

Community Leadership Programs and the Government: a Partnership for Building Learning Communities

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Abstract

Unquestionably, rural Australia is under stress with the future of many small rural towns uncertain. To begin the process of reversing these downward trends, there needs to be increased community participation and improved democratic processes at the local level, and a framework through which to manage change. The role of leadership and the creation of learning communities are essential elements for achieving these foundation goals upon which to rebuild community vitality and prosperity. This paper aims to demonstrate the valuable role of existing community leadership programs and their growing cohort of voluntary horsepower, in building community capacity, creating learning communities, and assisting the government and its agencies to implement relevant and effective programs in rural Australia.

Introduction

Since Sorenson and Epps wrote in 1996 that the importance of leadership for community development was receiving little attention in Australia (compared with Europe and the US), it seems that, during 1998/99, leadership development was heralded an essential component in reversing the downward trends in rural Australia. Russell, in his report to the Regional Australia Summit (1999) argued that there was a shortage of leadership in rural and regional Australia and that "...the ground, from which leaders might flourish, has not been well prepared". He went on to say that "...unless leadership – the commitment to develop leaders - becomes part of the core business of government (Federal, State and Local), all the initiatives flowing from the other critical themes of this Summit will fall on barren ground".

Hence one of the 12 themes discussed at the Regional Australia Summit (October, 1999) was the importance of community leadership in creating communities better able to respond to the rapidly changing conditions. Similarly, in June 1999, the Kennett Government released its Rural and Regional Strategy for the State of Victoria, which also made specific reference to the need for community leadership development as a central element in managing the rapid change that many rural and regional communities are experiencing.

The 'rural crisis' has also enabled the work on social capital and community capacity building to become part of government and government agency discourse. The strategic planning documents of both state and federal governments include extensive reference to the need to build community capacity to respond.

As Russell pointed out, the fostering of broad-based community leadership and the creation of learning communities is central to the achievement of the government's aim of improving community self-help and 'bottom-up' techniques which mobilise community skills and resources. The working group on Community Leadership involved in the Regional Australia Summit (October, 1999) made a number of recommendations aimed at mobilising energy and resources within all levels of government and community to build partnership which "...translate into action". In June 1999, the Kennett Government of Victoria launched its \$9 million leadership development initiative. There was, however, a change of government in Victoria before the initiative was implemented.

While both past and present governments, have recognised the importance of leadership development in creating a positive future for Australia's rural and regional communities, the role of existing community leadership programs in building learning communities has yet to be fully appreciated, and the opportunity for government to mobilise a growing cohort of community capacity builders is yet to be seized.

In August 1999, and again in March 2000, the co-ordinators of Community Leadership Programs, from across the state of Victoria, met to discuss a wide range of issues, including the need for a co-ordinated effort to a) maximise the use of limited resources, b) build a network of past and present participants, and c) develop an evaluation framework through which to demonstrate the benefits of community leadership programs to community development.

This paper aims to demonstrate the current activities, and potential role, of existing community leadership programs in assisting the government and its agencies to develop and implement strategies aimed at building community capacity, creating learning communities, and accumulating a sustainable stock of social capital – a precursor to the creation of a sustainable stock of wealth.

The Importance of Creating Learning Communities

Community sustainability hinges on the ability [of a community] to develop understanding and choice regarding community resources, market rules and decision making capacity
(Schaffer, 1995).

There is a growing literature on the importance of learning communities emerging from a range of discipline areas, including vocational education, economic development, resource management, community sociology and the development of social capital, the improvement of local governance, and rural community development, to name but a few. In a variety of ways, each of these areas appreciate the difficulties of providing information which is relevant, adopted and acted upon, either wholly or in a modified form, at the community level.

As Hyman and Shingler (1999) point out,

a democratic government depends on citizens to be informed about public policy issues and to use that information when voting for leaders, influencing public officials, discussing issues with others, petitioning government for redress of grievances, supporting community organisations, and engaging in other forms of political participation.

A study by Hyman and Shingler (1999), which explored patterns of knowledge seeking and decision-making, found that participation in seeking information and responding to it, was carried out by a small proportion of the population, while over 20% of the population "...use few, if any, sources of information to become knowledgeable about an issue" (p405). They found that the majority of people relied on others, who were more proactive, to provide them with the right choice. In light of the fact that our social, political and economic system functions on the assumption that individuals are well informed, will participate, and will make wise (or rational) decisions, there is clearly a need for alternative means of engaging people in the exchange of information.

What Makes an Effective Learning Community

The originator of the concept of 'social capital' talks about the networks, norms and values that exist in a community which enable cooperation and the exchange of knowledge and information (Putnam, 1993). According to Cox (1998), social capital is different to human, natural and financial capital in that it is the "...links which create society and cannot therefore be owned or depleted by use". It is the quality of the interactions and relationships between individuals which is collectively described as social capital.

The work of the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (University of Tasmania), has led them to believe that "...a learning community is building social capital as it learns, and that a community with high levels of social capital will be a learning community" (Kilpatrick, 2000). The research team at the CRLRA talk about social capital as the facilitator of change in communities – "... by *oiling* the process of learning through accessing, sharing and creating knowledge, skills and values".

It is also the process of building social capital and creating community-based learning which has major implications for the mobilisation of community assets (including both skills and physical/financial resources), improved economic outcomes for small business, and new enterprise developments (Kilpatrick and Bell, 1998). It is also the process which enables communities to create vitality and creative expression which is essential in revealing a unique identity and economic competitiveness. Learning communities are also more resilient to unexpected changes, better equipped to manage potential risks, and more responsive to the opportunities as they present themselves (Woolcock, 1999). From a government perspective, it is a learning community which will be better able to engage with policy development and to negotiate successful implementation of policies which are crafted for mutual benefit.

What emerges here is the importance of this facility of people and communities to interact in meaningful ways in creating the inherent strength in society. It is, therefore,

this facility of building social capital, which needs to be fostered if the goals of both the community and the government are to ever cross paths, let alone merge into one.

The Role of Government in Building Learning Communities

The work undertaken by Kilpatrick, Falk, Bell and others of the CRLRA has identified a range of attributes which make for an effective learning community. In brief, they have found that communities must have a capacity to share knowledge, enable broad-based leadership, and to accept a diversity of community norms and values. They have also found that successful communities have generated effective networks both within the community and beyond.

From the experiences of the Loddon Murray Community Leadership program, a willingness to question is also an important attribute of a learning community. Hence, a community or an individual needs the confidence, support, and a strong sense of identity to enable open reflection and questioning. A learning community is also one which recognises that no one has all the answers, and that information has to be interpreted to suit each and every different situation. Hence, a learning community is one which knows how to question, what to question, and how to create and utilise information, knowledge, and skills-based networks.

From a government initiative point of view, policies which utilise and build on the social capital that already exists in communities are more likely to succeed. Kilpatrick (2000) provides a number of pointers for governments aiming to effectively work with communities in building capacity – these include continuity, acceptance of diversity, information access, two-way communication, and effective resourcing.

Continuity of programs is critical for legitimacy and community support. This means that

programs, staff and institutional arrangements do not stop and start, or chop in and out, but rather evolve and change in a way that recognises and builds on the past. Continuity develops trust within communities, and between communities and governments that administer programs.

Kilpatrick, 2000

Policies and programs must also allow for *diversity* at the local level, and relinquish control over the direction that programs take. They must also create knowledge resources that communities can draw upon, recognising that individuals and communities learn in different ways, and require information at different stages. The real question here is how to translate information into knowledge which is put into practice. Glossy brochures, websites, and information sessions are not working as effectively in changing landuse practices, for example, as resource managers would like.

Two way communication between policy makers and communities is also a critical element in the success of policy development and implementation. A commonly held view is that these links can be created through the training of leaders and the identification of community members who will ‘champion’ the policy cause. However,

the likelihood of selecting the right community member (by a top down, outsider approach), and the process gaining early acceptance and legitimacy within the community is fraught with a high level of risk.

Finally, Kilpatrick (2000) points out that social capital alone will not solve the problems facing rural communities. Policies need to be adequately resourced if programs are to be effective in assisting communities to adapt to the changing conditions.

Community Leadership Programs – an Essential Partner for Government

In direct response to the recognised need for local leadership development, a number of community leadership programs have emerged throughout rural and regional Victoria, with a mission to help shape the future of their communities and regions. While each program has evolved in its own unique way, in response to the specific needs of the region in which it is located, the existing rural community leadership programs all share a common set of principles.

- A focus on the role of the individual in collective community action
- The development of a broad-based leadership network
- Leadership development as it relates to building social capital
- Unlocking of personal and regional potential
- Increasing awareness of regional issues and challenges
- Fostering creativity and innovation of thought and action

All the programs are committed to the concept of human scale development, which requires the empowerment of the individual, and the meeting of basic human needs in the process of developing strong and vibrant communities.

The programs operate under a diverse range of geographical, demographic and economic circumstances. For example, The Gippsland Community Leadership Program is located in the Latrobe Valley and is focused predominantly on its significant power industry, the Alpine Valleys Community Leadership Program faces issues of geographical isolation as a result of the mountainous terrain in which it is located, and for the Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program, has been addressing a lack of regional identity resulting from its location being between major regional centres.

The programs also operate under differing funding arrangements - ranging from almost complete in-kind community support, to near-full funding for a limited period from a range of sources. All of the programs are involved in fund raising through sponsorship. Hence, community support has been crucial to the running of these programs.

The existing programs have been successful in:

- increasing awareness of regional issues, contacts, resources and networks;
- developing skills and confidence in over 700 graduates throughout Victoria;
- developing networks of graduates committed to working across traditional boundaries;

- increasing understanding of individual gifts and talents;
- gaining support from industry and community through local sponsorship;
- providing opportunities for graduates to consolidate their contribution to community development;
- increasing the involvement of graduates in leadership positions and public life; and
- improving leadership pathways and leadership succession in rural communities.

The Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program – a Good Example

The Loddon Murray Community Leadership Program (LMCLP) provides an excellent example of the concept of a learning community and the subsequent implications for regional and policy development.

The program itself creates a learning community, by bringing together a diverse group of people from a wide range of backgrounds, to build leadership skills, explore the major issues facing the Loddon Murray region and to facilitate positive change.¹ In this way, each program group becomes a microcosm of a rural community, where participants experience the challenges of decision making and communication amongst a diverse group of individuals with differing norms and values. In the case of the LMCLP, the ensuing dialogue, action and learning can be played out in a supported, confidential environment .

The program involves a carefully structured series of activities and events, held throughout the region, consisting of three distinct and interwoven threads:

- A personal leadership project which enables participants to ‘lead change’ in their own community
- Leadership Development weekends which allow participants to understand and ‘lead self’
- Regional sessions involving field trips, case studies, tours, workshops and discussions with over 120 presenters, which focus on ‘leading the region’

Other principles which relate specifically to community learning attributes include:

- recognition of diversity in leadership style, with a focus on broad-based ‘participatory’ and ‘activist’ leadership.
- a philosophy based on sharing knowledge and the creation of a culture and community where seeking information and questioning is valued.
- respect for, and acceptance of, diversity and differing community norms and values. The LMCLP provides opportunities for participants² to learn more about themselves and others, through sharing personal stories and experiences.

¹ The participants are selected for their interest in becoming more active in their community, rather than for demonstrated leadership skills.

² *Participants range in age from early 20’s, to 60+ and come from a variety of backgrounds such as farming, business, arts, local government, industry, health, education, environment.*

- the development of a dynamic network – creating partnerships and alliances between government agencies, regional organisations, participants and their local communities.

Table 1: Summary of activities of LMCLP participants

Activity / project	Aim	Program graduate
Career opportunities for young people in agriculture	A information tour for primary and secondary teachers to provide them with an understanding of the career opportunities in agriculture in the region and allied industries	Tom Smith, Yarrawalla Shirley Hope, Bears Lagoon Judi Miles, Mittiamo Paul Gill, Kerang Hanks Bruger, Myall Gene Southerland, Cohuna Margot Henty, Cohuna
Farm\$smart for young people	Goal setting for young people from farming families	Di Bunnett, Bridgewater
Father and Son camps	Improve communication between fathers and sons in the region	Steve Hunsell, Lake Boga
Stone fruit co-operative	Successful expansion into export markets	Kerry Gammon, Woorinen
Rural transaction centre, program to welcome newcomers, and a variety of small community development initiatives	Building a better community	Suellen Tomanichel, Ultima
The Shed	Youth program	Shane Ward, Wedderburn
Regional Boards and other committee positions	Central Murray Area Consultative Council Loddon Murray 2000+ North Central Community Support Group (financial counseling), other local organisations	
Tractor and Machinery Association Board	First women	Wendy McAllister
Mayors Councillor	Ganawarra Shire Northern Grampians Shire Loddon Shire	Jenny Kelly Karyn Douglas Colleen Condliffe

The benefits of the Loddon Murray Community Leadership program, in terms of building confidence and providing people with opportunities and networks to make things happen, are best illustrated through a summary of some of the activities of program graduates (refer Table 1). According to the independent evaluation undertaken by McGukian & Associates, Bendigo, 70 to 80% of participants in the LMCLP had increased their leadership roles in the community since completing the program.

It is clear from this brief overview, that the activities of these people are diverse and far-reaching. They are demonstrating a breadth of vision and an ability to work with their communities and other organisations to bring about change. The opportunity that exists, is for the activities of some graduates (not all) to be part of a state-wide co-ordinated effort to implement a community planning process.

An Opportunity for Collaboration

As demonstrated by experiences in the USA and elsewhere in Australia, communities need to take stock of their social, environmental and economic assets. They also need to audit their performance across these three areas and develop indicators of progress for future reference and planning development. The task is substantial and requires a co-ordinated effort, in partnership with government. The growing cohort of Community Leadership graduates throughout Victoria, could become a major plank in the government's 'building community capacity' strategy.

The foundations for building community capacity throughout Victoria already exists in the form of the

- *Loddon Murray* Community Leadership Program
- *Alpine Valley* Community Leadership Program,
- *Fairly (Goulbourn Murray)* Community Leadership Program,
- *Sunraysia* Community Leadership Program,
- *Gippsland* Community Leadership Program,
- *Mallee* Community Leadership Program.

All of these programs have wide community support including that of local government and local industry.

To date, these existing programs have produced a cohort of over 700 graduates. These people represent a source of voluntary horsepower, in building community capacity, creating learning communities, and assisting the government and its agencies to implement relevant and effective programs in rural Australia. They provide government with an opportunity to engage directly with communities.

By harnessing the energies and commitment of this growing cohort of Victorians, the government can be more effective in its aims of:

- building community capacity;
- establishing effective partnerships with communities;
- developing relevant and broadly supported policies for service access;
- implementing programs which have full community support.

They also provide the government with a means through which to meet the essential attributes of good policy development as defined by Kilpatrick by tapping into the continuity, diversity, local acceptance and legitimacy, and local responsiveness that these programs offer. The potential to harness the extensive networks being generated through these programs as a means to improve policy development, implementation and decision making cannot be underestimated.

At present, however, these programs struggle to find sufficient resources to continue. The collaborative efforts by the program co-ordinators to convince government funding agencies of the benefits of supporting these programs has had limited and variable success.

The opportunity, and the challenge, for government is to engage with these programs, and to seek ways to foster a meaningful partnership. The goal of building self-reliant, vibrant, creative and innovative communities is shared by all who are interested and concerned about the future of Australia's rural and regional communities. It is therefore, incumbent on the government to ensure that the partnership is actively pursued, and that these programs are provided with the means by which to continue to make a significant contribution to the building of learning communities.

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