

Leading By Stepping Back

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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'what are you doing for others?'" As humans we instinctually want to help people. We do it every day... give a friend a lift to the airport, watch a neighbor's pet while they are on vacation, or volunteer for a local cause. We don't do these things for money, we do these things because we know it will make us feel good, and it will strengthen our friendships. Then why is it so much harder to get people to help society on a larger scale and strengthen a community through projects?

Community leaders across the country are often discouraged about the community projects they lead saying, "I have to do all the work by myself". These leaders often take on the majority of the responsibilities and drive to see the endeavor finished. No one should feel that they have to shoulder the burden alone when it comes to community activism, but sadly that is how things get done in most communities. You do it, or it doesn't get done. Fortunately, there is a trend that allows community leaders to flourish, let other community members lead, and not have the project get stifled in the muck and mire.

A growing number of community leaders have found *leading by stepping back* to be more engaging, impacting, and sustainable for a community. Many potentially effective community projects never get off the ground because the people in the communities and neighborhoods feel isolated from leadership and access to information. The very same leaders who say they have to

do it all by themselves are shooting themselves in the foot by simply not reaching out to the people who make up the neighborhood around them they are trying to help.

Leading by stepping back focuses on community leaders stepping back, while empowering those around them to sustain success. To accomplish this, community leaders have to embrace the talents of others, be willing to delegate, and provide the room for others to grow and develop.

Each person has talents. A good leader is willing to take the time necessary to discover those talents. This should be an intentional effort to engage your neighbors. Discovering the talents of others provides an opportunity for neighbors and community stakeholders to connect with each other and build strong relationships. Also, it changes the focus from the deficits to the positive resources available within.

Further, discovering the talents of others can lead to delegating roles and responsibilities. Delegating provides an opportunity to enhance the capacity of others and decrease apathy in engagement. Involving others to share responsibility increases the chances of success and sustainability.

Communities thrive when those within the community are provided the chance to build their capacity with the support of the community. As a leader, you want to support projects and initiatives of the collective group. This will involve listening to the motivations, goals, and agenda of the individuals and the collective group. This will result in the responsibilities and success being a shared effort.

As institutions and organizations continue to have limited resources to engage communities, it is important for community leaders to recognize and rely on the talents within the community. When we engage our neighbors and allow full utilization of their talents, we can truly lead by stepping back.

This post was co-authored by Kevin Smith and his colleague at the City of Raleigh, Dan Bagley.