group up to full capacity more quickly by delegating small tasks, conducting brainstorming sessions, asking different members to lead part of a discussion, and creating an atmosphere where active involvement is encouraged.

The leader should watch that the more experienced or assertive do not dominate discussions. It may be possible to pair an experienced person with a newcomer on certain tasks to both mute the assertive person while bringing the new person along.

A leader will ensure the goals and rules are clear to avoid ambiguity. The leader also may meet with members individually to discuss their involvement and troubleshoot any problems. It is also helpful to share information about other members early to communicate the type of expertise present.

It is often helpful for members to be introduced or to introduce themselves at the first meeting. Encourage participants to *briefly* outline their ideas, values and interests. Encourage questions to begin breaking down the barriers to involvement and facilitate group cohesion. While such get-acquainted activities may seem awkward or silly, they have their place in building a strong and effective group.

Group Development: Productivity

A key element to any group's success is its accomplishments. Large or small, formal or informal, task-oriented or social, accomplishments are the key to individual and group satisfaction. Productivity does not simply happen. It is the result of group dynamics working well. All the parts must be in place and working in synch. The essential dynamics of the group include:

- meaningful communication;
- mutually accepted goals;
- a supportive working atmosphere;
- active involvement by all;
- use of group decision making and conflict resolution; and
- roles within the group that are flexible as situations warrant.

Conclusion

A key element to the resolution of any public issue is the capacity of community leaders to function effectively either individually or within groups and organizations. A number of leadership characteristics and principles were offered that serve as the foundation to effective community action.

In addition to leadership capacity, other elements to resolving public controversies include employing effective communications skills and strategies and the ability to resolve conflicts and disputes. These topics are included in the other portions of this series.

This is one in a series of publications dealing with the issue of managing controversial public policy. The entire series includes:

- Leadership in the Public Arena
- Informing the Public Debate: Public Education Strategies
- Meaningful Input to Public Policy: Citizen Participation Strategies
- The Public Relations of Public Policy
- Successful Negotiating Skills
- Resolving Multiparty Disputes

Individually or together, these resources are intended to help local officials and others develop greater leadership capacity.

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