



CULTIVATING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TO *Transform Communities*

As comprehensive as the Main Street Approach, so are the many opportunities available for everyone in the community to participate. This collective sense of ownership strengthens and transforms communities resulting in increased economic activity, enhanced levels of engagement, and stronger sense of place.



Photo: Port Washington Main Street



By Norma Ramirez de Miess and Rachel Bowdon

Strong, thriving communities don't just happen. They need effective leaders at all levels, from a broad-base of committed volunteers to dedicated professional staff offering their time, talents, and passion.

One of the greatest strengths of Main Street is the continuous opportunity for people to come together to lead in various capacities and at different points in the revitalization process—whether it's during the first phase of building consensus and defining direction, or in the final phases of executing and completing projects and initiatives. As comprehensive as the Main Street Approach, so are the many opportunities available for everyone in the community to participate. This collective sense of ownership strengthens and transforms communities resulting in increased economic activity, enhanced levels of activity, and stronger sense of place.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION ON PEOPLE

While our day-to-day efforts might often direct our focus towards the immediate projects and initiatives we want to achieve, these tangible results should not be the only objective of our work on Main Street. After all, the goal of our work goes much deeper than simply creating a beautiful downtown district with businesses and activities to enjoy today.

Perhaps more important is that our communities continue to thrive well into the future, which depends upon a community with a solid sense of ongoing ownership in the downtown and core commercial district. We must make it a goal to be continuously focused on cultivating ownership among everyone in the community, not just among a few very loyal and dedicated people, to ensure successful revitalization efforts well into the future.

At its core, Main Street is intended to be a community-driven approach. If someone asked you right now if your revitalization efforts are being done *with* broad community engagement or just *for* their benefit, what would be your answer? Very small words can make a big difference in our efforts and corresponding results. So, as you and your board and committees consider the next work plans and projects, take the time to consider who else needs to be involved in those efforts and the ways to foster their active engagement. We should all strive to make sure that in everything we do, we avoid positioning the role of the community merely as an observer of revitalization, but an actual driver of the whole process.

Norma Ramirez de Miess helps

communities across the nation assess organizational and programming needs and implement strategies that build successful revitalization efforts. With more than 20 years of leadership experience, she developed NMSC's diversity services and leads initiatives that promote inclusion and understanding of the business approach of multi-cultural entrepreneurs. Before joining the Center, Norma led one of the largest and most diverse urban downtown revitalization programs in Elgin, Illinois, and was recognized as one of the 25 Most Influential Latino Leaders in the Chicago area.

As the Content and Education Manager, **Rachel Bowdon** is responsible for managing the Center's key marketing and member communication offerings, including the development and launch of the new NMSC website and member network, as well as the Center's new annual publication, *State of Main*. Previously, Rachel led the development of the recently launched Main Street America Institute, the Center's signature education and training program. She graduated with a degree in Art History from DePaul University and received a Masters in Urban Planning and Policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

We Asked You...about Building a Foundation on People

What tools or strategies do you find to be the most effective at creating a strong sense of ownership in members of the community?

"I find that involvement, especially in smaller projects, leads to more long-term involvement." Katy Kassian, Motivational Speaker, Tait and Kate

"Keeping them informed, giving them behind the scenes looks at new projects, giving them opportunities to participate in shaping our program's work, sharing the credit, celebrating successes together." Andrea Dono, Executive Director, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, Virginia

"Have volunteers decide what projects they will produce. Few want to be given or take over an assignment they did not create." Donna Ann Harris, Principal, Heritage Consulting Inc.

"Try to involve everyone no matter how small the task and make them feel like they are part of the change." Cristina Amoruso, Coordinator, DC Main Streets

"Frequent open communications and processes for gaining public input early in the process and then using that input and reporting back. Make sure they feel part of the process and that their contributions are valued." Michael Cain, City Manager, Boyne City, Michigan

What are some tips or examples on how communities can best recruit, keep, and recognize the value of their volunteers, staff, and partners, etc.?

"One advantage Main Street Programs have is the Main Street Approach that allows people with varied interests and skills to work towards the same cause. We meet with our volunteers to learn about their background and what they want to focus on. We get the best work when we give our volunteers, staff and partners the opportunity to do what they love." Samantha Armbruster, Main Street Program Manager, City of San Marcos, Texas

"It usually takes a "one on one" invitation. Send them a thank you note, recognize them in the newspaper, recognize them at annual meetings. Treat them as a partner and make sure that they understand that you value their time and efforts!" Karen Dye, Program Manager, Newkirk Main Street, Newkirk, Oklahoma

"Everything is about relationships; people want to work with people that they like. Spend extra time getting to know your volunteers, and appropriately matching them to what will best serve their needs and desires." Diana Schwartz, Director, Ocala Main Street, Florida

"Make the time they give to your program worth it by being a well-organized program." Debra Drescher, State Coordinator, Texas Main Street Program

We don't just need people to "help" us achieve revitalization. We want everyone in our community to "own" revitalization!

We already know that downtowns are the hearts of our communities—but to be sustainable, downtowns need to be *in* the hearts of the whole community.

EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO LEAD

The number of nonprofit organizations has grown exponentially from a few thousand to tens of thousands within the last decade, creating an environment that is increasingly competitive in gaining community

attention, support and resources. People of all ages are still volunteering, but they are now more selective about which causes they want to support and how they want to volunteer. This changing landscape provides a unique opportunity for organizations to consider a more focused and nuanced approach to community engagement, going beyond general calls for volunteers and support. It is clear that a "one-size-fits-all" approach for outreach and engagement is no longer enough, and perhaps, it never was.

Thanks to many studies on the subject of engagement, we now know that age, gender, and differing back-

grounds influence people's interest and preferences with regards to their volunteer involvement more than ever before. We also know that the ability to adapt to changing work environment trends is vital to sustaining engagement. For example, the changing economy has pushed much of the private sector to the important realization that they need to be more attentive at leveraging the talent of the individual while fostering more collaborative team models. Likewise, nonprofit organizations that rely on volunteer support as their "workforce" will need to rise to the challenge by finding better ways to foster a more inclusive and collaborative environment to empower their volunteers and staff to find a niche and purpose for their investment of time, talents, and efforts within the organization.

Because Main Streets' organizational base relies on more than one layer of leadership, organizations should plan to allocate a significant amount of time and effort to strengthening community engagement processes and human capital management. Building effective teams and developing collaborative and engaging environments is a complex effort that requires constant attention to processes and communications.

The first step to building more active community engagement includes performing an in-depth assessment of the overall leadership management approach,

We Asked You...about Empowering People to Lead

What do you think is the most effective way to empower people to lead?

"Connect to their passion and find out what they are most interested in. Then, provide the tools they need to move forward and take ownership of a project in a safe environment where they know they are supported by those around them." Cristie Thomas, Executive Director, Marietta Main Street, Ohio

"Make sure that they have a chance to participate in the creation of the work plan and see their ideas come to life. There is a saying, those that write a plan help underwrite a plan, and that does not just mean financially; time is one of the most valuable gifts. It is also very important to help them understand how their participation directly affects success." Diana Schwartz, Director, Ocala Main Street, Florida

"Give them a chance to shine while being there to be supportive of their efforts. I try to let them chart their own path." Natalie Ziegler, City Manager, Hartsville, South Carolina

"People need to understand clearly the parameters of the task and what the expectations are. If they are prepared to lead it is important to not micromanage them as this is the quickest way to lose any leader." Cristina Amoruso, Coordinator, DC Main Streets

What are some tips on what makes a team successful?

"Start with a dedication to a desired team culture and vision for the program. HOW a team works has to be more important than WHAT the team is working on." Samantha Armbruster, Main Street Program Manager, City of San Marcos, Texas

"Bonding! Having strong relationships with those you work alongside undoubtedly makes the work stronger. And, understanding the importance of the work and why it is vital not only to your mission but to the community as a whole." Cristie Thomas, Executive Director, Marietta Main Street, Ohio

"Learn how to play in the sandbox together—we can disagree but as long as we are all headed down the path toward the same grand goal, it's OK." Debra Drescher, State Coordinator, Texas Main Street Program

"We don't have staff meetings to catch each other up on our projects—we hold them as working groups. We pick a topic or project that one of us is working on and brainstorm and share ideas so that project leads can benefit from the expertise in the group." Andrea Dono, Executive Director, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, Virginia

from volunteer development and management practices, to planning and implementation. As we work with many organizations implementing revitalization across the country, we see important common elements that are helping build effective efforts. These include clear leadership roles and expectations, engaging practices that encourage empowerment rather than control, and regular and strong connections between all levels of leadership. Although sometimes we're focused on *what* we want to achieve (i.e. projects), our organizations must place a priority on *how* we go about making it all happen to achieve more sustainable results. This empowering format has provided a very effective foundation on which to build strong revitalization efforts for many organizations.

Further, it is crucial to take a closer look at communications with the community, from messaging to timing and tools. Main Street organizations must pay careful attention to adapt their communications based on *who* they are trying reach. For example, tried and true communication methods and tools may work with a strong and stable leadership base, but new techniques are often required to effectively engage new community members with less familiarity of the organization's mission. Also, organizations need to be strategic about the timing of communications and to be aware of competing internal and external factors that could impact reach. It is a constant balancing act, but understanding how to adapt and optimize communications is essential to cultivating strong leadership.

LEADING REVITALIZATION EFFECTIVELY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

We know that Main Street has been a highly effective approach for breathing new life into thousands of our historic downtowns and commercial districts. After going through an intensive review of the approach and its implementation across the country, the National Main Street Center's recently launched "refreshed" Main Street Approach, not only confirms the value of the methodology, but also reinforces the value of community engagement. People from all sectors and back-

grounds continue to be Main Street's biggest and most important resource for successful revitalization. This review provided a closer look at what works and what needs improvements with regards to our work with people in our organizations and communities.

Main Streets have built a reputation of hard working people—volunteers and staff—engaged in various initiatives that address the needs of revitalization in each of the Four Points. And although strategy has always been an integral part of the Main Street Approach, it seems that throughout the years, some of our efforts have had little to no strategy, leading to revitalization efforts that quickly falter. The refresh provides a unique opportunity to move beyond a project-based focus to a more solid strategy-driven focus, strengthening the positions of our staff and volunteers.

Board of Directors: Beyond serving as the main leadership base for the organization, we're now encouraging boards to dedicate more attention to developing the direction of revitalization efforts through a clear understanding of the market opportunities and community needs. Through "Transformation Strategies," boards of directors can be more effective at empowering committees to lead the implementation of the projects and initiatives that are clearly aligned with the strategies outlined.

Committees & Team Members: The refresh also provides an opportunity for committee leaders to make stronger connections between initiatives and with other committees or teams. While many Main Streets have and built a strong base of committees and teams following the Four Points that can continue to work for implementing their Transformation Strategies, the "refreshed" Approach also encourages local leaders to consider the flexibility needed to best fit their organizational needs. To be clear, "flexibility" does not mean and should not be interpreted as a "lack of" organization or "loose" organization. Rather, every Main Street organization should carefully assess and be strategic on how to organize community and additional resources to achieve the best results.

We Asked You...about Leading Revitalization Effectively

What do you think makes a great leader?

"Great communication skills, honesty, creativity, inspiration, flexibility. You can teach a person facts, but it is rarer to come across someone that has the organic ability to create excitement." Diana Schwartz, Director, Ocala Main Street, Florida

"Humility, a public servant's heart, an ability to cut through the muck and get to the issues at hand and then deal with them in a professional and rational manner." Debra Drescher, State Coordinator, Texas Main Street Program

"Authenticity. Leaders should care about those they lead and mean it. Leaders should never expect others to do work they wouldn't do themselves. Leaders should serve those they lead as much as possible." Samantha Armbruster, Main Street Program Manager, City of San Marcos, Texas

"Someone who is willing to work hard and be part of the team while she directs it at the same time." Cristina Amoruso, Coordinator, DC Main Streets

What are the most effective leadership strategies that you use?

"My best strategy is fairly simple—lead by example." Katy Kassian, Motivational Speaker, Tait and Kate

"I think it is important to remember that the leaders in your organization may not be the 'one with a title. If someone has the things that make a great leader—communication, creativity, inspiration—then make sure you are creating space for them to do so." Diana Schwartz, Director, Ocala Main Street, Florida

"Ask people to participate in developing the vision of the future, then you can lead them towards that future with confidence. Even if things get rough in execution, people want that future and will participate." Donna Ann Harris, Principal, Heritage Consulting Inc.

"Collaboration. I don't want to dictate. I want everyone involved in doing the work and setting the agenda and the team to receive credit when we do well." Natalie Ziegler, City Manager, Hartsville, South Carolina

"Share the vision, empower people, support them, and get out of the way." Michael Cain, City Manager, Boyne City, Michigan

Main Street Directors: While the day-to-day operations, planning process, and list of projects and activities might keep Main Street directors' attention on what is needed on the ground, more than ever before it is crucial to elevate their positions to "strategists" as well. As executives of their organizations, Main Street directors will need to rise to the challenge of looking at the big picture and helping the volunteer leaders define and maintain focus on the strategy. More than managing projects, Main Street directors can be more effective by empowering volunteer leaders to lead the planning of the projects and initiatives while balancing the coordinating needs and confirming clear processes for effective implementation.

Whether at work or in their private lives, people have always been interested in making a difference by "leading" change than just "laboring" for it. Rather than "using" volunteers as a very basic source of "labor" force, we encourage Main Street organizations to dedicate time, talents, and efforts to build and empower effective leaders for revitalization and the community at large. That's the power of Main Street.