

Article



Understanding the Importance of Leadership in Rural Communities

Owino Jonix
Mariah Bartholomay
Mitchell Calkins

ABSTRACT This research project attempts to provide a better understanding of how rural leaders emerge, the kinds of activities in which they are involved, and how they address the challenges they face. Rural communities tend to be at risk for public issues that may rise, which are central to the micro-levels of leadership roles and opportunities. Individuals who hold or have held leadership positions were interviewed, and a better understanding of the different stages throughout their leadership careers and the overall cycle of leadership within their rural Minnesota community was investigated. This study creates a preliminary model to be used for future research as well as for practical application.

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that leadership is a critical element for the success of collective action in terms of community and economic development (Luther and Wall, 1998; Bell and Evert, 1997; Flora and Flora, 1993). Efforts to improve a location's quality of life requires a commitment from a strong cadre of individuals working collectively (Israel and Beaulieu 1990) and bolstered by those in positions of authority (Baker and Teaser-Polk, 1998). Not all communities are endowed with people who are willing to step up into leadership roles (Sorensen and Epps, 1996). This is critical because leadership has been identified as an element for making collective action a success. This is especially true if the leadership is diverse, operates according to democratic principles,

and “places the welfare of the total community above the needs of any given special interest” (Israel and Beaulieu 1990:182).

The social structure and culture of a community may preclude the emergence of leaders. It is a research imperative, therefore, to determine what contextual factors are conducive to the practice of community leadership and what interventions may improve the social environment, all in the hope of creating more and better leaders. Existing research on this topic is slim, but it mostly has focused on the urban areas and less so on rural areas (Rich, 1980; Ward and Chant, 1987). To fill this gap, the purpose of this study will be to examine how rural leaders emerge, the kinds of activities in which they are involved, and how they address the challenges they face – in other words, their “leadership career.”

Given the contextual differences associated with the variation in population density, settlement patterns, and the attendant ways of life, we aim to expand the literature into a new direction. To do so, an exemplar rural community that possessed a strong core of committed and motivated leaders was chosen to serve as a case study. These individuals were interviewed in order to identify variables related to how rural leaders emerge, the kinds of activities in which they are involved, and how they address personal challenges. These individual accounts were used to develop a model which describes the stages each individual typically goes through as they become leaders and grow in their position. This model allows us to track the process whereby people enter and exit leadership roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of leadership studies is fundamentally multidisciplinary, where scholars from sociology to psychology to history to the humanities have argued not only what the core definition of leadership shall be, but also how it should be theorized in the various contexts in which it is practiced, what styles or forms of leadership are best in those situations, and what the effect leadership has on the performance of complex organizations (Kellerman 1984). Peter Northouse defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (201:5). Similarly, Joseph Rost has described leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (1993:99). This influence is multidirectional and not coercive, which distinguishes it from power. Even if the intended changes do not materialize, that does not mean leadership was not present. At times, the process of engaging in change efforts is as important as the final product. This is particularly the case in communities of place. Robinson and Green make the distinction between “community of interest,” defined as a group of people who have common interests but the ties are aspatial,

and “community of place,” defined as a group of residents who have common interests related to territory or place. In spite of the individualistic nature of modern society, many common interests and concerns still exist at the geographically local level (2011). Unfortunately, it is in this area that a dearth of research exists about how leadership is distributed and practiced. This stands in contrast to the relative abundance of research of leadership in formal organizations, such as businesses, government, and nonprofit settings.

The community context presents unique dynamics that affect the leader-follower relationship. Typically, communities do not possess the strict hierarchical chain of command found in businesses or bureaucracies. Since they are not endowed with the tools of management usually associated with the levels of hierarchical structures, community leaders must work in conjunction with fellow residents to advance communal goals. On the task-relational continuum first proposed by Stogdill (1974) – whereby on the task end the focus is on completing clearly delineated goals and producing outcomes while on the opposite end the focus is on fostering quality relationships among leaders and followers – leadership in the community context is relational (Pigg 1999).

Easterling describes the relations as civic leadership, which he defines as “. . . local residents stepping forward to solve community-level problems or to promote action that advances the community’s overall well-being” (2012:51). To work towards this ideal, leaders are tasked not only with motivating their followers, but also coordinating resources and activities towards reaching collectively agreed upon goals. Therefore, a definition for a community leader derived from Kenneth Wilkinson’s work on community field theory (1972) which postulates that a community is ultimately a manifestation of actions, coordinated by leaders and social interactions among individuals geared towards communal efforts is a person who is working towards the development *of* the community field, rather than development *in* the community field (Wilkinson, 1970). In other words, the community leaders have as their focus the advancement of collective interests rather than sectoral or parochial interests. The benefits of these actions accrue to those who may not have had a part, either directly or indirectly, in making it happen. Therefore, it can be said that community leadership is a transformative practice based in altruistic behaviors (Singh and Krishnan 2008).

However, leadership does not emerge naturally. Rather, it requires intentional promotion to develop leadership among a community’s members. Questions regarding the sources of new leaders (Shively 1997), whether or not they are up to the challenge (Chiras and Herman 1997), and if they are prepared for the immense task at hand (Murray and Dunn 1996) are especially relevant in light of the fact that rural America’s population is getting older. Demographic trends show the proportion of the population over the age of 65 will increase while the younger share will decrease. Concerns exist about who will step up and take the vitally important leadership roles that will be vacated by people as they age and retire from active public life. Additional concerns

unique to rural areas include economic restructuring that has led to loss in agriculture and manufacturing employment (Albrecht, Albrecht, and Albrecht 2002), leading to population loss and "brain drain" of individuals with high human capital (Carr and Kefalas 2009), as well as the lack of services or amenities considered vital to quality of life (Ricketts 2000). The decline in one sector of the community can potentially cause a spiraling-down phenomenon to occur. Leadership might be that element to arrest the decline in a community's quality of life (Emery and Flora 2006).

As far as the authors are aware, no study exists that succinctly examines the process by which people are exposed to leadership opportunities, how they are initiated into their new roles, and how they proceed throughout their leadership career until they choose to bow-out to let others take the reins. The term we will use to describe this entire process at the community-level is the *life cycle of community leadership*. Leader succession is an expected occurrence in a community, just like in a business or any type of organization. Unfortunately, planning for leadership succession is rarely conducted, so the process of succession is rarely smooth (Santora and Sarros 1995; Stavrou 2003; Hargreaves 2005). These factors can be conceived as variables for future research. A preliminary model is proposed which hypothesizes how new individuals enter into leadership roles, how they mature throughout the years, and how they bow-out of leadership roles. To our knowledge, no model exists currently to explain this phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were employed including the collection of documentary data (e.g., newspapers, Internet websites, etc.) and the use of face-to-face structured interviews. Qualitative methods were suited for this study because it allows for the identification of previously unknown processes (Pasick et al. 2009).

Both positional and reputational leaders in the community were targeted. Data collection proceeded in two phases. The first phase was to develop an initial list of community leaders. Brief interviews were conducted with six local officials, business owners, and residents known to the investigators. They were asked to list and provide contact information for individuals they believed were among the most notable community leaders.

The second phase of the project involved contacting those individuals who were named as the most notable community leaders through phone calls and/or emails to request and schedule interviews. Once initial contacts had been made, the interview process proceeded in a snowball manner where some of the leaders interviewed suggested other eligible leaders in the community. Fourteen leaders were interviewed in the course of the study.

Of the 14 leaders interviewed, the primary, current leadership roles were elected officials (N=4) and or organizational leaders (N=12). There were 5 female leaders and 9 male leaders (see Table 1).

Table 1. Description of Interviewees.		
	Number	Percent
Elected Official	4	28.57
Organizational Leader	10	71.43
Total	14	100
Gender		
Female	5	35.71
Male	9	64.29
Total	14	100
Length of stay in D.L		
5 years or less	1	7.14
5years and above	13	92.86
Total	14	100
Approximate Age range		
Less than 40	1	7.14
40-59	12	85.52
60 or more	1	7.14
Total	14	100

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were audio recorded and field notes were taken during the interviewing sessions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed qualitatively. The research study employed both open and axial coding. Open coding is about labeling and categorizing phenomena, and it is where codes are identified without any restrictions and purpose other than to discover the pieces of meaning (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In open coding, different categories were developed by going through the verbatim interview transcripts and breaking down the available data and information into several discrete parts. Axial coding occurs when there is a strong focus on discovering codes around a single category and about links and relationships, whereas open coding is about identification and naming (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Using the theoretical tools explored in the literature section, the study initiated its analysis for themes around styles, behavior, motivation, mentoring, understanding oneself as a leader, the need to balance commitments, challenges and solutions faced by the leaders. These guided the analysis of the data as patterns and emergent themes that rose up in conversation topics, vocabulary, and in recurring activities were noted.

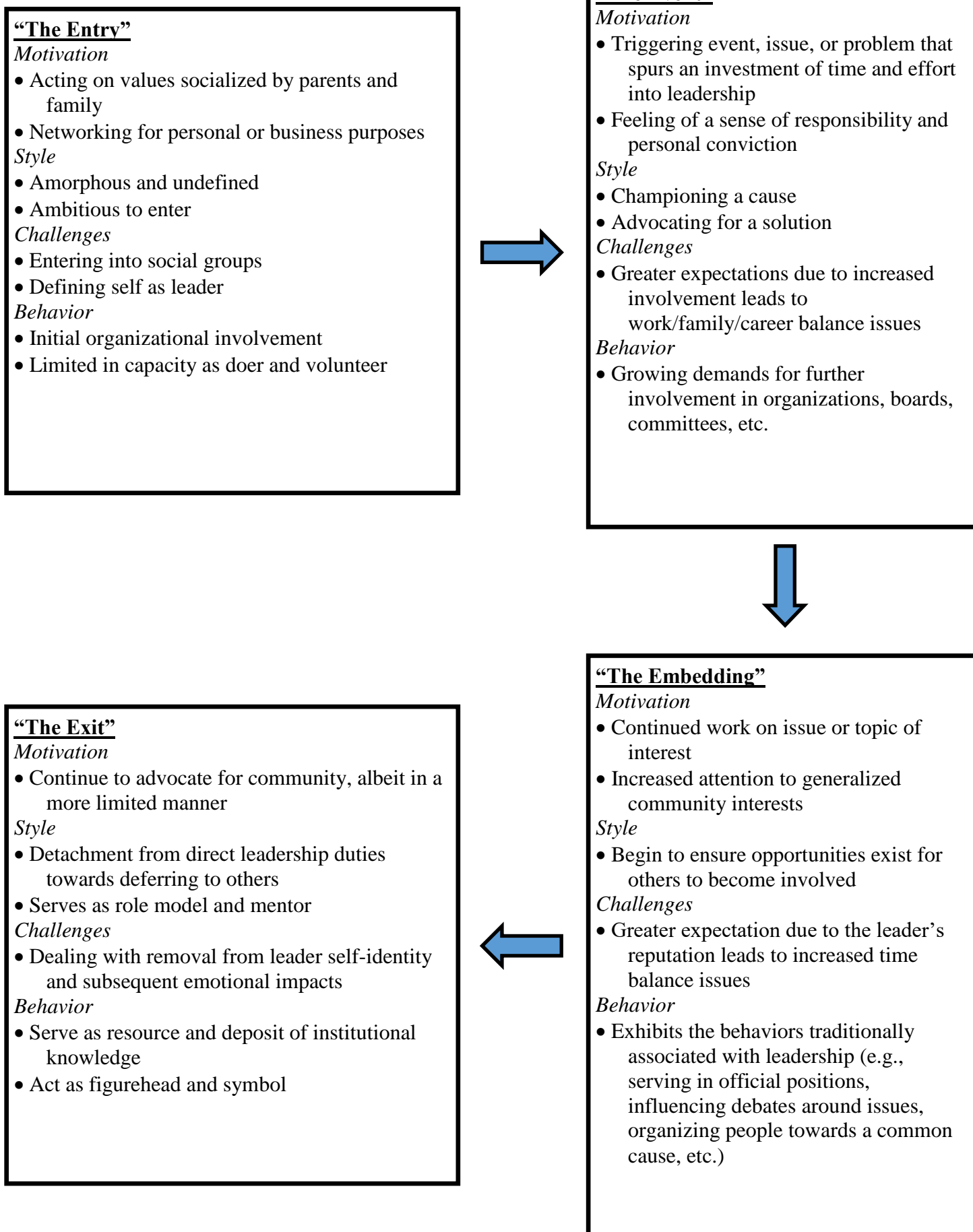
FINDINGS

Through the interviews of community leaders, several themes consistently appeared that had some variation throughout their leadership career. The four emergent themes identified are the style of leadership adopted, motivations, challenges faced, and the behaviors associated with the practice of leadership. These four change over time as a leader progresses in his or her position. Figure 1 illustrates these themes across time divided into four stages: The Entry, The Event, The Embedding, and The Exit.

These stages refer to time spent in leadership positions and does not necessarily correspond to a leader's actual age. For example, several interviewees engaged in leadership at an early age, although several did not until mid-life or later. These stages should not be construed as constituting firm boundaries, whereby it is possible to know when exactly a leader has entered into a new stage. Rather, it serves as a device to understand the growth and development of individuals in their leadership ability over time.

The Entry, the first stage, consists of the person's already existing qualities as well as the initial decision to get involved in some organized collective activity. A civic-orientated mindset is the result of socialization, primarily by the family. The first instance of acting on this mindset can be found during childhood thus providing the groundwork and preparation for future activities and, eventually, leadership. In adulthood, however, the desire to become involved in the community's public affairs often has a different

Figure 1



motivation underlying it, including the desire to network for personal reasons (e.g., make friends) or for business purposes (e.g., network with potential clients). This stage prepares the individual and is, in a sense, a period of training for the individual to become a leader. Thus far, the individual is not as fully committed as he or she will be later on.

The second stage – The Event – encompasses the period whereby the individual “jumps in” fully into a leadership role, whether designated by a formal title or not. This can be spurred by a triggering event or problem that demands action by the community and the fulfilling of responsibility or conviction. For example, a controversial land use development proposal is often a triggering event for many to engage in community organizing for the first time and to assume a leadership role on one side of the issue. This event is relatively sudden, although communal issues can persist for a long time, thus requiring a consistent response. The Event, in this case for the individual leader, may be their election to a position within an organization or some other form of decision to become deeply involved in some matter.

In the third stage – The Embedding – the individual develops into a more capable and experienced leader and transitions away from specific issues towards a more generalized, broad base of community-related concerns. However, this is the stage whereby the leader is most effective in helping the community reach goals. The individual’s reputation as someone who is able to organize and lead projects allows for them to pursue roles of greater distinction, including that of elected office. Recognizing the limits on one’s ability to engage in many issues at the same time, the leader at this stage is comfortable and confident enough to delegate and to help develop leadership capabilities among his or her followers.

The fourth stage – The Exit – is the time when the leader is unable to continue serving the community to the same extent as before. This may relate to one’s age, whereby the status of their physical health, for example, prevents them from being involved in multiple projects simultaneously. They continue to serve and advocate, although on a more limited basis or in a more indirect manner. Their detachment from formal roles creates opportunities for others to step-up, although the leader can still serve as a role model for the community. This can include being a figurehead or repository of knowledge into which others can tap. Numerous challenges are present at this stage, including the emotional impacts resulting from the loss of one’s self-identity of an active, involved community leader.

In the aforementioned stages, there are consistent themes that are found in each that fundamentally describe the leadership career: motivations, style, challenges, and behaviors. In this study, motivation is the person’s drive towards getting involved and continuing in leadership. Style is how the leader carries out his or her leadership roles. Challenges refer to the problems that leaders will have to deal with throughout their leadership career. Behavior refers to the manner in which leaders conduct themselves in

the different stages. The four themes are described in more detail in the following section.

THEME 1: MOTIVATIONS

It is axiomatic to state that an individual's transition from not being involved in a community leadership role towards being involved does not happen automatically. Instead, an impetus needs to occur in order for an individual to seek out leadership opportunities, particularly in established community organizations. Respondent-stated motivations for initially taking on leadership roles or behaviors and the motivation towards continuing such actions over time can be categorized into three themes: a desire to network for business purposes, a response to a specific problem that they felt needed to be addressed, and a desire to generally help the community improve its quality of life. At times, respondents reported possessing a mixture of these three motivations with no clear delineation among them. Additionally, motivations change over time. The reasons for engaging in community service are in flux, a necessity in order to prevent leader exhaustion. The implication of matching an individual's motivation with community needs is a necessity if bringing in new cohorts of leadership is to be accomplished.

Spending time to get involved in community affairs for networking purposes was mentioned by several respondents who had recently moved into the community and were wanting to get their name known among influential individuals. They recognized the worth of devoting time to this task even if the payback for themselves was not readily apparent. While some said it may sound selfish, they acknowledged it is standard practice among professionals:

. . . [O]ne of the major things is to develop your own business and grow your practice and get clients of your own and to generate business on your own. And really the only way to do that is through contacts and meeting people and doing that sort of thing. . . . The first thing I needed to do was meet people here and needed to do that in order to get my name out there and meet people. So, I don't think it started for me, a desire to be in leadership or be a leader or necessarily be active in the community. It was a self-serving interest in order to meet people and grow my business.

Another respondent said on the topic of motivation to get involved:

I've started a business and to start a business you got to get active in the community. So it was truly for business reasons. So I was an owner and of course joined the Chamber, but then through the Chamber I was on the retail committee and then the community development committee. . . . I'm going to be really

honest. I was cognizant of my resume and networking. I'm a business person so that people are aware of me and then maybe people will come to me [for service]. So, it was pretty fundamental.

Networking need not be for strictly business development. Some respondents wanted to get involved in order to develop social circles, particularly if they were new to the community.

When I moved into [town], I did not know anyone. It's one of the first times I came to a community where I didn't have a big network of people. . . . Obviously to get integrated is to become part of these organizations and other kinds of things.

The desire to develop friendships and otherwise integrate oneself into social circles, particularly those containing the influential members of the community, was a powerful motivator for some respondents. Another prominent motivation to engage in leadership was to respond to specific issues that people felt needed to be addressed. A problem facing the community was not being solved in the manner agreeable to the respondent, who was willing to take a side and stand up to advocate for that side. This reflects a certain ethic, as evidenced by one respondent:

I live on the lake there and there was something going on and I went and spoke to the city council. My philosophy has been if you are not happy with something, then you need to get involved and fix it yourself. So, after that I said I was going to run, so I ran. I guess that is kind of my philosophy I go by. I'm not saying it is a great philosophy, but if you don't like the way things are going, you can't just complain about it. You need to do something about it. You either come up with another idea or say: "This is what we should do, how we should do it." Get involved and influence change. That is true whether you are in the city government, whether it is in your class, whether it is in business, whether it is in any volunteer organization. You can only do things if you are involved or you can just sit on the sidelines and accept what is happening.

This observation is related to the literature on how communities respond to threats, perceived or real, to the places they have significant attachment to. The level of place attachment in a community is related to the actions community members and their leaders take in order to protect their environment from change (Devine-Wright, 2009). Organizing to protect cherished places takes leaders who are willing to devote the time, effort, and resources. Specific issues, therefore, can spur individuals into taking a leadership role that extends beyond the conclusion of that issue.

The final motivation that was identified from the interviews was a commitment to community that was based in one's personal ethics and sense of duty. Knowing full well that they, as individuals, probably won't receive direct benefits, they nonetheless devote themselves to generalized interests. Whether or not this is altruism is debatable, due to the contention among some scholars whether or not altruism truly exists. However, several interviewees noted their ethical position that drives their participation in community affairs:

It's probably just part of who I am. What is my motivation, my goal? I hope I can help people become the best of who they are meant to be, whatever that means. If I can help get someone on their feet in a tangible way and not hinder that and to start helping them own their choices in life and move ahead, then I try to do it. I try to find a way to help them.

The desire to improve the community signifies a level of place attachment that was mentioned several times throughout the interviews. While it is a subjective interpretation, many respondents commended the amount of engagement that residents gave towards communal issues. Several times it was mentioned that the town had more involvement as well as more and better leadership than surrounding communities. If true, then a critical examination of the motivations that parlayed into the practice of leadership can be useful to determine how to develop a sense of community pride and attachment in those other communities. Motivation to engage in leadership comes from multiple sources. Tailoring development efforts towards the cultivation of these sources, therefore, should be a prominent goal.

THEME 2: LEADERSHIP STYLE

The results on community leadership saw various leadership styles exercised in the community. The topic on leadership style was one that was difficult to respond to and it got most of the leaders scratching their head.

It would be interesting to see what mine is. I remember reading about all the different styles, but I haven't thought of it in terms of myself.

Various definitions, however, did emerge from the community leaders as they explained their perception, beliefs, and understanding of leadership and style. There was a wide array of styles from being assertive to more passive approaches.

I would consider myself as not a micromanager. I feel like I use a lot of sports analogies, that the policies just set up the playing field for us. So, if I've gotten an officer who wants to pass to the left, as long as he is within the boundaries, I'm am

going to let him pass to the left. And if I've got another officer who wants to run it up every time, if he wants to run it up the gut, as long as he is within the boundaries, I'm going to let them explore their styles. I'm going to encourage others' styles.

I am a fairly aggressive leader, am not going to lie. If you ask people they will probably tell you that.

When asked to describe their leadership style or approach, it was clear that a number of factors had played a role in shaping the leadership approach of the rural leaders.

Well, there is a book called *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*. . . . It [says] look after the people that work for you and be clear in terms of what your goals and motivations are, and if you are going to put people at risk you've got to have their back. If you're going to rely on them, they need to have your back. It's kind of mutual success and mutual destruction if you fail to achieve your goal.

Some of the leaders were a bit hesitant to refer to themselves as leaders as they described their style. They felt honored that members of the community considered them leaders.

I don't consider myself a leader, per se. But how I end up in leadership roles is because if I see something that needs to be done, I don't wait for discussion, decision, da, da, da. . . . So, I'm a little bit more of a "mover and shaker" for that reason, not to add any hubris to this situation.

So my way of leadership - I don't know if I want to call it leadership, is more in the sense of analyzing cause I get that from my business - accounting. So, I look at details. I analyze something and so I say is there another way to do it. It's amazing to find out that people always find one way of doing something yet there can be three or four different ways to do things.

It became evident through the various responses that Trait Theory at play in defining leadership style. Trait Theory, also known as the Great Man Theory, focuses on identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political, and military leaders. Personality traits played a role in defining the leadership styles in the rural community.

I'm an introvert and not an extrovert. So, I'm intrigued by people's personalities and their station in life, their experiences, and how that forms what their thought

processes are. And I'm okay with saying 'have we thought about this?' So for instance, If I am on a church council and in a church we do things the same way for hundreds of years and it is always the same, I am not afraid to say what the next generation will really want in the church. Let's look forward. So [I] am a future thinker.

I am maybe more of a cheerleader. Ever since we've been here, I have done a fair amount of running so I'm one of the fitness cheerleaders around here trying to get people excited about certain activities and local good-natured contests.

In exploring the cycle of leaders in rural community leadership, the leaders attested that they have maintained their leadership style over time. As mentioned earlier, the leaders explained their leadership styles in terms of personality traits, and these traits that distinguish leaders from non-leaders are likely to be maintained.

When you ask has my style changed, I have to say it hasn't. I have always been . . . if something needs to be done I will stand up and do it.

Besides the Trait Theory approach, it was evident that a situational approach that focuses on leadership situations is experienced in rural community leadership. The premise of a situational approach is that different kinds of leadership demand different kinds of leadership, and being an effective leader requires an individual to adapt their style to different situations.

I think I'm pretty inclusive. I'm very much a yes till it doesn't make sense kind of a person. You know what I mean by that? Like let's pursue this idea until oh, oops, ha that was a bad idea. Or sometimes it does work well and whoosh! Well then we're off and running and that was a good idea . . . I am also not above getting my hands dirty.

The leaders demonstrated the importance of empowerment as an approach to their leadership styles. This was demonstrated in their acknowledgment of the importance of teams as well as engaging members as activities are coordinated towards accomplishing set goals.

A lot of my leadership style has always been team building, rather than me being out in the front . . . it's always been that from the start, I haven't had any problems with being a leader of a team. . . . when am leading or trying to work with people, I try to establish it as a team and not me leading, I like to give credit to others.

I want to include everyone in the room, like when I have these big meetings with big groups of people, I want to make sure everyone is engaged, and I recognize that some people are more outgoing than others and some people have lots of ideas but they don't say a word. But I always hope that they get to share their ideas because it's probably some great nugget that would make a difference in a project.

THEME 3: CHALLENGES

The research study on rural community leadership brought about specific challenges with balancing multiple roles or "wearing multiple hats." Many community leaders who were interviewed discussed the many roles that they were working to fulfill simultaneously, sometimes with some difficulties.

First and foremost, I'm a wife and a mom. I mean those are my two most important roles by far. Have you heard the analogy of the rocks in a pot of water? Well, you put the big rocks in first; you have to decide what the big rocks are in your life. For me, it would be my husband, my kids, my family, my job, my health. Those are maybe the big things, and they have to fit in the pot first. And then there are little pebbles that go in last, the things that aren't as super important. I can't have too many big rocks, or you know, big jobs to take on, or it's going to start to overflow.

You surrender to the fact that there will be sacrifices. The biggest concern is that either my family suffers or my work suffers as far as leadership and time committed to volunteering. I'm not saying my kids cry themselves to sleep at night, but yet these are things that take my time from home.

Taking on so much has affected my work in the sense that I have had to spend nights in the office. I went to a three-hour council meeting and then I had to make up for the three hours at the office. So, there is no question; it has affected my work load.

Some community leaders discussed challenges of leadership in a more positive light. A few leaders discussed the ways in which they could incorporate their multiple identity roles into one situation, such as having family members bond over a volunteering project or a specific organization in which they are leaders or involved.

My kids have always been involved in the church, but it's been by choice. We have always told them that it's their own decision of how involved they want to get with the church. Worship wasn't an option, that's something we do as a family, but they would do different things to be involved here. It was pretty great

back then though. This picture says, "Thanks for the opportunity," and it was when my son realized he wanted to get into music. I let him play with the soundboards and run them for church a couple of times. He's now a band director and loves his job so that was probably a springboard that helped him find his passion.

I made a decision when the kids were young to volunteer in what the kids were involved in. I was volunteering at baseball so I could coach my son and my daughter was in Girl Scouts so my wife was a leader of the Girl Scouts. So, trying to include family and volunteering or getting involved in things that you can include family is one way to go about it.

One community leader talked extensively of the challenges he faces with different organizations and the roles he fulfills within them.

For instance, I am on the board of the golf course here in town, and I've been pretty active on the board at the curling club. I like to golf and I like to curl so I'm interested on those boards and have a real interest in improving the facility, increasing membership, and doing that sort of stuff. On the other hand, there are boards that I have served on that I just do because it is good for the community. I'm just not as passionate about this, not because they are worthy as organizations but it's hard for me to get real invested and to dedicate time and effort into those things that don't necessarily impact me as directly as some of my hobbies, I guess.

Other roles? Oh my goodness! Family and, of course, friends, you know, I think I certainly have a role in my circle of friends and church. I have lots of contact with church, and I sing in an adult choir there. I think [I] am recognized in church as person they can contact to do something if it needs to be done or to speak about an issue. I am recognized for that.

Many of the community leaders discussed the importance of having to juggle an extensive schedule. Discussion of challenges and balance between roles often involved knowing when to say no. It seemed unanimous that the leaders found it important to realize when they had enough tasks and roles to take on so to refrain from becoming vastly overwhelmed.

[I have] a really big calendar! (laughs) It's important to have willingness to say no. Strong leaders know when to say no. I am learning to choose where time is best spent and what I'm actually committing to before I take on another role.

No, it's really tough. [My wife and I are] kind of 'yes' people and we want to help so many people, but it feels wrong when you can't volunteer for everybody. You can volunteer for lots of different things but you can't really hold a leadership position in a lot of them because if you're just trying to keep on top of everything, you won't do well in anything.

The challenges that rural community leaders face, and the "multiple hats" that they wear, were mentioned several times throughout the interviews. Many of the community leaders discussed the importance of being able to have a balance between their many roles, which included being a parent and maintaining contact with other family, having and successfully upholding a full-time job, and oftentimes volunteering for multiple organizations.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how rural leaders emerge, the kinds of activities in which they are involved, and how they address the challenges they face. Rural communities tend to be at risk for public issues that may rise, which are central to the micro-levels of leadership roles and opportunities. Individuals who hold or have held leadership positions were interviewed. It was through these interviews that we gained a better understanding of the different stages throughout their leadership career and the overall cycle of leadership within their rural Minnesota community.

The aim of this study was to create a preliminary model to be used for future research as well as for practical application. For the former, questionnaires can be created and administered to multiple communities to capture the themes we have identified through this study. It can be hypothesized that variations among communities can exist regarding types of leadership styles, ways to work through challenges, ways to balance time and other commitments, and levels of motivation and their sources. At this point, we are unable to definitively state what conditions, applicable across all community contexts, are ideal for the process of initiating new leaders, developing early-career leaders in their skills and abilities, and the transition out of late-career leaders to open up opportunities for succession. However, we have identified relevant variables that can be utilized in future research. The impetus for engaging in community leadership needs to be examined. Multiple sources can coexist and are derived from specific social and environmental conditions. For example, in this community some respondents said that because of the rural nature of the community, people need to step up to take leadership roles. This need may not exist in the same manner in more

urban communities. An attachment to place doesn't exist at the same level across locations. Respondents noted a high attachment to place that formed a core motivation for taking on leadership duties. Leadership development programs should tailor their approach in those communities where attachment is lacking.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH.

Limitations for this study include the duration of time allotted for the research, the number of participants, and the lack of racial, economic, and cultural diversity which means that the findings are not necessarily generalizable across time and space. The data was collected over a period of two to three months. With more time, our team would have conducted more interviews and spread them out over a duration of time in order to better transcribe and code the new findings throughout the process. Future research should include an increased number of participants. It should also include a more racially and culturally diverse sample of leaders to further expand knowledge of rural community leaders.

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