

Asset-Focused Leadership Part 1

By John Hammerlink, Leading Differently
leadingdifferently.com

“Every single person has capabilities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capabilities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making.”

– John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight

If you are interested in developing many of the other concepts we’ve been looking at, such as [collaborative leadership](#), supporting more effective [networks](#) of concerned people, and helping them find their [power](#); then **Asset-Based Community Development** (ABCD) is the organizing strategy for you. I have dedicated a good chunk of my life to helping folks discover community-building assets. I have done countless ABCD workshops, and have written about it on occasion. ABCD principles contribute many useful ideas to a re-imagined concept of leadership; therefore, I’ll dedicate multiple sections to it.

Don’t be scared off by the word phrase “community development.” *Community* can refer to small groups of people who are passionate about the same issue, neighborhoods, or communities of interest – including those made up of people not sharing a community of place. For our purposes, *development* simply means to make better. Let’s start with the fundamentals.

ABCD, is an approach described by John McKnight and John Kretzmann, in the 1993 book, [Building Communities from the Inside Out](#). It is founded on the belief that communities and neighborhoods thrive when built upon the knowledge, interests, and capacities of their residents, groups, and institutions. This contrasts with the typical “needs-based” approach where the starting point is based on an assessment of deficiencies.

ABCD is not a formula. Rather, it is an approach to creating positive change that has many paths, but which necessarily includes three elements. One of the roles of leaders in asset-based endeavors to be a persistent compass when it comes to these three filters.

1. ABCD is, by definition, **asset-based**. It starts with what already exists in the community. ABCD requires the community to inventory the skills and talents of individuals, the assets of formal and informal associations (including relationships) and those of local institutions.
2. ABCD is **internally-focused**. The community frames the issues and challenges, and designs possible plans of action. This internal focus is intended simply to stress the primacy of local definition, investment, creativity, hope and control.
3. ABCD is **relationship-driven**. To be successful, communities must be deliberate about constantly building and rebuilding relationships among residents, local associations and local institutions. Relationships create the underpinnings on which trust is built. Sharing common values and goals is one thing, but when you add trust to the mix, you have the beginnings of a recipe for power.

NEEDS BASED	ASSET BASED
Focus on deficiencies	Focus on effectiveness
People are consumers of services	People are producers
Community members observe as issues are being addressed	Community members participate and are empowered

One way for leaders to assess their efforts as they begin is to ask themselves these questions:

- **Who decides what will be done?** – Is this the vision of a small group of individuals, or is there a shared vision across a larger group of stakeholders?
- **Who are the producers of results?** – Are “interventions” being done to, or for people; or are people accomplishing things on their own behalf?
- **How will the gifts of individuals & the community be identified and mobilized?** – What approaches to asset mapping and strategic planning make the most sense?

- **Whose capacity is being built?** – Are you simply replacing one rigid top-down system for another?

Mapping Assets

Simply put, asset-mapping is systematically finding out what skills, talents, knowledge, relationships, and other assets currently exist in the community. This should include unearthing the capacities of:

- **Individuals** – Talk to as many people as possible. Don't forget marginalized people, those whose presence is not frequently (if ever) recognized.
- **Associations** – These are social assets. They are not always easily recognized. They are identified by the fact that people are associating with each other without getting paid. The people in associations are together because they share a common passion or interest. Associations can be formal (a church congregation), or informal (a group of friends who meet every Tuesday for coffee at the same café).
- **Institutions** – All public, private, and nonprofit organizations including schools, government, and businesses.
- **Physical Assets** – This includes things like public space, buildings, and natural assets.
- **Exchange** – Financial transactions, including things like deliberate local purchasing or boycotting.

Don't panic. You don't have to map the assets of the entire community. This isn't an exercise in database creation. This is about looking for opportunity. These opportunities reveal themselves during the process of finding out how newly discovered assets can be connected and leveraged to increase relationships and moving people to act.

Once you know what change your community seeks to make start mapping with folks who might already be working to create that change? No special training is necessary, though there are many people who can help you get started.

Your early group of leaders will have to define your community, figure out who is available to do the work on the ground, and assess your initial resources to do the mapping. You can use any number of methods, either via surveys, or better yet through one to one conversations, or appreciative inquiry. Remember, lists of information are good, but stories are even better because they can reveal hidden social and cultural assets.