Increasing Diversity Of Leadership In Environmental Nonprofit Organizations In A Major Brownfield City: Phase 2

Lynda Jeffries, The Leadership Group LLC, USA
Ted Amsden, The Leadership Group LLC, USA

ABSTRACT

The Genesee County Parks and Recreation Commission in Michigan sponsored an effort to “develop [and implement] a vision and plan for increased diversity and inclusion of the broader community in conservation initiatives”. Genesee County includes the City of Flint Michigan, which has the largest brownfield site in the United States from the closing of General Motors Corporation facilities.

Phase 1 of this project explored differences of awareness, understanding, and perception about environmental and conservation issues through structured interviews of 23 diverse community leaders (Jeffries and Amsden, 2009). Phase 2, consisted of action planning meetings with community leaders interviewed during the initial data gathering. This article summarizes the Phase 2 results, conclusions and recommendations to increase leadership diversity within environmental organizations.

Keywords: Diversity; Environmental; Conservation; Nonprofit; Governmental Agency

INTRODUCTION

The project described in this article resulted from an effort sponsored by the Genesee County Parks and Recreation Commission in Michigan to “develop [and implement] a vision and plan for increased diversity and inclusion of the broader community in conservation initiatives.” Genesee County includes the city of Flint, Michigan, which has the largest brownfield site in the United States from the closing of General Motors Corporation facilities. Flint has a predominantly African American population surrounded by predominantly white suburban and rural areas.

The first phase of this project focused on understanding differences of awareness, understanding, and perception about environmental and conservation issues through structured interviews of 23 diverse community leaders and was reported in detail in a prior article by the authors. (Jeffries and Amsden, 2009).

The 23 interviewees included:

- 12 African Americans
- 8 White Americans
- 2 Arab Americans
- 1 East Indian American.

Interviewee gender:

- thirteen female
- ten male

Experience with environmental issues and organizations:

- 8 with little/none,
- 6 with some experience
- 9 with significant experience.

All interviewees were engaged civically to a significant degree, including several executive directors of local non-profit agencies.

Themes from the interviews included emphasis on different environmental issues, with people of color focusing on environmental challenges in their neighborhoods. Perceptions of people of color about local environmental organizations ranged from uncommunicative and uninvolved in environmental issues affecting people of color to elitist and exclusionary. Themes also included an interest by community leaders of color in environmental issues and willingness to serve or recommend others to serve on boards of local environmental organizations. The failure to provide opportunities and guidance for youth of color about environmental careers was also a theme.

The background of diversity issues in United States environmental groups was described briefly in the article on Phase 1 of this project:

United States (US) environmental groups' leadership and staff have largely been composed of White Americans (Bonta and Jordan, 2007, p. 16). Some authors report a perception by environmentalists that people of color "do not care about the environment" (p. 17). Others suggest there is a "realization that many prestigious environmental professionals didn't know why diversity is important, despite their professed belief in its importance" (Enderle, 2007, p. 6). In addition, the missed opportunities from a failure to see a connection between environmental issues and racial justice issues, referred to as environmental justice, have been the subject of increasing attention (Rhodes, 2003).

Environmental organizations continue to struggle with diversity in staff and governance structures. Although they account for one-third of the US population, people of color hold only 14% of staff positions and 13% of board positions within nonprofit environmental groups, up from 9% in 2002 (Stanton, 2005, p. 62). Roughly 22% of government environmental agencies and 33% of mainstream environmental organizations employ no people of color on staff. When hired, people of color often fill support staff positions that are not necessarily targeted for leadership potential (Bonta and Jordan, 2005, p. 10).

The current article describes Phase 2 of the project, which consisted of action planning meetings facilitated by the authors with community leaders who had been interviewed as part of the original data gathering.

METHODS

Facilitated Meetings

The authors facilitated two meetings of community leaders in February and March of 2009. To increase the likelihood of attendance, the meetings were scheduled for two hours in length. All but one of the meeting participants had been previously interviewed as part of the data gathering process.

First Facilitated Meeting, February 4, 2009

The first facilitated meeting was held on February 4, 2009 in First Presbyterian Church, Flint. Participants included people from the following organizations: University of Michigan Flint, Flint River Watershed Coalition, University Outreach University of Michigan Flint, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Keep Genesee County Beautiful, Boys & Girls Club, University of Michigan Flint Center for Civic Engagement/ Environmental Justice Student, Genesee County COGIC Alliance, Concerned Pastors for Social Action, and Genesee County Parks and Recreation. Participant demographics in the first meeting were:

African American: 3 White American: 6
Female: 5 Male: 4

After introductions and an icebreaker about earliest memory of an environmental or conservation issue, a summary of the Phase 1 data analysis was presented in a PowerPoint presentation. The full written data analysis report was also provided to participants. Small group discussion about the data and full group debrief followed.

A guided imagery exercise was conducted to answer the following question: To foster greater diversity in leadership, what should environmental and conservation organizations be like in 10 years (leadership, programs and impact)? Everyone shared what they envisioned to the full group. Responses were captured on easel paper. Each participant posted two dots on the easel paper to prioritize the group's responses. The results of the visioning and the prioritizing activities are provided below.

Visioning Results (#) = number of dots

- Increased service learning and place-based education (5)
- Public spaces – bright, shiny, people, kids (3)
- Environmental Liaison per neighborhood (2.5)
- Common “new” story/narrative – all moving forward (2.5)
- Flint has its 1st master plan since 1960s (2)
- Compacts – “Green” municipal (2)
- Tapped into graduating classes from universities – they stay in Flint (2)
- People in Flint are hired to do jobs – make Flint better (2)
- National workshops/seminars held in Flint – more people engaged (1)
- Redevelopment doesn't price out Flint residents (1)
- Neighborhood activism (1)
- Intentionally cultivated leadership
- Green zones (tax credits, etc.)
- Grocery stores in neighborhoods
- No one saying “I can see through Max Brandon Park” [a large Flint park with trees, but little other greenery]
- Diverse ethnic government
- 70% electric cars
- Indoor solar theme park
- Cashless society
- New luxury housing
- Michigan's 2nd Urban State Park replacing Chevy-in-the-Hole [razed site of General Motors and Fisher Body plants where the 1935 sit-down strike gave birth to the United Auto Workers].
- More open lines of communication between universities and the community

First Meeting Evaluations

At the close of the first meeting, participants were given evaluation sheets. Key themes from the evaluations were (1) the value of discussing these issues together, (2) the lack of sufficient time for discussion, (3) the need for more people to participate, and (4) the need for planning specific next steps.

Second Facilitated Meeting, March 18, 2009

The second facilitated meeting was held on March 18, 2009 also in First Presbyterian Church, Flint. Participants included people from the following organizations: University of Michigan Flint, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Keep Genesee County Beautiful and Genesee County Parks and Recreation. Participant demographics in this meeting were:

African American: 3 White American: 1
 Female: 3 Male: 1

The following four visioning priorities which had received the most “votes” from the previous meeting were selected by the authors for further analysis by participants:

- Increased service learning and place-based education (5)
- Public spaces – bright, shiny, people, kids (3)
- Environmental Liaison per neighborhood (2.5)
- Common “new” story/narrative – all moving forward (2.5)

For each of these visioning priorities, participants were asked to identify (1) barriers to achieving the particular vision, and (2) strategies for overcoming those barriers.

RESULTS

The results of this activity were the following:

Top 4 Priorities from Visioning

I: Increased Service Learning and Place-Based Education

Barriers	Strategies
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaboration between agencies (to use in-kind resources, space, etc.)
Connection-Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaboration w/universities (internship, college credit) ● Cooperate with and talk to orgs to identify eligibility for resources
“language-gap” – university/academic language vs. everyday language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ex: “look for college kids to volunteer” Language should be consistent
Tends to be done in fits & starts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Needs to have more continuity, longer lasting connections w/individual people
Availability in all communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bring resources to the community and highlight the value of the program. ● Acknowledge/thank those involved ● Rotate around to different communities
Sustainability	
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Time events when mass transit is available. ● Tailor transit to program (let them know what is needed)
Other factors that are of a higher priority (work, clothing, etc.)	
Outreach method/marketing	

II: Public Spaces – Bright, Shiny, People, Kids

Barriers	Strategies
Lack of coordination of effort, resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Find programs within the city to save time and money (ex: look at administrative structures)
Fear of public spaces (safety)	
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involve citizens near/in their location; causes them to see value, take ownership and decreases vandalism
Lack of things to do in the community. Space should be nice, but many may not see value in utilizing the space.	

Relationships not forged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Door-to-door conversations spreads knowledge/support even if don't participate directly ● Small house-meetings or in community spaces and agencies to hold discussions ● Balance listening & talking (facilitated) ● Personal invitations ● Include time to talk about individual experiences
Splintering in groups & bad publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Insure "equitable" distribution of resources; example - park mowing in some areas & not others (based on acres vs. parks) ● Rotate resources
Transportation	

III: Environmental Liaison From Neighborhood

Barriers	Strategies
Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify small group of people and provide resources and basic support (pencils, paper, etc.)
Funding	
Defining neighborhoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Look at wards, precincts, block clubs, or self-select ● Consider occupancy –ex: abandoned lots) ● Base on location of elementary school
Marketing/Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Email fliers to community orgs; tap into school contacts & small businesses
Building relationships/trust	
"Burn-out" – small groups of people take on responsibilities for so many thing that they become tired, disillusioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give others an opportunity; don't call on the same people

IV: Common "New" Story/Narrative – All Moving Forward

Barriers	Strategies
Crafting a "consensus" based message	
Everyone not at the table	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invite people to the table in the beginning (creatively involved vs. imposed) ● Meet in the community; reach out to them ● Make true community meetings vs. public hearings
Getting people to agree on story/not clinging to past	
"Sounding board" not available	
How to balance issues of recovery & healing with need to move forward	
Too often there is minimalization of impact of past and by ignoring it/not apologizing for past wrongs, this stands in the way of moving on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge/be honest about inequities in order to move forward. Stop the denial.
Segregation – self selected and imposed by others	

Next Steps

The participants then consulted on the next steps that should follow this second facilitated meeting. The results of those discussions are below.

1. Have conversations within the community about "environmental" issues in their particular neighborhoods.
2. Start solving these problems neighborhood-by-neighborhood; priority-by-priority
3. Use joint city park efforts to:
 - a. Solve some park issues

- b. Build relationships and establish authenticity
 - c. Be one starting point for other solutions
4. Delivering this information to state level to get added support
 - a. Look for funding
 - b. Reduce political barriers
 - c. Gain clarity on why things happen that affect locally
5. Outreach to media about these efforts
6. The authors write this as a case study and publicize
7. Look at other communities for more best practices
8. Look at other age groups within this community for best practices to share with other age groups
9. Linkages to various websites of participating organizations
10. Develop a Leadership Council on these issues
11. The authors write a final report with recommendations

Second Meeting Evaluations

At the close of the second meeting, participants were given evaluations sheets. Key themes from the evaluations were (1) the value of discussing barriers and strategies, (2) the value of diverse backgrounds in the discussion, and (3) the need for civic and community support.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Immediate Outcomes

The authors became aware of several immediate outcomes of the two facilitated meetings, which included:

- Between meetings 1 and 2, several agencies discussed collaborations on existing projects.
- One participant was asked to join the board of a partner agency.
- Participants desired continuing dialogue.
- Participants wanted more people to participate in this dialogue.

Recommendations

Recommendations from the authors to the sponsors of this project included:

- Development of a Leadership Council to drive ongoing activities
- Share report of activities/outcomes with community and stakeholders
- Examine priorities and develop action plans/timelines

CONCLUSIONS

The participants in the two facilitated meetings developed a variety of ideas for increasing the diversity of participation and leadership in Flint area environmental and conservation nonprofit and governmental organizations. These ideas may offer insights and stimulate thinking by similar organizations elsewhere that recognize the diverse impacts of environmental and conservation issues and the need for diversity within the organizations, including at the leadership levels.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Genesee Parks and Recreation Commission and its executive director Amy McMillan for sponsoring this project and providing considerable logistical support. The authors also wish to acknowledge appreciation to the Ruth Mott Foundation for funding this project and to Jennifer Hill and Elizabeth Jordan of the Foundation for their support and encouragement of this project.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Lynda Jeffries has a MBA in Management from the University of Detroit Mercy, a Graduate Certificate from Wayne State University in Human Performance Technology, and a B.S. in Business Administration from Lawrence Technological University. She is an Adjunct Professor of Leadership and Nonprofit Management at Lawrence Tech and taught Social Diversity and Business Ethics at Davenport University. Lynda is certified in MRG's Leadership Effectiveness Assessment and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. She is the author of the CD "Overcoming Procrastination" and co-author of the article "Increasing Diversity of Leadership in Environmental Nonprofit Organizations in a Major Brownfield City: Phase 1". E-mail: Ljeffries2@prodigy.net.

Ted Amsden has a Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School, a B.A. in Economics from Wayne State University and a Graduate Certificate in Organization Development from Eastern Michigan University. Ted is a certified Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) and is MBTI certified. Ted has worked on diversity inclusion for 21 years, and received several awards. He co-wrote "Transforming Diversity Trainers into O.D. Change Agents", *International Journal on Diversity*, v.4 (2006) and "Increasing Diversity of Leadership in Environmental Nonprofit Organizations in a Major Brownfield City: Phase 1", *Environmental Practice*, Sept. 2009. Ted has three certifications in diversity inclusion. E-mail: amsdener@yahoo.com. Corresponding author.

REFERENCES

1. Bonta, M., and C. Jordan. 2005. *Diversifying the Conservation Movement*. Center for Diversity & the Environment, Portland, OR, 14 pp. Available at http://www.environmentaldiversity.org/documents/diversifying_conservation.pdf (accessed January 6, 2009).
2. Bonta, M., and C. Jordan. 2007. *Diversifying the American Environmental Movement*. In *Diversity and the Future of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, E. Enderle, ed. Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, New Haven, CT, 13–33. Available at Yale RIS, <http://www.environment.yale.edu/news/5175> (accessed January 6, 2009).
3. Enderle, E. 2007. Framing the Discussion. In *Diversity and the Future of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, E. Enderle, ed. Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, New Haven, CT, 5–12. Available at Yale RIS, <http://www.environment.yale.edu/news/5175> (accessed February 3, 2009).
4. Jeffries, L. and Amsden, T. 2009. Increasing Diversity of Leadership in Environmental Nonprofit Organizations in a Major Brownfield City: Phase 1, *Environmental Practice*, vol. 11, #3.
5. Rhodes, E. 2003. *Environmental Justice in America*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 296 pp.
6. Stanton, R. 2005. Cultural Diversity in Conservation Organizations and Programs. National Council for Science and the Environment ~NCSE, Washington, DC, 42 pp. Available at <http://ncseonline.org/Conference/Biodiversity/Resources/Workshop%2009/Stanton,%20Post%20Survey%20Follow-up,%202005.pdf> (accessed February 3, 2009).

NOTES