

Leadership and Rural Communities

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of leadership in rural communities. It explores the need to focus on developing leaders and the critical nature of leadership styles in improving services to rural people in rural communities. Furthermore, the authors present research findings, identify selective rural theories and propose a leadership model that supports effective social work practice in rural areas.

Introduction

The challenges in rural communities are increasing in frequency, complexity, and intensity, requiring the need for effective rural leadership that is practical and capable of addressing multifaceted issues. The quest for effective leadership in rural areas is arguably the greatest challenge facing rural communities. Numerous studies have been conducted on communities and their effectiveness. Primarily, the literature focuses on improving the lives of people, neighborhoods, and communities in urban areas. There exists a paucity of research on leadership models for rural communities. Some of the literature speaks to leadership, the commitment of people, and the way they feel about their communities as central to the effectiveness of communities in achieving their goals and outcomes (Martinez-Brawley, 2000). Conversely, it has been suggested that leadership is very significant in moving communities in the right direction. The literature also suggests that leadership and the way people feel about their communities are related to the overall success of rural communities (Ginsberg, 2011).

This article will discuss the importance of leadership in rural communities. The authors will explore the need to focus on developing leaders and the critical nature of leadership styles in improving services to rural people in rural communities. Furthermore, the authors will present research findings, identify selective rural theories and propose a leadership model that supports effective social work practice in rural areas. To address the array of issues facing rural communities, rural social work educators, practitioners and others professionals must give attention to a leadership model that is compatible with rural lifestyles. Families living in rural communities experience a way of life uniquely different to the lives of families in urban communities. In rural communities for example, there exists a sense of closeness, a connection to land and nature, an intimacy among community residents, orientation toward self-sufficiency, an ability to develop natural helping networks, and an abundance of personal space (Scales, Streeter, Cooper, 2013) often not found in urban communities. Consequently, an appropriate leadership model for rural communities must consider these factors in order to be effective in bringing about change.

Rural Theory and Rural Leadership

Three concepts helpful in understanding and advancing knowledge of rural theories and rural leadership are Gemeinschaft, Social Exchange Theory, and the Strengths Perspective. These concepts create an interesting framework for understanding rural communities. In Gemeinschaft communities, human relationships are intimate and based on a clear understanding of where a person stands in society. People also feel a sense of community. Based on close ties of family and friendship, people know each other, help each other, and frequently live their lives in close interaction with a small group of people with similar norms and values (Daley & Avant, 2013; Daley & Avant, 2004; Martinez-Brawley, 2000).

The Social Exchange Theory is a relationship maintenance theory which examines how people arrive at their decisions in relationships. It is based on a central premise that the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction. It deals with both the ties that bind people together and the effects of interactions between people (Collins, 1988). In rural communities, relationships are paramount to accessing resources and meeting basic needs. As researchers have suggested, there exists a limitation on the type and quantity of resources available in rural areas (Daley & Avant, 1999; Mackie, 2012). Consequently, relationships in rural communities are beneficial for sharing resources and accessing services connecting people to family, groups, organizations and communities both within and outside the rural area.

The idea of using social relationships and exchanges as a central principle for effective leadership in rural social work emphasizes the importance of the strengths perspective. The degree of deficits existing in rural communities is due to the nature of their geographical location and access to formal resources (Daley & Pierce, 2011). The strengths of social relationships, the cohesion of rural communities, and the exchanges that occur create opportunities to improving the quality of life in rural communities (Daley & Pierce, 2011). By using social relationships and exchanges, rural individuals develop an increased understanding of their roles in the community and environment (Avant, 2013). This understanding, along with and shared experiences increase their commitment to building a better community. Gemeinschaft, Social Exchange Theory and the Strengths Perspective combined present an organizing framework for rural leadership where individuals in rural areas are able to recognize their own capacities and identify with their environments (Daley & Avant, 2004).

Traditional and Contemporary Leadership Models

The literature on rural leadership is filled with descriptions of the challenging nature of rural areas. Of the challenges indicated, leadership necessary to assist rural areas in expanding their traditional boundaries appears to be the most imperative. As society becomes more complex, rural areas become equally complex, placing a greater demand on the individuals who lead them. But what is leadership? Do leaders have special personalities and/or physical traits? Is a leader an individual who closely monitors the performance of others? Are leaders individuals who articulate a vision and inspire other members in the organization to believe in that vision? Do leaders tell people what to do, tell them when to do it, and punish them if things are not done as prescribed? Do leaders have a specific set of behaviors that they perform in the course of their interactions with others? Or, are leaders individuals who can cultivate a special type of relationship with people, making each individual feel unique?

In pursuit of an answer to these questions and to establish a clear definition of leadership, theorists, researchers, and practitioners have spent over a century researching and analyzing various theories on the subject of leadership. In the vast body of literature accumulated over the past century, definitions and meanings of leadership are numerous and conflicting. For example in an earlier work, Burns (1978) indicated that there were 130 definitions of leadership. Furthermore, Bennis and Namus (1985) discovered over 350 definitions of leadership over three decades. Leadership has also been defined from a behavioral and interpersonal perspective. For example, Avolio (1999) defined leadership as the quality of the behavior of individuals whereby they guide people or their activities in an organized effort. Despite the multiple definitions of leadership, the following components can be identified as central to the phenomenon of leadership: (a) leadership is a process; (b) leadership involves influence; (c) leadership occurs within a group context; and (d) leadership involves goal attainment.

Based on these components, leadership can best be defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Skidmore, 1990). Defining leadership as a process means that it is not treated as a trait or characteristic residing in the leader alone, but as a transactional event that occurs between the leader and his or her followers. It is a process which implies that a leader affects and is also affected by employees. It emphasizes that leadership is not a linear, one-way event, but rather an interactive event. However, it is important to note that it is the leader who often initiates the relationship, creates the communication linkages, and carries the burden for maintaining the relationship. Defining leadership as a process also emphasizes the significance of relationships, which are very important in rural areas. The type of leadership effective in rural areas must value relationships, individual differences and the important characteristics of rural communities (Avant, 2006). Therefore, to be an effective leader in rural areas, a special type of leadership style should be present in the leader. Leadership style may be defined as a pattern of specific behaviors or attitudes that a leader places on different leadership functions (Casimir, 2001). Although leadership is viewed as the process, leadership style is the glue that holds the process together.

Approaches to studying leadership have resulted in a focus on leadership styles prevalent in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century. The literature reveals a number of schools of thought about leadership styles. It suggests that leadership styles have developed through at least four main generations of theories: trait theories, behavioral theories, situational theories and transformational theories. The literature also points out that the four theories are not mutually exclusive or time bound. In other words, although it is true that the progression of thinking tends to follow a sequential path, it is very evident in the literature that elements of the four generations of leadership theories have experienced cross-fertilization (Bass, 1998; Yukl, 2006).

The first of the four generations of theories are the trait theories, where a universal set of effectiveness characteristics is identified. Some of the earliest studies of leadership in the United States are based on the assumption that good leadership is synonymous with the possession of certain traits (Stogdill, 1948). Specifically, some of the traits included such widely diverse attributes as social characteristics, intelligence, and even physical appearance. Other traits highlighted were the ability to supervise, initiative, self-assurance, and individualized approaches to work (Ghiselli, 1963). The first half of the 20th century was dominated by research that examined leader traits. In the early 1970's, there was a noted shift from defining leadership traits to an approach that related those traits to leader effectiveness, reflecting the shift from trait research to behavioral research that was in process.

The second are the behavioral theories, where a universal leadership style was identified. Behavioral theories began to have a major influence on leadership studies during the 1950s and 1960s. The Ohio State University Leadership Studies that began in 1945 are considered to be the origin of the behavioral approach. Those studies established two of the most well known approaches to understanding leadership style. For example, the studies resulted in the leader behaviors being charted on two dimensions: initiating structure, wherein the leader acted to further the work objectives of the group, and consideration, in which the action focused on interpersonal relations and the needs of the workers. Leaders high on the initiating structure concentrated on employees' tasks and procedures. They devoted more effort to scheduling work, devising work activities, and communicating information about the work. Leaders high on consideration structure focused more on understanding their employees and building productive working relationships. Behavioral theories implied, at least theoretically, that training and education in leadership could create more effective leaders (Avant, 2006; Likert, 1967; Yukl, 1998).

At the same time as the Ohio State University's studies, Bales (1950) and his associates concluded from their studies that two categories of leadership behavior were primary: task-oriented and socio-emotional. Leadership studies at the University of Michigan also identified these two dimensions, calling them job-centered and employee-centered (Likert, 1967). Other terms for these two dimensions include task behavior and relationship (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) and concern for production and concern for people (Blake & Mouton, 1964). Several researchers saw these dimensions as opposite ends of the same pole. A leader that was high on one dimension was not necessarily low on the other. Blake and Mouton (1964), however, felt that a leader could be either high on both dimensions at the same time, low on both dimensions at the same time, or somewhere in between. This combination was the basis for their managerial grid, where the leader's style is determined by the amount of attention given to both dimensions. This grid has nine levels of concern for people and nine levels of concern for production.

The third are the situational theories, where a combination of leader, subordinate, and situational characteristics were considered (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Sommer, 1995). Two well-known researchers on leadership, Douglas McGregor (1960) and Fred Fiedler (1967) were very instrumental in the development of situational theories. In McGregor's research, he theorized that individuals' potential for leadership was greatly influenced by their assumption about the nature of human beings. Fiedler believed in the contingency theories which stated that leadership was based on situational factors. He saw leaders' capacity to influence subordinates as largely a matter of fit among the leader's style and personality, the characteristics of the work group, and the needs of the work situation (Kettner, 2001). Similarly, Hersey and Blanchard (1977) identified four different leadership styles that could be drawn upon to deal with contrasting situations. In their research, they provide an influential discussion of choosing the appropriate style for the particular situation.

The final theory is transformational theory where the focus of the leader is on the unique connection between the leader and the followers that accounts for performance and accomplishments for the larger group and the organization (Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership theories evolved from transactional theory which focused on the leader awarding or disciplining followers depending on the adequacy of their performance (Bass, 1998). Transformational leadership goes beyond the attempts of the leader to satisfy the followers through transactions or exchanges based on contingent rewards. In contrast, transformational leaders typically heightened awareness and interest in the group or organization, increased confidence, and moved followers gradually from concerns for existence to concerns for achievement and growth. Furthermore, transformational leaders develop followers to the point where they are able to take on leadership roles and perform beyond established standards or goals (Avant, 2006; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Each of the leadership models discussed offer suggestions of various aspects that might be appropriate for rural leadership. Taken together, these and literally hundreds of other leadership models identify fundamental aspects of leadership that are appropriate for developing a rural leadership model. In summary, some of these aspects include the significance of the work environment and the importance of tasks and relationships. Other attributes of leadership models have included trust, integrity, power, influence and finally cultural competence (Northouse, 2007). The authors propose that of all the leadership models discussed that transformational leadership is the best model for rural areas.

Rural Leadership Model

According to Arches (1997), transformational leadership theory is an example of the development of leadership theories that have surpassed the traditional bureaucratic organizational models of leadership. Transformational leadership is a model that includes a structure that stresses leadership styles that allows for flexibility and individualization. It encourages input in decision making and stresses the importance of teamwork and social relationships. The transformational leader is very important to the community. The leader has a clear perception of her/his followers and is aware of his/her own values, needs and vision, and acts in a manner that promotes the needs of both. This leadership model recognizes the importance of connectiveness of the individual, the work group, and the community. It calls for individual input while working for the overall benefit of the community. As a result, individuals feel included and they are prone to want to spend more time and energy in meeting the needs of the community. Transformational leadership creates an atmosphere in which all individuals feel included and appreciated which motivates them to enhance their own satisfaction while working to promote the good of the community (Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996).

Transformational leadership is empowering and participatory because it promotes decision-making and fosters local leadership. Teamwork is emphasized and the community is viewed as a system of people working together with common dreams. This leadership style creates a culture based on openness, trust, and respect, and inspires team spirit. Transformational leadership has several implications for addressing the problem of leadership in rural areas. It has been well established in the literature that rural areas are in need of leaders. Transformational leadership is a model that provides the type of leadership necessary to deal with the complexity of issues facing rural communities. It has the elements of trust and respect that facilitates the cooperation needed for effective teamwork. Furthermore, it emphasizes a relational approach in which leaders show interpersonal consideration through relationship building, empathy, and interdependence that is so appropriate for rural areas (Avant, 2006). Pigg (1999) suggests that community leadership should be based on our knowledge of communities rather than organizations.

He supports this claim by stating that community leaders cannot rely on formal authority or power positions. Leaders should, on the contrary, depend on their ability to build relationships and support from the community itself. This idea of building relationships is not the way organizational leaders conduct business. The authors use this difference between community leaders and business organizations as one way of supporting their rejection of formal leadership theories. Transformational leadership is a model that goes beyond the traditional approaches to leadership. It approaches the community as an interactional field.

The community field is a process of interrelated actions through which residents express their common interest in the local society. Transformational leadership influences relationships among individuals, leaders and collaborators who bring about real changes that reflect their mutual purposes (Northouse, 2007; Chemers & Ayman, 1993). By thinking of leadership as relationships rather than associating the term with positions and responsibilities could help overcome many rural community residents' reluctance to "get involved" or "be a leader" (Pigg, 1999). This way of thinking certainly lends credibility to the problems facing rural community leadership development today. One major concern is the unwillingness of members of society to get involved in their communities. Defining leadership as a relationship might alleviate the fear certain people have in being called leaders. This model also has some major practical implications for examining leadership in social work education and the profession. One of the main premises of this leadership model is also an interactional approach. This model stresses the importance of social relationships when working with communities and redefining one's perception of leadership. Leadership has been traditionally conceptualized as an individual skill.

The corresponding approach to research and theory testing assumes an individualistic conceptualization of leadership, in which sharp distinction is drawn between leaders and followers. Within this tradition, leadership and leadership development is thought to occur primarily through the individual. Much research has shown the complex nature of interaction between the leader and the social and organizational environment. From this perspective, the transformational leadership model proposes a way of working with communities to build new leaders and engaging communities. In many geographical locations, social work practitioners are viewed as being very distant from the local community (Podsakoff, Mackenzie & Bommer, 1996). Transformational leadership is important for social work practitioners when working with rural communities. This theory approaches leadership as a social process that appears to engage everyone in the community by moving away from the formal structure that guides many organizations. As indicated earlier, leadership in the social work profession is becoming increasingly more important and complex as the profession itself has changed. This theory proposes an approach to leadership that will assist rural communities in addressing some of the social, cultural, economic, political and demographic factors that are creating changes in human services delivery systems.

Shifting the focus of leadership from the leader to emphasizing the quality of the relationship between the leader and the followers creates the opportunity to build new communities and address some of the issues facing rural communities (Pigg, 1999). Transformational leadership suggests some practical applications to addressing the problems in leadership facing rural communities (Yukl, 2006). Based on the literature the issue of leadership is critical to rural communities in the 21st century. Transformational leadership appears to be a model that can benefit the profession and rural communities. However, further research is needed to assist social work leaders in understanding the depth of this theory so that it may be used more effectively to bring about change in rural areas.

Summary

Leadership is a popular topic of study because nearly everyone has either been affected by a leader or has been a leader, and knows the outcomes of leadership are critical. This article has attempted to highlight an often neglected area of study, which are issues related to leadership in rural communities. It has also suggested a leadership paradigm that addresses issues specific to rural communities. Hence, transformational leadership reflects the changing philosophical approaches to leadership. These changes include a shift from one of dominance and control to a more supportive and inclusive leadership style. This shift is being called the "new leadership" for the 21st century (Northouse, 2007). In the future, if helping professionals and others are to be effective in working with rural communities, the framework of transformational leadership has the potential of breathing new vitality into rural communities, and improving the lives of the individuals who reside in them.

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