

# Diversifying Civic Leadership What It Takes to Move from “New Faces” to Adaptive Problem Solving

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America's self-image as a democratic nation is tempered by the dominant role that personal power and privilege have played throughout its history. Cities and towns across the country took shape through the vision and the bold action of small, tight-knit circles of local business leaders. At the same time that they were building up corporations and amassing personal wealth, these “town fathers” (and they were almost invariably men) assumed major civic roles and responsibilities.

At least in nominal terms, this arrangement worked remarkably well. In many instances the community had a stable economic base, most residents could count on finding a job, authority figures ensured the provision of municipal services and civic infrastructure, and the people who were inclined to serve in leadership roles held a monopoly in that regard.

No such equilibrium exists in today's unstable world. Stalwart corporations have fallen on hard times, and many of the traditional power brokers who dominated civic life have passed on or lost their air of invincibility. No longer can communities count on a few power brokers to set direction, get things done, and take care of everyone. Paternalism is no recipe for prosperity in the twenty-first century.

For communities to adapt to the complex economic, social, and technological challenges that now confront them, they need to innovate and to diversify their economies. This shift in the business model requires a different brand of community leadership, one that engages an expanded and diverse group of leaders. Scott Page describes why diversity is so important to a community's prosperity:

The key to innovation, in economic terms, resides inside the heads of people, the more diverse

the better. . . . Innovation depends as much on collective difference as on aggregate ability. If people think alike, then no matter how smart they are, they most likely will get stuck at the same locally optimal solutions. Finding new and better solutions, innovating, requires thinking differently.

The value of diversity is also clear when we think in terms of the concept of adaptive leadership popularized by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky. The challenges that communities face as they position themselves for long-term success are not *technical* problems with engineered fixes. They are *adaptive* challenges stemming from the interaction of many interrelated trends—demographic, economic, social, political, and technological—playing out at the local, national, and global levels. Understanding this complex environment requires contributions from many people operating from a variety of perspectives.

## Expanding the Leadership Base

Tremendous progress has been made over the past thirty years in moving regular people into positions of community leadership. Community action agencies, community development corporations, foundations, universities, and other institutions have established leadership development programs geared directly for emerging and/or grassroots leaders. At the same time, many programs for traditional community leaders (for example, leadership programs based in chambers of commerce) now incorporate diversity training or antiracism programming as a means of instilling a greater appreciation of diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

While many of these efforts have been able to show some level of success, they also make it clear that

expanding a community's leadership base is tricky business. Established leaders aren't always open to including new players, especially when those newcomers bring foreign ways of looking at the world and fail to conform to traditional norms of behavior. Even if existing leaders are receptive to new faces, the "nontraditional" leaders may fail to show up. Especially in communities where an elite group historically has assumed responsibility, residents may have reached the conclusion that regular people cannot or should not play a leadership role.

If new and different leaders do emerge within a community, there is still the issue of their effectiveness. It's not enough to get new people to the table. They need to know what to do when they get there. Inexperienced leaders are bound to stumble now and then. Without appropriate training, guidance, and encouragement, emerging leaders can grow frustrated and step back into more comfortable territory. In the process, established leaders may reaffirm their doubts about the value of diverse leadership.

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A number of communities have overcome these challenges and succeeded in expanding who is involved in decision making and problem solving. However, in breaking free of its paternalistic tradition, a community may very well find that a more inclusive way of doing business is less efficient in solving problems and in getting things accomplished. Engaging a diverse group of leaders *can* foster adaptive problem solving and innovation, but too often it actually leads to protracted discussion. New and different voices at the table allow more possibility for disagreement, which in turn can stymie a group in moving to the concrete action that ultimately will make a difference on the issue at hand.

While many good program models exist for the task of developing emerging leaders, they generally focus on building the individual capacity of participants, leaving unanswered the question of how this will translate into more effective problem solving at

the community level. Advanced Leadership Institute (ALI), which operated in central Wisconsin between 2005 and 2009, is an exception. Graduates of ALI have changed not only the face of civic leadership throughout the region but also the practice and the ethic of community problem solving.

### Origins of Advanced Leadership Institute

For nearly all of the twentieth century, the fortunes of the towns and villages in the southern portion of Wood County in central Wisconsin rose along with the success of the papermaking industry. The mills in and around Wisconsin Rapids employed generations of workers and paid wages well above the norms for manufacturing labor. The preeminent firm was Consolidated Papers, Inc., which at its peak employed over a third of the region's 12,000 workers. Consolidated had a long track record of success, even during downturns in the national economy.

The world turned upside down in the late 1990s when the papermaking industry underwent a dramatic restructuring. Modern new facilities were built overseas in countries with low wage scales. Demand for paper dropped precipitously as a result of a recession and longer-term shifts in the use of paper products. In 1999, Consolidated announced that 700 jobs would be eliminated. A year later, the company was sold to a large multinational firm, Stora Enso, based in Helsinki. Additional cost-cutting measures led to the loss of 1,300 additional jobs.

The region suffered an additional blow in 2007 when another paper firm, Domtar, closed a mill in Port Edwards where 500 workers were employed. By 2009, the number of local residents employed in the papermaking industry declined by two-thirds, from 5,668 to 1,808.

Shortly after the local paper mills began laying off workers, the region's second largest industry, cranberry growing, fell prey to oversupply. Although cranberries are often associated with New England, Wisconsin actually grows more cranberries than any other state. Wisconsin Rapids was the home of Northland Cranberries, Inc. The firm owned cranberry marshes in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Canada, and operated large processing plants. In the mid-1990s, Northland was the largest cranberry

grower in the world and pioneered cranberry juice that was 100 percent juice.

The fortunes of Northland and local cranberry growers soured during the late 1990s when a glut in production pushed the price per barrel from more than \$60 to less than \$10. This pushed revenues below the cost of production, so thousands of barrels of cranberries ended up in landfills. Many cranberry farmers were driven out of business. In 2004, Northland sold off its flagship production facility in Wisconsin Rapids as well as the vast majority of its marshes. A year later, the firm sold off most of its remaining assets and ceased being listed as a publicly traded company.

The economic dislocation and despair suffered by local residents was compounded by an erosion in civic leadership. For generations, the owners of the local papermaking companies had played the role of town fathers. George W. Mead, his son Stanton, and his grandson George Mead II led Consolidated Papers throughout twentieth century. The Meads built a highly successful company that provided high-paying, secure jobs to generations of workers. They also served as the dominant civic leaders in Wisconsin Rapids. Schools, parks, buildings, hospital wings, and many other amenities bear the Mead name.

The downside of having strong and visionary town fathers is the vacuum in leadership that opens up when times change. For the entire twentieth century, the residents of Wisconsin Rapids knew who to turn to when something needed doing or when a threat appeared on the horizon. The strong, authoritative leaders who ran the paper mills also took care of the larger community's needs. But dynasties end. George Mead II was the last in his family with an interest in leading a paper company. Many members of the Mead family had moved out of the area over the years. By the turn of the century, the base of civic leaders was thin and aging.

When the local economic base began disintegrating, there were no obvious leaders to step up and announce the path forward. Residents reported feeling fear, anger, confusion, and paralysis. As one local resident lamented, "It felt like we had been hit by a truck."

Some local residents continued to look in the same old places for the next generation of leaders to emerge. But others saw this as the right time for a complete overhaul of the structures and practices that had long defined community leadership in the region.

The two primary drivers in promoting a new, more inclusive and more adaptive way of solving problems were Kelly Lucas, chief executive officer of the Community Foundation of South Wood County (now Encourage Community Foundation), and Connie Loden, CEO of the Heart of Wisconsin Business and Economic Alliance. Together they developed the Community Progress Initiative (CPI), a comprehensive initiative that included strategies to encourage entrepreneurship to develop locally grown businesses, and engage as many people as possible in efforts to improve the economic and social life of the region. Expanding civic leadership was one of the most important principles underlying CPI. Whereas the traditional culture had supported closed-door decision making by a small group of elites, CPI invited anyone and everyone in the region to participate in planning and problem-solving forums.

The community foundation recognized that it was important not only to provide new avenues for "regular people" to engage in civic affairs but also to equip emerging leaders with the leadership skills needed to engage fully in the process of solving complex community issues. The region's existing leadership program had been created years earlier by the chamber of commerce with the intent of equipping business leaders with new networks and knowledge about local issues. Kelly Lucas believed that the problems plaguing the region could only be remedied through collective problem solving by a broad range of engaged residents rather than through decisive action on the part of a handful of elite civic leaders. ALI was created with the intent of developing the leadership capacity of this broader group.

#### **Advanced Leadership Institute**

ALI is an intensive eight-month leadership program designed to promote effective community leadership among established and emerging leaders in central Wisconsin. The curriculum was developed in 2004 by Katherine Tyler Scott and Irma Tyler-Wood of

**Table 1. Advanced Leadership Institute Tool Kit**

Tool	Description
Personal History Timeline	An activity that allows participants to assess the present and future by looking critically at the past. Participants plot and analyze events at both an internal and external level. It allows a group to create a common reality and a common vision.
Hold in Trust	A concept that allows leaders to identify the origins of their own development and how their character has formed. It promotes an awareness of civic trusteeship and the obligation to give back. It provides a foundation for adaptive leadership skills.
Ladder of Inference	A tool for understanding how different parties view a problem or issue. It is useful for achieving clarity and a common understanding. The tool is able to diffuse emotions and help people involved in a conflict listen to each other and understand each other.
Four-Quadrant Problem-Solving Tool	A tool that helps individuals and teams clarify problems, diagnose why the problems exist, and develop effective solutions. It builds consensus and ownership among a group when resolving the problem.
Seven-Element Model of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation	A negotiation tool to resolving conflict in a collaborative manner. It allows the group to maintain trust and communication while resolving the conflict.
Procedural Agreement	A planning tool that lays out the process by which a group will work, function, negotiate, problem solve, and reach its goal.
Anger Cycle	A process that enables leaders to not become hostage to emotion. It helps the leader respond responsibly and respectfully in volatile, heated situations.

*Note: All tools except the Anger Cycle are copyrighted by Ki ThoughtBridge.*

KI ThoughtBridge, who also facilitated all the sessions. With funding from the Ford Foundation, the community foundation has so far organized three classes of ALI, reaching a total of 100 emerging and established leaders from across the region.

ALI was specifically designed around three principles. First, the people involved in community decision making need to understand, respect, and trust one another, even when they have diverse perspectives or backgrounds. Second, these players need to have the skills and tools to find creative, workable solutions, especially for issues where residents disagree on the nature of the problem or the way forward. And third, they need to pay at least as much attention to the common interests of all residents as they do to their own personal interests.

Like traditional place-based leadership programs, ALI also emphasizes networking and new connections. But ALI goes beyond the typical meet-and-greet program in a number of important ways. For example, ALI emphasizes the concept of “trusteeship,” which leads participants to strengthen their commitment and their emotional connection to their community.

Whereas most community leadership programs focus on providing participants with expanded knowledge about local issues and actors, ALI is concerned primarily with building adaptive leadership skills. This skill-building approach is oriented around the “Advanced Leadership Institute Tool Kit,” which includes concepts, templates, and approaches that can be applied to the leadership challenges that arise in the workplace, in civic arenas, and at home. The specific tools in the tool kit are shown in Table 1.

As ALI participants learn about and experiment with the tools in the tool kit, they undergo an intensive exercise in personal reflection, discovering more about their own motivations, leadership style, and patterns of reacting to conflict and emotion. At the same time, participants also become acquainted with new ways of working through complex issues. Building on their personal experience with the Harvard Negotiation Project, Katherine and Irma developed a set of tools that can be used to resolve conflicts and facilitate collective problem solving (for example, the Seven Element Model of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation, Four-Quadrant Problem-Solving Tool). The ALI curriculum uses an experiential learning approach so that participants get a

chance to try out the tools on real problems confronting the community.

ALI specifically focuses on improving collective problem solving by delving into the issues that underlie trust and mistrust, especially when people come from different ethnic groups, age cohorts, communities, or social or economic classes. ALI deliberately brings together participants with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In facilitating the training, Katherine and Irma continually scan for contentious issues and quickly bring disagreements to the surface. Tools such as the “Ladder of Inference” allow those involved in a dispute to gain a fuller understanding of the sources of disagreement. Problem-solving tools are then applied to identify common interests and to pursue win-win solutions.

In working through important community issues with deeply held points of view, ALI created the conditions for effective relationship-building. Over the course of six sessions, participants gradually opened up and revealed themselves to one another. In becoming more vulnerable, participants found themselves supporting each other. This process generated new levels of trust, even among participants who came into the training believing that they had little in common.

### Outcomes

An independent evaluation of ALI found that the vast majority of participants developed valuable new leadership skills, including facilitating a group process, gaining support for an idea, diagnosing situations, and managing conflict. ALI participants also described how the program had allowed them to build important new relationships, gain self-confidence, and become more aware of their own strengths, limitations, and aspirations. These personal changes paid off at work, at home, and especially in settings involving communitywide conflict.

Participants also talked about the changes in attitude and orientation they experienced through the in-depth conversations and experiential exercises:

I think the Advanced Leadership Program created awareness for folks that they’ve got a responsibility and a right to step up and to

serve. . . . You’ve seen more folks feeling comfortable in their own skin, stepping up saying, “Hey, I’ve got something that can be contributed,” and they’ll take a step up.

A number of ALI participants did in fact pursue new ventures and became higher-profile civic leaders as a direct result of the program. When Kathy Aft entered ALI in 2005, she was the town clerk of Grand Rapids, a small town on the other side of the river from Wisconsin Rapids. Her leadership potential was readily apparent to her colleagues in the training, and they encouraged her to move into a position with greater influence. She decided to run for election for town board supervisor and was elected in April 2010. In assuming this new role, she has brought with her the skills and orientation that she learned in ALI, especially with regard to intercommunity relations.

ALI can point to a number of instances in which graduates have brought together different municipalities or school districts to work on common issues, a distinct departure from the historical pattern. For example, one ALI graduate brought together officials from six local governments to apply for a federal transportation project, in the process negotiating a complex financial match requirement. Similarly, ALI graduates facilitated cooperation between two school districts that had been rivals. The districts came together to create a common school calendar that would allow students to take classes at schools in different districts and also found a way to hire an information technology professional who could serve the needs of both districts.

Many ALI participants became well enough versed in the tools and techniques that they were able to put them into practice when confronted with conflicts in work or community settings. Six ALI graduates completed a train-the-trainer program and now offer facilitation services to local organizations dealing with contentious issues. One graduate who chairs a school board introduced the tools and practices to labor negotiations with teachers, which allowed for quicker resolution and fewer hard feelings than had occurred in previous contract negotiations. Another graduate facilitated a successful planning process involving different organizations that had opposing

views on the creation of cross-country ski trails within a local park.

Perhaps the highest-payoff example of ALI's contribution to community problem solving was the development of a regional workforce training program, Workforce Central. The program is a partnership between various employers, the local technical college, the regional workforce development board, a service provider network, the community foundation, and other local and national funders. Workforce Central provides job training and career support for job seekers and workers in four industries that have been identified as the pillars for the region's economic future: advanced manufacturing, information technology, health care, and renewable energy. It is one of only two rural National Fund for Workforce Solutions sites in the United States. All of the members in the planning group had graduated from ALI and brought their skills and techniques to conceptualizing, designing, funding, and implementing the program.

The ultimate goal of ALI is to create and maintain a strategic leadership group that will support regional planning collaboration, advocacy, and increase the momentum of social and economic change in central Wisconsin. The tools and language that Katherine and Irma taught to ALI participants are surfacing in virtually every public forum, whether the issue is job losses, economic development, public education, land use, transportation, or sports.

The structure and dynamics of community leadership in central Wisconsin look much different now than they did in 2005, when ALI enrolled its first class. According to one participant:

This is definitely a different place. There has been a shift in who are leaders—from those with economic power to those who did not. ALI has been instrumental in bringing forward people who can make decisions, communicate, and negotiate. ALI made them comfortable stepping forward as leaders.

Others agreed that the old power brokers no longer hold any sort of monopoly. "Most people feel they can be involved if they want to be."

## Larger Lessons

What we are seeing in central Wisconsin is a quickly expanding base of community leaders that not only is able to negotiate differences in perspective but also takes full advantage of their diversity to develop innovative solutions to complex problems. ALI has played a crucial role in this shift by bringing together emerging and established leaders in a program that develops specific skills, instills self-confidence, and takes people through the steps required to build trust across lines of difference.

Prior to ALI, civic leadership was reserved for residents who either came from one of the established families or occupied an executive position within the business sector. ALI invited an expanded group of players into leadership work and at the same time provided a shared experience based on a specific model of leadership development. Historically the region's leaders had honed their skills through training geared toward a particular profession or industry, which arguably contributed to a silo mentality that had been so pervasive in the past. In her experience as a facilitator, Irma Tyler-Wood observed:

With the silo walls up it was easy to assume that what it takes to lead a corporation is very different from what it takes to lead a school district or a church. It was also easier to maintain a hierarchy of who the really important leaders are. ALI leaders developed an understanding of their common challenges and constraints which enabled them to stand in each other's shoes and see each other as peers.

In many ways, ALI provided a previously unavailable opportunity for people from across the region to have honest, in-depth conversations about the psychological, political, and cultural dynamics that were undermining the recovery that everyone wanted. Again quoting Irma:

We arrived in the community when a major case of blaming and scapegoating was going on. ALI had two impacts on that tendency. The group developed the ability and courage to (1) explicitly name what was happening and (2) to develop a

plan to offer public and behind the scenes support to the leaders being unfairly scapegoated. As a result, when other controversial issues came up, the ALI participants took public stands like writing a letter to the editor of the community newspaper or appearing at public forums and hearings.

One of the major benefits of a place-based leadership program is that participants can focus on real issues that are relevant to nearly everyone in the class. This is much different from what happens when a community leader flies across the country, has a great experience with previously unknown classmates, and then comes back with grand new ideas and inspiration to a largely unchanged local environment. The participants in ALI began to put their new skills and tools into direct practice in the midst of the eight-month program. Participants built or strengthened their relationships with the same people they need to work with on an ongoing basis. And they focused on the region's most pressing economic, social, and educational issues, with the recognition that no one was going to succeed personally unless and until the region as a whole recovered.

It is important to remember the scale of community where ALI was launched—a region of 40,000 people. When 100 people are trained in the same philosophy and tools, it is possible to shift the prevailing mode of decision making and problem solving. The tools and language that Katherine and Irma taught to ALI participants are surfacing in virtually every public forum, regardless of the issue in question. According to one ALI graduate:

Now we speak a common language. And once we have a common language, we get to the heart of the issue. It's less personal. Not impersonal. We have a personal connection and respect, but less defensiveness. We agree on the tool that we need to use. Then we know what we're talking about.

This shift in paradigm suggests that it is possible for community leaders to become more effective, adaptive problem solvers at the same time that they are diversifying their ranks. Achieving this level of structural and cultural change in community leadership requires more than simply developing new leaders. At a communitywide level, there need to be new ways of talking about issues, making decisions, and relating to one another. It's not enough to invite more people to the table. They also need to learn how to do creative things together in the kitchen.

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