

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FUND

Why invest in grassroots leadership development?

By Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

1. It's practical and effective.

Grassroots leaders and organizations have a vested interest in succeeding because they are working to make their own lives better. For example, grassroots leaders make community crime watches work because the safety of their families and neighbors is at stake. They design and implement economic development projects to increase their own economic assets and improve their community's quality of life. They run tutoring programs and advocate for school policies to ensure opportunity for their children.

2. Grassroots leaders are seldom recognized as leaders in the larger community.

They are often people who typically have had few opportunities to participate as equal partners with traditional leaders and government representatives in making the decisions that affect their communities. Their connections to the information, skills, and relationships that mainstream leaders and professionals take for granted are often remote or nonexistent. These connections are intangible assets that can open opportunities for both individuals and communities to build tangible assets.

3. Grassroots leaders embody the values democracy and inclusiveness.

They bring the interests of low-income and minority people to local and state programs and to public policy arenas. Involving grassroots leaders in solving the problems that affect their communities typically results in better, smarter approaches to addressing community issues related to moving people and places out of poverty.

4. Grassroots leaders hold government accountable to individuals and communities

Grassroots leaders can mobilize the voices of many into a unified call for elected and appointed officials to be responsive to low-wealth communities. For example, grassroots leaders have pressured and then cooperated with local school boards to change disciplinary policies and practices that harm rather than protect their children; they have forced government agencies to clean up ignored toxic waste dumps in their communities; they have challenged state economic development policies that promote industrial recruitment without support for entrepreneurship programs and community economic development.

5. Grassroots leaders are essential for bridging the fault lines of race and class in communities

The best way to bridge differences is for people to get busy working together on specific issues or projects. When grassroots leaders, who are often low-income or people of color, work in parity with mainstream leaders, everyone learns new respect, skills, and perspectives that help to bridge differences and advance solutions.

6. Investing in the development of grassroots leaders accelerates and increases the positive impact they have in their communities

Intentional, well-designed programs help uncover new and diverse leaders. Organized leadership programs for grassroots leaders can accelerate their learning curve, stimulate action, and encourage thoughtful reflection so that their community improvement work gets done faster and better.



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