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Intentionality in Leadership Development and Community Outreach

By Tamara A. Norris

Abstract

When a community-minded organization (CMO) engages in community outreach projects only for the sake of appearances or self-promotion, it misses valuable opportunities for relationship building and economic development, and may be doing more harm than good. Likewise, when CMOs provide leadership development for a select few rather than all employees, opportunities for their own growth are missed. In contrast, intentional and intersectional community outreach and leadership development efforts benefit the individual, the organizations, and the community. For organizations that have participated in community outreach for years, a culture shift is needed to move from doing what the organization wants to do, to doing what develops the organization’s people and develops the benefitting community. This takes intentional planning on the part of the CMO. In this article leadership development and community outreach are examined together to open a discussion for CMOs to begin envisioning a framework that makes them stronger by developing both their communities and their employees. This article seeks to advance research and discussion on the topic of community outreach intersected with leadership development.

Introduction

The term, community-minded organizations (CMO) refers to organizations pursuing some specific purpose or business, whether for profit or not, that have as an ancillary purpose to contribute to the improvement or flourishing of their community. CMOs devote time and effort to performing community outreach projects for the sake of bettering their communities. This article challenges those organizations to look at these projects in a way that steps away from mere virtue signaling and moves toward a model that builds relationships with the communities they want to serve. By being intentional in the design of its projects, the CMO can work toward a more effective outreach while creating a

thoughtful leadership development path for its own people.

The Situation

In the book *Toxic Charity*, Robert Lupton (2011) shares a story that he witnessed in an urban neighborhood on Christmas Eve 1981. While he was visiting with a neighbor, a family from an area church arrived at the neighbor’s house with donations and gifts for the family for Christmas. The father left the room while his children were playing with the gifts and Lupton comments on the scene, “I was witnessing a side I had never noticed before: how a father is emasculated in his own home in front of his wife and children for not being able to provide presents for his family,

how a wife is forced to shield her children from their father's embarrassment, how children get the message that the 'good stuff' comes from rich people out there and it is free" (Lupton, 2011, p. 33). This story underscores that what may seem to be an outreach to help a community member can cause long-term damage instead. This is not to say that providing gifts for families who are experiencing financial difficulties is wrong, but in this situation the method used was harmful. Rather than dropping gifts off and making a spectacle in front of the family, consider a method that makes the parents the heroes. In a community

To effect real change, CMOs must move beyond superficial community outreach. This is done by changing the culture of the organization. The emphasis needs to be on community outreach that builds relationships. This can be accomplished when individuals from the organization serve alongside those who are benefitting from the service provided. When status labels and positional titles are stripped away (such as homeless person, or Vice President), people as equals are what remain, and only then can relational work begin.

church near the author, gifts are set up on rows of tables in their gymnasium. A parent or guardian comes in and selects the gifts they want for their families. The children may or may not be present. The act of the family heads making the selection and providing the gifts to their family accomplishes the goal of helping the family in a way that remains respectful to the family members.

Virtue Signaling

Wallace (2000) describes "Conspicuous Virtue Signaling" as "intentionally public and deliberately designed to signal the individual's virtue" (Wallace et al., 2020). An example of this is an organization that promotes helping neighborhoods through community outreach, highlights this activity in the media, but then makes no effort to employ people from that neighborhood. Virtue Signaling is defined here to illustrate that some organizations utilize community

outreach solely for the purpose of building themselves up in the eyes of the community. To effect real change, CMOs must move beyond superficial community outreach. This is done by changing the culture of the organization. The emphasis needs to be on community outreach that builds relationships. This can be accomplished when individuals from the organization serve alongside those who are benefitting from the service provided. When status labels and positional titles are stripped away (such as homeless person, or Vice President), people as equals are what remain, and only then can relational work begin.

Democratizing Philanthropy

Consider approaching outreach from the perspective that everyone has something to offer. This means that involvement in community outreach is not limited to a few star performers in the CMO. Anyone from the organization can participate and grow through the outreach experience when it is designed with that intention. Democratizing philanthropy supposes that everyone has the ability to make a difference. In a mutually beneficial outreach structure, the CMO, the beneficiary organizations, and the community they serve all work together. This article proposes a symbiotic relationship where the CMO selects beneficiary organizations and projects that fit its mission and development plan for its own employees. The beneficiary organization receives needed help by providing input into their projects to improve their service community. Both the CMO and beneficiary provide and receive in this relationship

toward the ultimate goal of a stronger business and stronger community.

Community Outreach and Leadership Development

CMOs can intentionally apply the belief that everyone has something to offer to their own employee development. Employee leadership development can engage and grow employees throughout the employee lifecycle, from onboarding to separation.

CMOs should take time to be intentional in outreach and leadership development efforts. It is more than dropping off donuts from a staff meeting at a local homeless shelter. It is examining ways to build relationships through community outreach while simultaneously providing employee development opportunities. This dual purpose may require a shift in the culture of the organization.

Shifting the Culture

To effect culture change, Burke (2018) builds on work by Schein (2004), stating there needs to be an understanding of "three concepts: artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions" (Burke, 2018, p. 245). Artifacts are visible. Do senior leaders participate in community outreach? Do managers encourage employees to participate in community outreach during business hours? Are pictures displayed showing employees working on those projects? Values come from many directions. Do communications make the connection between the company's purpose and their efforts of community and leadership? Are such values as community, empathy, and personal growth highlighted by way of providing community outreach opportunities to all employees? Finally, basic underlying assumptions according to Schein "define what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations" (Burke, 2018, p. 249). While words and actions may match, are there unwritten taboos that employees follow that might interfere with fully embracing a connection

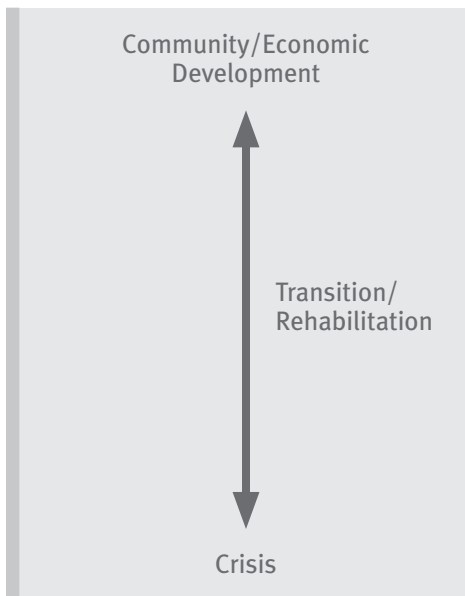


Figure 1. Community Outreach Continuum

between community outreach and leadership development.

In all aspects of culture, a CMO can seize opportunities to shift away from “doing for” to “doing with.” The CMO needs to shift from the mindset that it is bestowing a boon upon a community to a mindset that it is partnered *with* the beneficiaries to build a strong community.

Understanding the orientation of a CMO in terms of its artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions toward community involvement will help those championing that organization’s shift toward a mutually beneficial community outreach/ leadership development culture. For those concerned with the CMO’s profitability, being community-minded and profitable are not mutually exclusive. Organizations like Microsoft show that a company can be both, if they are intentional in what they do.

The following section introduces a set of frameworks a CMO can use in these efforts to help identify 1) the type of outreach response needed, and 2) where individuals are in their leadership skills. Then these are brought together to help CMOs determine where to focus their outreach and leadership development efforts.

A. Community Outreach Continuum

Corbett (2014) introduces three areas of poverty intervention: “relief, rehabilitation and development” (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014). Using Corbett’s model as a

starting point, the author proposes a Community Outreach Continuum, illustrated in Figure 1, that progresses from Crisis Relief to Transition/Rehabilitation and then Community/Economic Development.

1. Crisis Relief

Crises happen. Hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and medical emergencies each constitute a crisis. Response to a crisis calls for quick action to provide needed food, shelter, help, etc. However, crises eventually subside, as should crisis-level relief. Melissa Crutchfield of The United Methodist Committee on Relief states, “Emergency relief can go on for a long time or can end fairly quickly. It depends on the nature of the emergency and the resources at hand. The length of time it takes to recover depends on the magnitude of the disaster, the preparedness of the country, the vulnerability and accessibility of the affected location, and the resources that are immediately or locally available” (Crutchfield, 2013). The length of time for crisis relief may vary, but at some point, the cleaning buckets and pallets of bottled water become less of a need and the community is ready to transition to the next phase.

2. Transition/ Rehabilitation

In Transition/Rehabilitation efforts, those receiving assistance can now become involved in participation and planning. In this phase, the issues begin to settle. In disaster relief this is when base needs are being met and the “social fabric of communities is strengthened” (*Phases of Disaster Recovery: Emergency Response for the Long Term—WorldReliefWeb*, n.d.). When disaster victims have a source for food and have connected with a shelter, longer term issues can begin to be addressed. The recipients of services can be engaged in that process. An example of this stage is the Transformation Station at Good Works, Inc. in Athens, Ohio:

Through the Transformation Station, Good Works provides appliances, non-emergency food, bicycles, and cars to people in rural Ohio through what we call a “sweat equity” volunteer opportunity... Our vision is to bring people into community, clothe them with

dignity, and help them use their skills and abilities to help and serve others (Good Works Inc., n.d.).

Through the Transformation Station, the beneficiaries work alongside the CMOs (Democratizing Philanthropy). No distinction is made regarding a person’s position within the work team. The people needing assistance are a vital part of the work being done.

3. Community/Economic Development

In the community/economic development phase, the recipients are fully engaged, since this work directly affects the area where they live and work. They engage in the project and in the planning process. This is a long-term commitment. Changing a community takes time and effort. A relevant example is Urban Recipe, a food co-op in Atlanta, Georgia. The mission of Urban Recipe is “to partner with our members and supporters in creating food security, building community, and providing a platform for personal development while affirming dignity” (*Urban Recipe*, n.d.). Members of the co-op are responsible for various tasks such as unloading food, sorting, and cleaning. They also participate in the co-op’s business meetings. Urban Recipe meets every two weeks and is limited to membership of 50 families. The members of the co-op are engaged in operations. They are part of the decision-making process. They work at the co-op and have a voice. The recipients are not receiving a handout; they are working for the help they receive and are part of the organization’s decision-making process.

The Community Outreach Continuum helps CMOs determine how to structure response based on the type of intervention needed. This is not to be done in a silo, however, but in collaboration with the beneficiary, especially as the effort moves closer to community/economic development. Not all beneficiary organizations work at all stages of the continuum. Through the partnership built with the CMO, the work they do can create benefits for both organizations. For example, a college that partners with a domestic violence shelter normally works at crisis

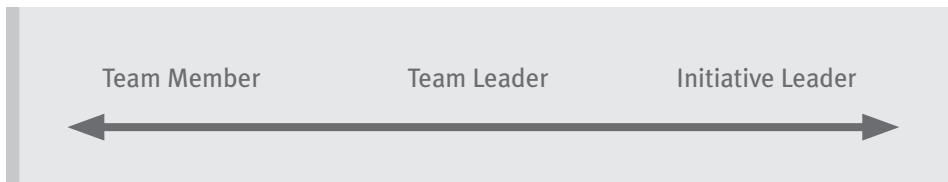


Figure 2. Leadership Development Continuum

level. Together the two organizations could develop programs, such as workforce training, that would help the survivors as they get beyond the crisis and prepare to rebuild their life. This is work moving from the crisis to the transition stage.

B. Leadership Development Continuum

Individuals within an organization will be at varying points in their leadership journey. Some may be experienced leaders, while others have opportunities for growth. By intentionally involving their employees in community outreach opportunities, a CMO can help develop their internal community’s (employee) leadership skills. This can be considered as a continuum through the lens of teams (Figure 2). This model is based on work by Ed Kur, who proposed a MicroLeadership to MacroLeadership continuum.

The continuum starts with the individual as a team member and progresses to becoming a team leader. This continuum is fluid and should be matched with the employee’s current leadership skills. Newly onboarded employees do not have to start at the beginning of the continuum if they are experienced leaders. Likewise, a manager may benefit from work on his or her leadership skills and may start at the beginning of the continuum. The model is meant to meet people where they are.

1. Team Member

An employee’s leadership development should begin with their onboarding and continue until separation from the organization. The employee is involved in projects as part of a community outreach team. When beginning to develop leadership skills employees are known as “emerging leaders.” By participating as a member of a team, they network with others in the organization to develop relationships. Relationships formed while working together serving others invites a different level of conversation and cooperation than what may occur in the workplace. Additionally,

relationships begin to form with the community with whom the outreach is occurring. Skills developed at this level include networking, community awareness, and teamwork.

2. Team Leader

At this level, the individual takes on a leadership role of a team in a community outreach program. He or she is charged with overseeing the team, delegation, and managing group dynamics. While developing their own skills they also are developing the other team members’ leadership skills. Skills developed at this level include delegation, group dynamics, developing others and an even deeper understanding of the community.

3. Initiative Leader

At this level, the role of the leader is evolving to strategic planning. They are honing their skills in long-term planning and continue to develop team members. They may serve on community boards and lead long-term community initiatives. Skills developed at this level include

strategic planning, needs assessment, and leading others.

C. Community Outreach Meets Leadership Development

The Community Outreach Continuum can intersect with the Leadership Development Continuum (Figure 3). As CMOs investigate outreach projects, each project should be viewed where it is in terms of crisis (immediate) to community development (longer term) and the people to be involved will be viewed based on their position of team members to initiative leaders. By critically examining potential projects against these frameworks, the appropriate outreach response with the right people can be selected. Ultimately as employees are developed and community relations formed, the CMOs projects will move toward Quadrant D in Figure 3.

A. Crisis Responder—In this area, emerging leaders are matched with an agency providing crisis relief. For example, a project where the organization partners with the Red Cross and collects canned products and bottled water for the victims of an apartment complex fire.

B. Crisis Response Leader—With more leadership experience, the employee will lead the team to respond to the crisis. This

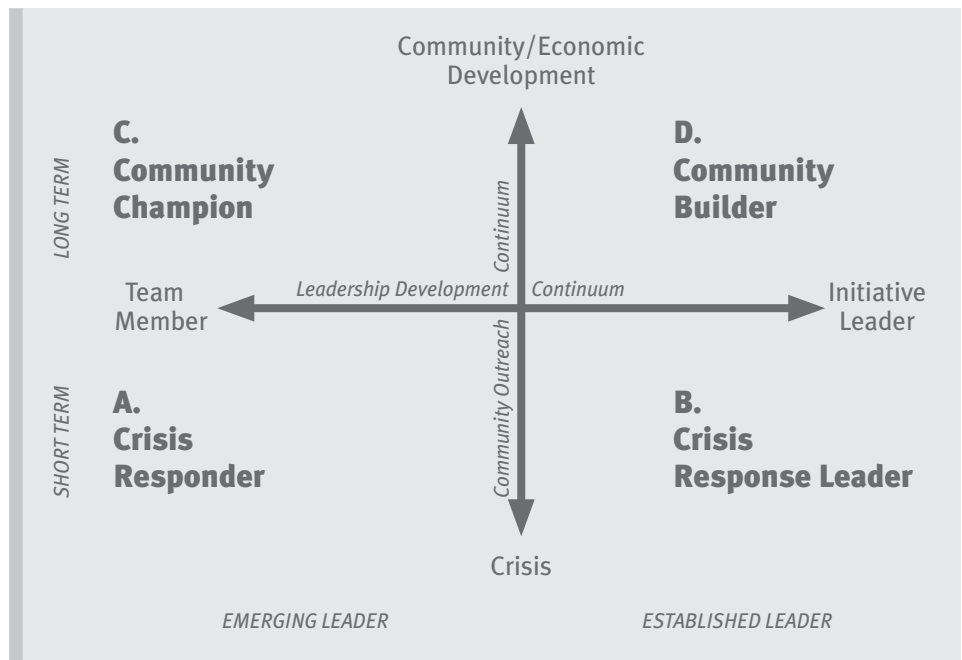


Figure 3. Project Selection Grid

may be a partnership with an area domestic violence shelter to lead programming around improving the shelter and providing needed items for the residents. The program is driven by the employees with less supervision from managers.

C. Community Champion—The longer-term projects will already be established by the Initiative leader so these new leaders will serve as team members and have an environment to begin practicing what they are learning.

D. Community Builder—In this quadrant, the organization works toward long-term relationships and community building. It is leaders who have progressed to leading these long-term initiatives.

What does this look like from the perspective of the beneficiary? Consider *Figure 3* again looking at the benefits for the receiving (beneficiary) organization.

A. Crisis Responder—During crisis relief, the beneficiary organization often needs people right now. These emerging leaders will be helping people at their most desperate hour and due to the relationship with the beneficiary, the help will be what is specifically needed. For example, after a hurricane, organizations that work with victims do not need truckloads of toys, they need cleaning supplies and drinking water.

B. Crisis Response Leader—In addition to team members this level of CMO will have leadership experience and the beneficiary organization can utilize them to help lead pieces of the project freeing the organization up to address other duties.

C. Community Champion—As the relationship develops with the CMO, the beneficiary will be able to integrate the emerging leaders into projects and get them more involved in the benefitting community to build understanding and relationships between both parties.

D. Community Builder—The beneficiary has a long-term relationship with the CMO as they work together to better serve the community. The people at this level have established leadership skills and not only can lead projects but may be good candidates for board members.

Table 1. Answering Questions Using Both Continuums

	Community Development	Leadership Development
Why – Purpose	Define desired outcome: social justice, economic recovery, food insecurity, etc.	Define desired leadership skills: project leadership, emotional intelligence, goal setting
Who – Stakeholders	Identify your CMO’s unique gifts, then connect with suitable beneficiaries	Include all employees from onboarding until separation
Where – Location	Consider communities that are local to your organization that are sources of customers or that are within your supplier network	Determine whether it is more beneficial to the employee to develop relationships at the onsite location, at another offsite location or in the surrounding community
What – Action	Align with needs of the beneficiary based on the beneficiary organization’s position on the Community Outreach continuum	Select the type of project and role based on participants’ positions on the Leadership Development Continuum
When – Timing	Ensure the term of relief is aligned with CMO’s needs and beneficiary’s needs	Focus is on long term leadership development and not on performance review schedules

1. How Does This Work?

Table 1 provides thought and structure around the questions why, who, where, what, and when. It offers insight into the intentionality that goes into creating this type of outreach program. While this level of coordination takes time, it sets up expected outcomes for both community outreach and employee leadership development.

From the community development perspective, the CMO analyzes its own strengths as well as the needs of the community. The outreach project they choose is based on the needs of the organization or community that will benefit from the outreach. This can only happen by forming a relationship between the CMO and the beneficiary, so they may discuss what is truly needed. It is suggested that the beneficiary organization be one that has experience with the community they serve and can address needs along the proposed Community Outreach Continuum. To achieve greater buy-in from employees the CMO may want to select a beneficiary organization with a non-controversial mission, such as Goodwill Industries International, Inc. They desire to partner with other organizations to “achieve a shared vision of

building an economic recovery that works for everyone” (*How to Partner with Us*, n.d.). Goodwill provides services from clothing to training for the communities in which they serve. The CMO must evaluate beneficiary organizations based on factors such as the current political climate and the CMO’s organizational mission.

From the leadership development perspective, the CMO also focuses inward on how involvement in developing the community can simultaneously serve as leadership development for individuals in the organization. While all employees may be invited to participate in community outreach initiatives by serving on teams, there is intentionality in involving emerging leaders in the planning and management processes. As this process is part of an intentional leadership development strategy where the CMO is investing in its community and its employees, it is encouraged that this outreach be done as part of the employee’s paid scope of work. Referring to the Leadership Development Continuum in *Figure 2*, the goal is to move employees along this continuum. This process starts with onboarding and continues through to separation. While presented as a linear path, it is possible that as a person

A Personal Story

Early in my career life I belonged to the Toledo Area Jaycees (formerly known as the Junior Chamber of Commerce). Founded in the early 1900's in St. Louis, Missouri, the organization is an example of a CMO which intentionally develops both the community and the individual. Its core tenets include "service to humanity is the best work of life" (History, n.d.). Chapters around the world share the mission "To provide development opportunities that empower young people to create positive change" (Mission and Vision, n.d.). Over its long history the Jaycees has been a Community-Minded Organization which intentionally develops both the community and the individual.

In the work position I held at that time, there was little room for advancement or development beyond learning the next new software package. The Jaycees are a place for young business people such as myself to meet and work together to develop leadership skills. I honed my skills through projects and training that promoted my individual development through community development. Through this organization I refined my leadership skills and network with a variety of business leaders and government officials locally, at the state, and international levels. The Jaycees was a safe environment for me to practice my skills of public speaking, project management, team leadership, recruitment, and more. The lessons learned continue to have an impact on me today.

moves into new positions of leadership, they may restart at a mid-point somewhere along the path to help refine their leadership skills.

a. Return on Investment—Community-Minded Organization

CMOs will still be concerned about the expected outcomes. Return on investment of involvement in outreach projects may not easily be measured in dollars, but consider the following potential benefits:

- » Leadership skill development within the CMO by letting emerging leaders practice in an external environment.

- » Lasting learning for leaders as "learning effects persist longer when more sensory channels are involved" (Bartsch, 2012). These projects provide hands-on experiential learning.
- » "Improves the work engagement of employees" (Zhang et al., 2021). Zhang found this improvement even when all employees were not involved in the same level of volunteering.
- » Increased commitment (Kim et al., 2010) of participating employees to the CMO and to the community.
- » Develop or refine individual employee compassion. "Through corporate volunteering, employees are able to express care and compassion to beneficiaries or recipients outside the organization's boundaries" (Grant, 2012).

b. Return on Investment—Beneficiary Organization

The beneficiary organization receives return on their investment in the partnership with the CMO. These may include:

- » Help that is helpful. The intentionality behind the design of the community outreach project will ensure that it is a project that the beneficiary organization or community can use. The volunteer projects are not busy work wasting both parties' time but are important to the mission and operations of the beneficiaries.
- » "Non-profit organizations receive external feedback concerning their work methods" (Bartsch, 2012). This is an opportunity for community-based organizations to learn from their CMO partners' business management perspectives.

c. Mutual Return on Investment

Finally, as this is a partnership, there is a benefit to the relationship between the CMO and beneficiary:

- » As progress is made toward community development, the beneficiary and CMO develop a deeper relationship. This can lead both to better view situations from another's perspective.
- » The beneficiary organization spends time in service to a community. Through this intentional project design

there is opportunity for the beneficiary and CMO to learn from each other. An organization with well-developed teams and leaders who has a community focus strengthens the community as a whole. Likewise, a strong community in which to conduct business will help the CMO in their business efforts.

Conclusion

Outreach efforts, while often well meaning, can have unintended consequences. Donations can skew a community's economy by exceeding demand and harming local small business people. Food pantries could keep people in long-term dependency. For community outreach to have a lasting impact, CMOs need to be intentional about the type of projects they conduct based on the Community Outreach Continuum. By deliberately incorporating employee leadership development in this effort, the CMO, the beneficiary organization, and individual employees can all learn and grow from these outreach efforts.

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