10 Ideas for Recruiting New Leaders

by

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These ideas represent a synthesis of theory and experience. Working at community development in small towns throughout the United States has provided a source of examples and anecdotes that offer real life applications of the theories about leadership and motivation.

None of these ideas is original. All of the examples are based on the actions of community leaders dealing with the very real problem of recruiting new and emerging leaders to join in the improvement of a community.

This list is by no means exhaustive as many ideas for recruiting new leaders are limited only by personal creativity and circumstances. The ideas are proven approaches to help alleviate problems associated with recruiting new leaders. Use this guidebook with confidence.
Ask the Question:  
“Who’s Not Here?”

In order to answer this question, members of a community group have to understand the composition of their community. What groups or individuals should be involved in order to have a truly representative community organization? Which groups are missing from the organization (or the meeting or the project)?

Understanding the make-up of the community helps in analyzing the leadership pool so that certain segments of the community can be targeted for special recruiting efforts.

This can also be considered as an “insurance policy” for a community action project since making sure that the group is inclusive is the best way to build in cooperation from the beginning.

Answering this question assumes, of course, that efforts will be made to involve those not present, as a way of making sure that all parts of the community are well represented.

Look for Skills, Not Names

One of the problems caused by relying on the same people for the same tasks over and over again is that those people will eventually tire of making the same contribution. Burnout is a phrase that is all too familiar to most community leaders and volunteers.

A simple way to identify new people to recruit is to focus on the skills needed for the task, not on the person who last did it. By listing the skills required for a task and then attempting to match those skills with an individual’s experience, it’s also possible to identify a whole new group of people who can help with a community project.

It might turn out that the person with the necessary organizing skills for the community picnic is a retired farmer or an elementary school teacher who’s never before been asked to help out with a project. By looking at skills rather than names, you can discover leadership potential and involve new people.

Try Involvement by Degrees

One of the most successful techniques for helping new leaders develop is to offer ways in which individuals can become involved on a limited basis and then “grow” into a larger and more prominent role.

Asking for help with a small and simple task makes it easier for an individual to respond with a yes while presenting the chance to increase the commitment as time goes by. In fact, there often seems to be a natural progression from helper to leader.

It’s important to remember, though, that many people need a strong push...
to the front to take on a leadership role. Often history and cultural influences can keep talented individuals in the background. However, gaining experience working within a group usually bolsters confidence to take on more responsibility.

**Appeal to Self-Interests**

A standard approach to recruiting new volunteers is to try to understand the personal motivation of others. The realization that others see rewards in community service is a vital step to both identify and recruit new leaders.

Active self-interest may be intellectual or altruistic or social. Individuals may wish to help others, to pay back a debt to the community that fostered them, or to receive the approval of friends or neighbors.

It is, essentially, personal drive that brings a new leader to the point of taking a risk and trying to accomplish some task. By understanding how a person sees the rewards of community service, the appeal to take on a leadership role can be tailored to be most persuasive.

**Use a Wide-Angle Lens**

While the effort to bring new people into the leadership arena is important to community improvement projects, it’s also important to recognize that even the smallest and most limited volunteer contribution can be part of the leadership activities of a community.

Placing flowers in a park or helping with a mass mailing may seem like small efforts, but they still are part of the whole picture of what makes up a healthy and vital community. What’s important is seeing how each contribution fits into the whole picture.

Recognizing and encouraging any and all contributions to community survival requires a sense of the big picture. And, by never discounting any effort, no matter how small, the door to increased involvement remains open.

**Define the Task**

Recruiting new leaders by asking for help on a community project becomes most effective when a task is very clearly defined. This means describing the skills needed as well as the time commitment required.

It’s also a good motivational technique to describe a task in terms of what the expectations are, perhaps even including a final product. For example, if a leader is asked to manage a town hall meeting, the expectations will certainly include speaking to the assembled group and introducing others. It might also involve helping with advertising the meeting or designing the agenda. The difference in time commitment is obvious.

Finally, defining the task should also cover some ideas about how this role fits into the whole scheme of community improvement. An important
motivational tool is the understanding of how one person’s contribution strengthens the whole effort.

**IDEA 7**

**Use Current Leaders to Recruit New Leaders**

One of the signs of a healthy and vital community is a leadership group that recognizes the need to recruit new members into the leadership role. The most successful recruitment efforts are conducted by the people already in leadership positions. Because of their visibility alone, current leaders are in an excellent position to draw new leaders into community activity.

Current leaders are also in positions to make use of resources such as the media, public meetings, staff or existing committee structures to recruit new leaders.

Example is perhaps the most powerful recruiting tool available to current leaders. By sharing responsibilities through delegation, current leaders can recruit and train newcomers to the leadership pool. Recognition of effort, friendly interest, and encouragement go a long way to ensure a good supply of leaders for any community.

**IDEA 8**

**Create a History of Efficient Use of People’s Time**

There’s nothing so encouraging to a volunteer as a meeting that’s well run. Since no one likes to waste time, especially volunteer time, the efficient use of time helps build a positive reputation for an organization.

Good time management includes careful follow-up practices for delegating tasks, plus meetings that are focused and productive. Short- as well as long-term goals are important, too, so that some results are accomplished immediately and serve to build your reputation for productive activity.

Group members who are convinced that the organization (or community) project is worthwhile and that the effort is well-managed are much more likely to take on a leadership role.

**Offer Membership “Premiums”**

What are the advantages of assuming leadership? By offering some sort of “premium” to newcomers, emerging leaders can often be persuaded to try out a new role.

The use of a reward, such as an intangible or even just a symbolic gesture, can often overcome hesitation on the part of the volunteer leader.

“Premiums” can be anything from a discount on club dues, a trip to a convention or a workshop, or a letter of recognition sent to an employer highlighting the community service contributions of an employee.
Market Your Wares

Making sure that the community is aware of the results of local effort is an important technique for attracting potential leaders. Service clubs and community organizations, as well as elected or appointed councils and commissions, should consider ways to let the community know what’s being accomplished.

While word of mouth is, of course, a major communication path in any community, local newspapers (weekly or daily) and radio or TV stations can be used to highlight projects and plans. Newsletters and special notices take advantage of the print media, too. Be creative in the way your organization is presented to the community. Build on the reputation of your group as both effective and important.

If a community improvement group makes an “annual report” to the community through the local media or a presentation to the city council or village board, the reputation and visibility of the group is greatly increased. That visibility makes the organization or project attractive to emerging leaders and makes recruiting potential leaders easier.

It’s obvious that leadership is a continuing community issue. Recruiting new people into leadership positions and supporting the initial efforts of emerging leaders is one of the most productive strategies for survival that any community can employ.

Keeping in mind the motivation and needs of individuals goes a long way toward ensuring that recruiting efforts are successful. Rewarding and recognizing effort is probably the most important strategy for keeping leaders committed.

Above all, the community that works hardest to make citizen participation possible at all levels is the one that develops the most and best leaders. And that’s the type of community that

The Heartland Center for Leadership Development is an independent, nonprofit organization engaged in a variety of activities designed to help both recognized and emerging leaders approach confidently the challenges associated with fundamental change.

The Heartland Center was organized by a group of Great Plains leaders as an outgrowth of Visions from the Heartland, a grassroots futures project. The Center is known nationally for its innovative research on rural leadership and especially for its study on Clues to Rural Community Survival.
Heartland Center Programs

- Training for leaders in communities, businesses and organizations to help them deal with fundamental change by finding opportunities where others may see only threats.

- Assisting communities and organizations in developing a capacity for strategic planning and tackling problems of the future through solutions they themselves take the lead in devising.

- Helping policymakers clarify questions key to the future of communities and states and promoting broad-scale public participation in the search for workable yet innovative solutions to problems brought on by significant change.

- Conducting research on leadership and its potential impact on quality of life, public policy, and business and community prosperity.