# Characteristics of Potential Participants

## Who Should Participate?

The early observations and discussions that stimulated the program should help you answer this question. Where are the gaps in the leadership structure? The criteria and policies you develop for participation should be consistent with the long-range goals of your county and the mission of the program. If you are committed to broadening the leadership base in your community and seeing leadership developed at all levels, then you must deliberately recruit and select participants who represent this philosophy.

Emerging leaders are often the focus of community leadership programs. Leadership programs often require potential participants to have some level of demonstrated leadership even to fit into the "emerging" category. The most established leaders rarely apply for community leadership programs; they are more likely to serve as presenters or mentors. Leadership programs may choose to focus on emerging leaders, current leaders, or a mixture of both. Be sure the focus is clear to everyone from the beginning, as well as the reasons behind it. For example, if people believe the program is for established leaders but none participate, the program will be labeled a failure even if the steering committee intentionally selected only emerging leaders.

Do you guarantee a spot in each class for sponsors who make major financial contributions to the leadership program? Most programs agree that this is a dangerous policy, and it makes it very difficult to provide the kind of diversity most programs want.

## Representing Community Viewpoints

Communities are becoming increasingly heterogeneous in both social makeup and range of values and viewpoints. The criteria for participation and the participants selected for the leadership program should reflect that diversity.

Leadership programs that are concerned with a particular community issue, such as human relations, may choose to target certain groups for "over-representation." For example, if race relations are a particular community concern, a program may have a 50-50 balance of whites and minorities in the leadership class, even though this ratio is not an accurate reflection of the community as a whole.

The level of learning and the overall effect of the program are increased by including a balance of male and female participants, as well as people with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, such as:

- Occupations
- Ages, including older youth
- Life experiences
- Social, religious and political orientations
- Ethnicity
- Income levels
- Length of time in the community
- Geography
- Employment status (retirees, volunteers, full-time employed persons, etc.)
- Private sector: large business, small business, professions, agriculture, organized labor
- Non-profit sector: human service agencies, arts, education, religious/spiritual community, hospital
- Public sector: local government, court/judicial

When such diversity is present, people begin to understand the different cultures and values within their own community, which helps them work together toward common goals. In their community leadership roles, graduates of the leadership program will work with a wide array of differences within the community. Therefore, when fellow leadership class members represent a variety of viewpoints, interests, values and beliefs, program participants can practice effective ways of working with those differences during the leadership program and gain a better perspective on the needs and thinking of the entire community.

Consider a leadership program that includes adults, high school students or other young people, older adults and the newly retired. Some communities have found teenagers to be among their most enthusiastic participants.

## Expectations for Participants

Leadership development should be a partnership in which each participant both learns from and teaches the others. To achieve this participation, it is helpful to develop and clearly communicate what is expected of participants. These expectations might include:

- Consistent attendance
- Active participation

- Support of participant's family members and employer (formal commitment for employer to sign)
- Keeping an open mind
- Willingness to challenge the status of current situations
- Openness to new ideas, concepts and different values

## Class Size

Class size is not necessarily determined by the community size. Class size should be appropriate for the outcomes you desire. Most community leadership programs find 20 to 30 people the most workable class size. Having fewer than 20 persons can limit the range of diversity and viewpoints, and having more than 30 may inhibit effective group interaction, reflective discussion and learning. While a larger class size can be a way to increase revenue, the quality of the leadership development experience seems to diminish when classes contain more than 30 persons.

One program determines the class size by the number of people who fit on the bus available to that program. Another program in a small, rural community bases class size on the size of available meeting rooms.

Inclusiveness and diversity may determine class size. Programs strive to include people in each leadership class who are representative of important sectors and categories in the community. To avoid "tokenism" and to allow a valid voice, programs often find it meaningful to have more than one representative from each of the categories. This is important to the comfort of individual participants and it is essential if a program wants to discuss and explore tough issues such as racism, sexism or ethnic stereotyping.

Meaningful conversations and trustful relationships among participants are important outcomes for many programs, especially with leaders from sectors of the community other than their own. Many programs target participation by individuals from sectors that are least likely to interact under "normal" conditions, but where the potential for fruitful interaction is high.