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Leadership Patterns in Nebraska Communities

By Jack Ruff

Introduction

In the summer of 1979, the Center for Applied Urban Research undertook a study of leadership patterns and styles in Nebraska communities with populations of 2,500 to 5,000. Although that study focused its primary efforts on developing linkages between training programs and community development, the data provide some useful information related to the leadership structure of these communities. These data, describing the individuals who comprise the leadership structure in the study communities, are the focus of this article.

The communities that constituted the base for this study are: Auburn, Aurora, Broken Bow, Central City, Cozad, Crete, Gothenburg, Kimball, Minden, O'Neill, Schuyler, Superior, Valentine, Wahoo, and West Point.*

Leadership Determination and Data Gathering

One problem that needed to be addressed was how to determine community leaders. The approach used was to contact the chief administrative officers in the cities and also within the chambers of commerce and ask them: “All things considered, who are the 10 most influential persons in your community in regard to community and economic development?” The lists from the chambers of commerce and the chief administrative officers in the cities were then compared. As Table 1 shows, five of the 15 study communities did not have two lists for comparison. However, of the ten communities having two lists, the number of leaders identified on both averaged 3.9 per community. Combining lists supplied by both the city and the chamber of commerce produced an average of 13 leaders per community. The public and private community and economic development leadership structures appeared to be comprised of substantially different people.

Of the 195 leaders identified, personal interviews were conducted with 114. Table 2 shows the distribution of those interviews.

Leadership Characteristics

As the researchers examined the informants' lists of community leaders and conducted personal interviews, one of the factors that became obvious was that few women were identified as being leaders in economic and community development. Indeed, only 11 of the 195 identified leaders were women.

The age distribution of those identified as community leaders was rather homogeneous. The median age was 51 years. Leadership age structures varied among communities with Central City having the youngest median age, 43.5 years, and Aurora having the oldest, 60.0 years. Table 3 shows that only two of the 114 leaders interviewed were under 30 and only five were over 70.

Community leaders in Nebraska communities with populations between 2,500 and 5,000 tended to be rather well educated. Table 4 shows that the “some college” category contained the largest number of residents. However, if the “completed college,” “graduate school,” and “professional degree” categories are combined, 44.7 percent of the leaders completed a higher education program.

Leadership Pattern

The principal questions guiding the presentation of these data are: 1) What is the occupation of the leader? 2) What ties does the leader have to the community? 3) What is the mix between institutional leaders, policy leaders, and social activists, and 4) What type of skills do these leaders feel contributed to their success as leaders?

Occupations and Community Ties

Owners and managers of business enterprises comprised the largest group of leaders. Financial managers were the next largest grouping with service professionals third. Table 5 compares occupation to educational attainment.

In an effort to determine the types and strengths of ties that leaders had to the community, the question was asked, “Position and family history are sometimes important in determining whether or not a person is recognized as a community leader. Would you tell me a little about yourself and your family? For example, how long have you lived here? Do you have other family ties here?
And what is your age? Responses to this probe were then grouped according to the proportion of life spent in the community.

Leadership Position

An important factor in the study of leadership was to determine the role that community leaders played in local decisions. By analyzing survey data on the positions that leaders held in the community and their involvement in community development issues, the researchers classified the respondents into four leadership roles or position categories. First were the institutional leaders. These persons were community leaders who held high positions in community organizations who were generally interested in the community and their involvement in community development issues. The second leadership classification group was the policy makers. These individuals held public office (i.e., mayor, councilman, or administrator) or were private citizens (i.e., developers, chamber managers) and were active in setting development policy goals for the community. Third were the social activists. Leadership was best obtained by working in an established organization or by being involved in community and economic development.

These leaders were generally private citizens who, by sheer commitment of time and energy, brought about or assisted the development of the community. Last were the institutional policy makers. This group was made up predominantly of private individuals who were heads of local organizations directly involved in development policies who held high status positions in the community and were active in setting development policy goals. Figure 1 shows the primary sources of legitimacy by leadership type. Of the community leaders surveyed 39 percent were classified as institutional policy makers, 17 percent as institutional leaders, 21 percent as policy makers, and 3 percent were in the social activist category. Table 7 presents a comparison of type of leadership with occupation.

Leadership Skills

The researchers were interested in gathering information concerning how a person acquires the skills necessary to become recognized as a community leader. The interviewees were asked: "Over the years, what events or activities have contributed most to the development of your leadership skills in regard to community development? For example, was it your education, work experience, organization, memberships, leadership training workshops, or simply trial and error or "hard knocks"?"

A related, more succinct, question was later asked. "What skills do you have that are most useful in your job as a community leader?" Responses were classified into three general categories: management skills, interpersonal communication skills, and technical skills. Among the management related skills, the most often mentioned were decisiveness, ability to make decisions, ability to do research and get facts, and willingness to stick with the task at hand. Interpersonal skills included such things as ability to get along with people, ability to develop contacts within the community, communication skills, and promotional ability. The most often mentioned technical skills were knowledge of city government operations, knowledge of banking and financial activities, and knowledge of the law. Since respondents were given an

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opportunity to identify as many skills as they thought important, a total of 187 responses was received from the 114 respondents. Of these responses, 40 percent could be classified as management skills, 39 percent fell into the category of skills related to working with people, and 21 percent were technical skills. Table 8 gives the results.

Involvement Patterns

In order to analyze the relationship between various leadership characteristics and the leaders' involvement in economic and community development, the following question was asked each respondent: "It is next to impossible for most people to be involved in all the different types of community and economic development activities. Will you please tell me in what areas you are particularly active?" The respondents were then given a list of nine closed categories and one open category to which they could respond. The largest number, 95, indicated that they were particularly active in industrial and economic development, but this is not surprising because the respondents had been selected for their community and economic development activities. Table 9 shows the areas of activity on the part of the community leaders.

Only 11 out of 195 identified community leaders were women.

When areas of activity were compared with the occupations of the various community leaders, a few differences could be observed. First, financial leaders tended to be primarily interested in industrial and economic development plus agricultural promotion. Local businessmen were also interested in industrial development; however, they were also interested in planning and zoning and in retail promotion. Government workers, on the other hand, were more interested in planning and zoning and in public improvements than they were in industrial and economic development. Table 10 gives the results.

The researchers also attempted to measure the perception of the amount of influence various leaders believed they had on certain types of activities. Each respondent was asked: "We would also like to know in which areas you feel you have influence on what is accomplished. I'm going to read ten types of activities that community leaders may become involved in; please tell me whether you feel you have a great deal of influence, only some, or none at all for each activity."

Examination of Table 11 shows that 62 percent of the financial managers believed they had great influence on industrial and economic development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Financial Managers (n=26)</th>
<th>Local Businessmen (n=55)</th>
<th>Government Employees (n=10)</th>
<th>Service Professionals (n=14)</th>
<th>Other (n=9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial and economic development</td>
<td>25 96.2</td>
<td>48 87.3</td>
<td>6 60.0</td>
<td>12 85.7</td>
<td>4 44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural promotion</td>
<td>24 92.3</td>
<td>31 56.4</td>
<td>3 30.0</td>
<td>3 21.4</td>
<td>5 55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and zoning</td>
<td>12 46.2</td>
<td>35 63.6</td>
<td>7 70.0</td>
<td>8 57.1</td>
<td>6 55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Improvements</td>
<td>17 65.4</td>
<td>32 58.2</td>
<td>7 70.0</td>
<td>7 50.0</td>
<td>9 77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>18 69.2</td>
<td>24 43.6</td>
<td>2 20.0</td>
<td>10 71.4</td>
<td>3 33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/arts and recreation/sports</td>
<td>19 73.1</td>
<td>31 56.4</td>
<td>7 70.0</td>
<td>9 64.3</td>
<td>9 55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>18 61.5</td>
<td>25 52.7</td>
<td>6 60.0</td>
<td>12 85.7</td>
<td>4 44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail promotion</td>
<td>12 46.2</td>
<td>33 60.0</td>
<td>3 30.0</td>
<td>2 14.3</td>
<td>5 55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism promotion</td>
<td>18 61.5</td>
<td>31 56.4</td>
<td>5 50.0</td>
<td>6 42.9</td>
<td>4 44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other 3/</td>
<td>1 3.8</td>
<td>3 5.5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3/ Other includes historical preservation and low income housing as well as traditional housing developments.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Management Skills</th>
<th>Working with People Skills</th>
<th>Technical Skills</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
<td>No. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial managers</td>
<td>16 34.8</td>
<td>13 28.3</td>
<td>17 37.0</td>
<td>46 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local businessmen</td>
<td>40 46.0</td>
<td>58 43.7</td>
<td>9 10.3</td>
<td>67 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government employees</td>
<td>7 36.8</td>
<td>6 31.6</td>
<td>6 31.6</td>
<td>19 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service professionals</td>
<td>6 28.6</td>
<td>9 42.9</td>
<td>6 28.6</td>
<td>21 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>1 33.3</td>
<td>2 66.7</td>
<td>0 -</td>
<td>3 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemakers</td>
<td>2 50.0</td>
<td>2 50.0</td>
<td>0 -</td>
<td>4 100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirees</td>
<td>3 42.9</td>
<td>3 42.9</td>
<td>1 14.3</td>
<td>7 100.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75 40.1</td>
<td>73 39.0</td>
<td>39 20.9</td>
<td>187 100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, 50 percent of the financial managers believed they had a great deal of influence on agricultural promotion. They seemed to feel much less influential in regard to retail promotion and tourism promotion. On the other hand, local businessmen felt they had the greatest amount of influence in a wide range of other public activities. They seemed to feel much less influential in regard to retail promotion and tourism development, they also felt influential in community development and assorted leadership roles. Correlations revealed no significant relationship.

Leadership Characteristics and Community Development

In the study communities, leadership characteristics and community development also seemed fairly open, and those leaders could be categorized as social activists. Thus, entrance into a leadership position apparently could best be attained either by working within the informal organization and becoming recognized as one of the leaders of that organization or by being involved in community development activities. Members of the leadership were composed of individuals required to make policy decisions on a more or less regular basis and having been heads of organizations or held other similar positions. The two that provided the largest number of leaders were business and financial. Although the identification of these groups as influential in a community’s economic development program was not surprising, the informal organization in both the private and public sectors could only agree on 27 percent of those identified as leaders. This suggests that leadership structure within these communities is rather pluralistic; that is, the business community, financial community, and other sectors might be more diversified than traditionally believed.

Owners of businesses comprised the largest group of leaders.

Leaders in the study communities also tended to be rather well educated and to have lived in the community most of their adult lives. About 40 percent of the leadership structure was composed of institutional policy leaders, i.e., those who were seen as leaders because they were heads of organizations or held other types of high status positions in the community. Thirty-seven percent of the leaders were classified as institutional leaders, i.e., from families whose background or experience provided them with the status and hard work, to do so.