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2. Title: Personal Growth as an Indicator of Community Change Through the Involvement of Community Leadership Training: A Phenomenological Study
3. Presentation Track: Research
4. Description of the session:

Teaching multi-session leadership programs has been documented as creating community change. Little research has been done on what types of personal change evolve as a result of participating in this type of experience. This session will highlight research that was conducted in rural western Nebraska, which presents the connection between personal change and community economic impact.

5. Biographical profile of presenter:

Anita Hall is an Extension Educator with the University of Nebraska and has worked in grassroots extension for 27 years. She is currently working on her doctoral program from UNL in leadership studies and is targeting leadership within organizations as her area of focus.

## 6. Paper:

### Introduction

The change of human behavior and thought, as well as the change of a culture, is a slow process. Funding sources demand as quick of a proven change as is possible. And predominately, proven change is measured via economic means. The purpose of this study was to investigate what participation in leadership education has meant to the grassroots population and then to further study how these highly personal behaviors and emotions have evolved into economic survival on the plains.

### Literature Review

The need to develop leadership in local communities is a relatively recent recognition (Pigg, Peterson, & Rolfe, 1990). Previously, community leaders tended to come from either the dominant businesses in the community or high-status families (Moore, 1988). Today this influence and power is more dispersed or diffused through the social structure of most communities. Community leadership patterns now take numerous forms, and it is not unusual to find the community social structure changing considerably in just a few years. As migrational patterns shift, people periodically leave and reenter community leadership roles as time, interests, and motivation dictate (Schultz & Galbraith, 1993).

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) suggest that adult education has a tradition of being concerned with informal adult education. They indicate “one segment of the field has been long concerned with informal adult education in community settings, and with adult education for social action and community development.” (p. 230). Galbraith (1990b) noted that the community is a natural setting for the adult education process, particularly as it relates to the development of thoughtful and autonomous learners. Elsewhere,

Galbraith (1990c) suggests that a “learning community calls for discriminating consumers of educational services and learning opportunities” (p. 89)

Four important elements associated with community leadership training are suggested: motivation, confidence building, relevance, and awareness (Schultz, 1991b). Gaining the motivation to engage in community leadership roles is one of the most valuable parts of the program. Encouragement of the awareness of personal ability and community need, coupled with confidence, helps feed motivation. The motivation seems to become a reality when the need is made clear and confidence and ability are applied. Program participants must also have confidence in themselves before they begin to feel comfortable with learning new things. This confidence-building was achieved by involving participants and helping them recognize which of their skills and abilities were relevant to community leadership roles. The encouragement and support of the other group members were also noted as essential to this process (Schultz & Galbraith, 1993).

There remains a void in the literature bridging the gap between the meaning of leadership education and the proof of actual community change. This study attempts to bring the two ends together – the subjective internal attributes and the objective external changes – into one journey. It will bridge the understanding that both the subjective and the objective must work together for true life long learning. Future policy makers and community change agents will benefit from this research.

## Methods

**Purpose Statement:** The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what it means to an individual to be selected as a potential leader in a community and participate in an indepth leadership education program.

**Central Research Question:** How have the personal attributes of participants in an indepth leadership program been strengthened so as to contribute to their desire to be leaders in their communities?

**Subquestions:**

1. How have participants grown personally since being involved in a community leadership series?
2. What processes have participants used to internalize this personal growth?
3. What do participants see as their responsibility to their community now as compared to before their involvement in the leadership series?
4. How have participants been engaged in the future of their communities?

Phenomenology was selected as the research methodology for this study. Specifically, it was the appropriate method, as this study dealt with the meaning of an experience for an individual– participating in a specific leadership program. As a researcher, I wanted to understand what the involvement of being in a long term educational program meant to the adult student and how this meaning reflected to significant behavior change in their role as a leader.

Leadership education consists of a series of workshops that have been held in numerous locations in the state. It was necessary to engage local university faculty in securing participants for this study. These participants had each completed this particular leadership series in their local site and were recommended by the faculty member as individuals who exemplified enthusiasm for the program as well as for the future of their community. Thus, participants in the study were chosen based on a purposeful sampling strategy. Criterion sampling, which limits participants to those meeting some criterion,

was judged as the best method for selecting participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The specific criteria were as follows: the participant completed the entire leadership series (nine programs totally); the participant showed optimism towards their local community; and the participant engaged in leadership opportunities in their local community.

The participants were screened through observation and verbal comments by the local faculty member to examine if they met these criteria. If so, they were asked to participate in a research project that involved an audio taped interview lasting approximately one hour pertaining to their personal meaning of the leadership experience.

Five adults volunteered to participate in the study. An interview date and time was determined. This was coordinated by the local faculty member. Two days prior to the interviews, emails were sent to the participants reminding them of the time and location of the interviews and that I would be conducting them. This email also served as an introduction to the participants of my credibility and interest in the leadership program.

At the start of the interview, the participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous and that they could stop the interview at any time if they should feel uncomfortable. The verbal instructions for the in-depth interview were as follows:

- Think about your experience of participating in the leadership series. Tell me what it meant to you personally and how it influenced your vision of responsibility in your community.

The following specific questions were then asked of each participant:

1. How have you grown personally since being involved in the community leadership series?

2. What processes have you used to internalize this personal growth? That is, what have you done to make this a part of who you are as a person?
3. What do you see as your responsibility to your community now as compared to before your involvement in the leadership series?
4. How have you been engaged in the future of your community? How does your community look different now than before your participation in the leadership series?

Participants were only asked to elaborate on comments that were unclear to the researcher, or provided triggers of importance that the researcher felt needed to be pursued.

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed by the researcher for the purpose of analysis. The transcriptions were analyzed using a modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data presented by Moustakas (1994).

### Findings

#### Meaning Statements:

Each significant statement was evaluated as to its meaning of the leadership experience. If the statement proved that it had the necessary elements it was kept. The remaining statements were reread to determine if there was a meaning that I had not previously noticed.

#### Themes:

Next, meaning statements were clustered into themes that lifted themselves up through the narrative statements. These themes were validated by rereading the significant

statements, as well as the transcription of the interviews to determine if these themes truly represented the original voice.

### **Clustering of Meaning Statements into Themes**

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#### **Respect for Individuals at the Community Level**

1. The participants developed an appreciation of the attributes and skills of members of their leadership class
2. The participants organized a network within the community of individuals dedicated to community change
3. The leadership group became a support group for each other when challenged with community issues

#### **Breaking the Isolation With the Outside World**

1. Participants appreciated the knowledge and helpfulness of outside resources who provided networking relationships with community members as well as positive support and encouragement
2. Participants realized that they weren't alone. They had felt like they were an island, completely isolated
3. A reciprocal relationship has been established between the participants and the outside resources that has evolved into a joint mentoring and accountability friendship

#### **Personal Empowerment**

1. Participants realized their personal strength, that they were not helpless

2. Participants gained confidence that they could achieve their goals and create community change which resulted in a sense of personal pride
3. Participants gained strength to take the initiative to express themselves and instigate change without waiting around for others

### **Personal Responsibility to the Community**

1. Responsibility to the next generation to provide a vital community so that they will have a choice if they want to come back as an adult
2. Participants feel an intense need to give back to the community – they can't all be takers
3. All members of the community must work together to instigate change
4. Participants must influence others of the positive attributes of the community
5. Participants changed their focus to what can we do for us, to what can we do for the community

### **Concrete Community Action As a Result of Leadership Education**

1. County lodging tax was instigated bringing in new economic growth
2. A foundation was developed for the area hospital
3. Leadership for school consolidation was developed
4. One specific business was developed
5. One participant (a woman) developed a platform, ran for mayor and won!
6. Hope has been reestablished in the community

## Textural Descriptions

Ihde (1977) has stated that, “every experience has its reference or direction towards what is experienced and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is present (pp.42-43). It is this “what” that must be explicated texturally in order to arrive at the full experience. Moustakas (1994) states that in the textural description of an experience nothing is omitted; every dimension or phase is granted equal attention and is included. It is described from many sides, angles and views, until a sense of fulfillment is reached. From an extensive description of the textures of what appears and is given, one is able to describe how the phenomenon is experienced.

After identifying the themes, five textural descriptions of the meaning of participating in a leadership education program for each individual were developed. These were then combined into a composite textural description.

### **Composite Textural Description of what it means to an individual to be a potential community leader and participate in leadership education**

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Participants in community leadership education describe the experience in recognition of the networking that is involved. It was their opportunity to get to know people in new arenas. Local community members were acknowledged as new members of the team, each having specific attributes that contribute to the achievement of goals. Resource people from outside community were seen as links to goal accomplishment as well as individuals who could provide an accountability status to community leaders.

The description of action taken, as a result of the motivation and visioning received during the leadership series, is described by the participants. Information and ideas that were gained from the outside resources were used to further community change. Application of ideas, concepts and personal adrenaline was important to these leaders.

“Well, it was good for me to be a part of the class because I met some people, even though I’ve lived here all my life, and even though I knew

who they were, I guess I didn't know them. I developed a new respect for some of the people in the class and in the networking that has taken place since then has been pretty phenomenal. I guess I don't know if we accomplished a lot that you can see, but there has been a lot of groundwork that has been laid. For me personally, the speakers that came in...I mean, they were wonderful. The information they had to give – I didn't know that kind of help was out there. We started talking about what needed to be done in the county economic-wise. Are we in this by ourselves? And if we are, it is going to be unbelievable.”

### Structural Descriptions

Keen (1975) defines structures as “that order embedded in everyday experience which can be grasped only through reflection” (p 46). Structural description involves conscious acts of thinking and judging, imagining, and recollecting, in order to arrive at core structural meanings. Structures underlie textures and are inherent in them. The two are in a continual relationship (Moustakas, 1994).

After identifying the themes, I constructed the five structural descriptions of the meaning of participating in a leadership education program for each individual. These were then combined into a composite structural description.

### **Composite Structural Description of what it means to an individual to be a potential community leader and participate in leadership education**

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Participants continued to describe the feelings of appreciation for the outside resources and the sense of hope that they brought. No longer did these individuals feel isolated. Feelings of isolation brought a sense of despair to the community. These leaders wrestled with how to overcome this despair, not only within themselves, but to other individuals who they needed to bring on board to create community change.

The attribute of leaving a positive legacy to future generations was described by the participants. A sense of pride and the desire to give the youth a choice was expressed as a vivid feeling of these leaders. They were not content to become stagnant – either as individuals or as members of the community. The feeling of urgency was a resounding voice – our children are leaving and we cannot wait until someone else does something.

“So you know that if you throw out this idea to this group, it comes from the same processes that you do. I think that support is real important to us, as well. Some of the most important things that leadership gave me was the confidence that it gives you, and that everybody gives you. When you talk to the professionals, the list just goes on and on, and you have all of those resources that you actually have contact with and you can actually start to develop a plan and you can start to use them for your credibility and your resources. You start to actually have movement.”

### The Essential Meaning of Leadership Education

From the composite textural and structural descriptions, I then synthesized the essential meaning of participation in a community leadership program and the impact of the role of a community leader based on this experience.

### **The Essential Meaning of What It Means to an Individual to be Selected as a Potential Leader in a Community and Participate in Indepth Leadership Education**

When an individual is selected as a potential community leader and education has been provided to enhance this role, the meaning –the essence – of this phenomenon to the participant is the feeling of personal connectedness past oneself – the social connections to the outside world and the knowledge that isolation has finally been shattered. This strong need and accomplishment of social linkages played itself through networking, mentoring, and accountability. The acknowledgement that strong social ties were providing empowerment created the need and desire for these participants to become community leaders and ultimately to create positive change.

### Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

#### Discussion and Implications

Social network theory recognizes the importance for leaders to accurately perceive the network relations that connect people, and to actively manage these network relations (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005). Informal leaders who may lack formal authority can emerge

to frustrate organizational functioning through the manipulation of network structures and the exercise of social influence.

It is clear that the participants in this study discovered social networks that empowered them personally and further invigorated them to instigate community action. Prior to their involvement in the leadership education program, these networks had not been discovered or utilized.

Kilduff, Tsai, & Hanke (2005) identify four interrelated principles that generate network theories and hypotheses:

1. The importance of relations between organizational actors
2. Actors' embeddedness in social fields
3. The social utility of network connections
4. The structural patterning of social life

It is suggested that an understanding of these patterns of social ties contribute to leader effectiveness. The following discussion will use these four principles to organize the essence of leadership empowerment to the participants in this study.

#### The Importance of Relations Between Organizational Actors

This is the most important distinguishing feature of the social network theory. It moves “away from individualist, essentialist and atomistic explanations toward more relational, contextual and systemic understandings” (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). “Human beings are by their very nature gregarious creatures, for whom relationships are defining elements of their identities and creativeness. The study of such relationships is therefore the study of human nature itself” (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003: 131). This theory believes that

leadership is not in the personal attributes of individuals, but in the relationships connecting individuals.

#### Actors' embeddedness in social fields

For organizational network researchers, human behavior is seen as embedded in networks of interpersonal relationships (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996). Embeddedness refers to a preference for interacting with those within the community rather than those outside the community. People's perceptions of others as leaders are reflected through the sets of embedded ties within which people are located (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005). From an embeddedness perspective (Uzzi, 1996, 1997), an effective leadership network is a multi-step process. First, ego needs to build ties to individuals who represent access to and from key constituencies within and outside the organization. But, second, ego needs to monitor whether representatives of these key constituencies themselves have access to networks. And third, ego must monitor the inter-relationships between these representatives. Leadership success can crucially depend upon these secondary networks, and the interrelationships between people beyond the leader's ego network (Sherony & Green, 2002; Sparrowe & Liden, in press).

#### The social utility of network connections

The third principle of social network research is the belief that network connections constitute *social capital* that provides value – including economic returns. A civic spirit emerges from and contributes to the many interactions of trust and interdependence between individual actors with the system (Coleman, 1990; Portes, 2000). Leadership, from the network perspective, involves building and using social capital.

### The structural patterning of social life

Social network researchers look for the patterns of “connectivity and cleavage” in social systems (Wellman, 1988:26). To understand who is a leader from a network perspective is to investigate the social-structural positions occupied by individuals in the social system. Network leadership can be measured in terms of how much social capital it creates for others, especially those members of underrepresented groups whose social network ties may be restricted because of in-group pressures toward homophily and out-group bias (Mehra et al., 1998). A particularly important concept in network leadership occurs with the discussion of isolation. G.K. Chesterton wrote, “There are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally.” The extent to which isolated individuals are part of work groups may predict the extent of leader effectiveness in such groups.

Educators who teach leadership spend a considerable amount of time fine tuning the written word – developing the best curriculum, designing visuals, reading the literature. The most eye opening revelation that developed from this research as it relates to teaching was that nowhere in these interviews was the teaching material mentioned. While a seasoned teacher of leadership education understands that a combination of skill development and subject matter must form the base of application, this research firmly shows that this is only but a small component of leadership development. Leadership cannot be taught in isolation, but must be experienced in the context of a social atmosphere.

The essence of participating in a leadership education experience within the confines of a local community was that of the overwhelming dissolution of isolation. Once this isolation was shattered, courage was instilled to begin to form networks – to mentor each other – so that change could begin to happen. Some of this change created economic activity which instilled hope in a time of financial distress. But always, the change created passion for the continuity of survival on the plains and the human adrenaline needed to further this culture to the next generation.

Limitations to this study center around the context of the one locality in which the interviews were completed. This study needs to be replicated in other parts of the state in which geographic isolation is not such a massive issue to determine if this alters the results of the essence. Another factor that is worthy of studying is the amount of time from the onset of the educational series to the interview. It had been three years since these participants had been involved in formal leadership education. How much time does it require for the personal behaviors to become operational so as to conduct concrete action in the community? The answers to these questions will be useful to policy makers as they wrestle with long term funding issues.

“Probably anybody can step up to the plate, but without the education and bringing those people together and giving an opportunity to understand, even the fundamentals of what it means to be in a meeting, to understand the people that are sitting around you, anybody can attempt, but without that knowledge, even the understanding, the visioning, what its all about. Anything you can bring to the small communities that can share in the visioning is helpful.”

“It has made a lot more work out of life because I can no longer keep my mouth shut and do nothing. I mean, you see so many things that need to be done and you just know. I guess another part is that now, I am the older generation of the community. I’m supposed to be the one – the mentor, the person who someone can go to. I guess that is my job now.”

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