POLICYBRIDGE
ANALYSIS

Missing in Action

An analysis of black leadership
and the challenges that impede
success and impact

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- *Why were African Americans selected as the target for this disinformation campaign?*

- *What does this focus reveal about how African Americans are viewed?*

- *Is the quest for social justice and voting access seen as a lightning rod issue that divides African American communities from white communities?*

- *Why did so many African Americans enthusiastically follow and share the concocted Facebook and Twitter accounts?*

- *Do African Americans feel more respected and listened to in the virtual world than they do in the real world?*

- *Where are the leaders in the African American community and what tactics might they employ to win the respect and confidence of their peers?*

UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

RUSSIA 2016?

There has been much political fodder in recent months about the long-awaited Mueller Report and the incendiary comments and responses that followed its release by Republicans and Democrats alike. Regardless of whether collusion was confirmed or dismissed as an outcome, one issue appears to be clear: Russian government interference during the 2016 presidential campaign did occur and was exacerbated by social media. Facebook, Twitter and Google all reported astounding discoveries of fake accounts that were established to manipulate the presidential election in some form or fashion.

The Washington Post released information that was a particularly troubling offshoot of the Russian disinformation campaign. In a December 17, 2018, article, the Post highlighted a report that was prepared for the Senate Intelligence Committee by researchers at Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Project, and Graphika, a network analysis firm. The researchers concluded that Russian operatives, in their bid to support Trump's candidacy, were especially fixated on African Americans. With a goal of dampening political engagement, Russia's disinformation campaign targeted African Americans with more Facebook ads than any other group in America, including conservatives.

The report found that three of the four most-liked Facebook posts by the Russian influence effort came from an account called Blacktivist, which urged the African American community to be more cynical about politics. A post on October 29, 2016, declared "NO LIVES MATTER TO HILLARY CLINTON. ONLY VOTES MATTER TO HILLARY CLINTON." A message days later, on November 3, suggested that "NOT VOTING is a way to exercise our rights."

On Instagram, all five of the most-liked posts created by Russian operatives were aimed at African American women and included hashtags such as #blackpower, #blackpride, #unapologeticallyblack, #blacklivesmatter, #icantbreathe and #blackgirlskillingit. The operation was sophisticated and relentless, with a goal of manipulating identity politics to tear America apart. Messages to African Americans were geared toward diverting energy away from established political institutions by preying on anger with structural inequalities, including police violence, poverty and disproportionate levels of incarceration, according to the report. The Russia-backed social media posts pushed the message that the best way to advance the cause of the African American community was to boycott the election and focus on other issues instead.

The effort appears to have worked: Clinton very narrowly lost three key states – Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin – due, at least in part, to a lower than expected black turnout in the urban areas of Philadelphia, Detroit and Milwaukee.

There is one final point about this report worth highlighting (although the full report warrants attention). In a Russian-generated Twitter account titled @blackmatterus, which grew to have more than 20,000 followers, Twitter profiles were set up for fictional African American "contributors" to the website. The group's Twitter account often linked to a Facebook page called "Black Matters," which attracted more than 220,000 followers. This site encouraged African Americans to participate in real-life rallies protesting police treatment of minorities.

There are many egregious elements to the findings of this research report that are quite concerning. The first and obvious one is the issue of national security, by way of high-level tampering with an American federal election by a foreign power. That matter is in the hands of the U.S. Congress and will most likely be the source of debate for many years to come. However, it is also troubling that the architects of this malicious effort to influence and undermine the U.S. election process deliberately sought out African Americans more so than any other demographic group. This raises myriad questions and concerns: Why were African Americans selected as the target for this disinformation campaign? What does this focus reveal about how African Americans are viewed? Is the quest for social justice and voting access seen as a lightning rod issue that divides African American communities from white communities? Why did so many African Americans enthusiastically follow and share the concocted Facebook and Twitter accounts? Do African Americans feel more respected and listened to in the virtual world than they do in the real world? Where are the leaders in the African American community and what tactics might they employ to win the respect and confidence of their peers?

These timely and critical questions will be the focus of this analysis.

Black Leadership and the Balance of Power

It could be argued that a lack of leadership, particularly in the political arena, has led to the demise of thoughtful public policy analysis, comprehensive candidate vetting and collective community responses to the issues of the day. Once upon a time, there was a smaller group of leaders who rallied minority communities around key issues and themes with minimal effort due to their positions of influence. The current environment, however, characterized by a proliferation of social media platforms and a precipitous decline in community (face-to-face) meetings aimed at problem solving, is one of disorganization and disconnection, creating an ideal target for subterfuge. Until African Americans communities can organize a new leadership model that elevates leaders of substance to the forefront as change agents regardless of where they come from, efforts to invade and dissuade the perspectives and actions of black voters will continue.

Addressing this matter requires, as a first step, an understanding of the different types of leaders and leadership models that operate in African American communities and the intentions or special interests that drive the efforts of each group. It is important to note that these leaders and the ways in which they interact can be complicated, as some issues engender perfect harmony while others give rise to fierce disagreements. What's important is that the vantage point of the leadership group and the accompanying actions need to be understood first in order to analyze where and why leadership gaps occur. Leadership group categories are defined below in more detail.

Leadership Group Categories

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

CIVIC LEADERSHIP

Political Leadership

In many urban core cities, such as Cleveland, Ohio, where African-American populations are significant (if not the majority), there has long been a struggle for leadership. This leadership struggle has often been centered in the political arena, where African Americans first began to emerge (in large numbers) as elected officials as a result of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. That same mix of legislation would ultimately help service workers, professionals and executives to reach levels of power and influence, but that would come later (and in some cases as a result of elected leaders using their influence for the greater good). But, because elected officials were the first in many cities to have power and/or to be recognized as leaders to be reckoned with, the political ecosystem became an early stronghold of black leadership.

That early stronghold was cemented by political appointments, municipal jobs for those "in the know" and other favors that established a small group of black elected leaders who controlled major initiatives and investments in black communities for decades. This outcome, however, led to concerns about "career politicians" co-opting the role and responsibility of the black community leader. While this was understood by many as how "politics" worked, it resulted in a limited number of black leaders becoming the power brokers who negotiated on behalf of the black community. After decades in leadership roles, these political leaders and operatives became recognized by many as the "old guard."

With power comes responsibility, and the question of "power sharing," or lack thereof, has permeated throughout the black community in Cleveland for many years. Unfortunately, many younger or emerging leaders have felt that "old guard" leaders have built and protected positions of power ostensibly for the good of the community but in reality for selfish purposes. Although some long-standing officials have been faithful and hard-working stewards, far too many, in the eyes of many in the black community, have stayed "too long," blocking opportunities for emerging leaders and perpetuating status quo policies and practices that have kept Cleveland at or near the top of too many lists that track poverty, inequity and disparity.

This hold on political power has led to distrust of the political ecosystem and the motives of many elected officials, which has resulted in many potential minority leaders and change agents (especially younger ones) feeling a need to "go it alone" or to join Facebook and Twitter groups instead of engaging in block clubs or community associations. Perhaps this state of frustration or sense of limited access to leaders is what drove large numbers of African Americans to be more trusting of social media posts that were, in actuality, propagated by agents of the Russian government with the intent of manipulating them and depressing their vote. Whatever the case, there is a need for more open channels in cities and communities that provide engagement opportunities for citizens of all ages and all educational, political and socioeconomic levels.

Business Leadership

Although African Americans in business and industry have reached impressive levels of success, aspirations for leadership positions that allow them to put their skill and acumen to work in the general community are not exactly commonplace. Not everyone chooses to exert their influence for the civic good, and, even if most did, the number of African Americans who reach those levels are not significant enough to counter the myriad problems facing urban core communities. Unlike elected officials who align seamlessly for community challenges and political party interests, business leaders often come from disparate vantage points and entities and therefore are rarely positioned to rally together to address community problems. It is also important to note that, unlike elected officials or public sector workers, business leaders do not work to serve the interests of the taxpaying public at–large, as they are in business first and foremost to serve their customers and shareholders. In addition, many of these leaders simply have no desire to engage in what is often "politically volatile" or racially tinged community work.

Relatedly, while there are large numbers of entrepreneurs in the African American community, the vast majority of them are sole proprietors, and the number of businesses in that category that rise beyond "lifestyle business" status is far lower than what would be considered optimal. While successful lifestyle businesses are commendable if the owner is comfortable, these smaller businesses are less likely to yield enough economic power to assert themselves as community leaders without some risk of jeopardizing their respective livelihoods. The time commitment alone can be more than a small business owner can allot to the community, and taking a stand on a controversial community issue could be "bad for business." This also holds true for the seldom seen C-Suite African American executives who reach the highest ranks of corporate America but may not choose to be a "community leader" because of the reputational or political risks that come with the territory, which would have to be balanced with the rigor of running multimillion or multibillion dollar enterprises that require significant time, extensive travel and other challenging work demands.

Business leaders typically identify as such and typically bring a business perspective to community issues and opportunities. They bring credibility often as an independent voice who has an interest and a stake in the betterment of the community because it is where they conduct business and recruit their employees. The balance of being a business leader and community leader, however, can be challenging, and those with an interest in community leadership typically get involved as civic leaders. Civic leaders (to be addressed later in this section) are not limited to business representatives, but most often business leaders are best known for and most comfortable with civic leadership roles. This is because civic roles are usually more clear and measurable (i.e., raising money for the annual United Way campaign) which allows the company that the leader represents to promote its community stewardship on a broader scale.

Community Leadership

Cleveland and other major urban core cities are replete with an impressive array of community leaders who have "toiled in the vineyard" often for decades as block club presidents, community volunteers, church leaders and neighborhood association members. They are the closest to the ground in terms of understanding and tackling community challenges and problems and are the visionaries who dream big and spark change. They are passionate, well-connected and respected for their years of commitment to the cause. They are also most likely "battle-tested," as grassroots leaders cannot make community impact without experiencing some scrapes and bumps along the way.

Community change is impossible without community leadership, but community leaders are typically dependent on elected officials, businesses and philanthropic groups to provide the political and financial resources necessary to move projects forward. The input of community leaders and their commitment to seeing projects through to completion are critical, but without resources their impact is limited. They can and do play an important role in the political arena by serving as campaign volunteers, precinct committee persons, ambassadors of a larger community strategy being promoted by elected officials and as actual voters. Community leadership is a category that has traditionally been open to all and is therefore a good foundation for emerging leaders because it provides them a safe space to "cut their teeth" and learn about community organizing, networking, fundraising and politics. Community leadership can be a stepping-stone to higher-level leadership opportunities, but community leaders will, in most cases, be recognized as leaders in their respective neighborhoods and not frequently as spokespersons working on behalf of the entire African American community.

There are exceptions to this definition, however, as those who advocate for issues such as social justice or health equity are typically working on behalf of the entire community. The main point is simply that advocates and spokespersons typically get more traction when they are known and respected, and those who are active in communities are among the first to win the confidence of their fellow citizens as respected colleagues in the struggle.

Civic Leadership

Civic leadership is different than community leadership because civic leaders typically address larger scale issues that are strategic and that serve an entire city, county or region. Civic leaders do not have to be community leaders, which makes this group sometimes difficult to understand or embrace at the grassroots level, seeing that decisions made or influenced by civic leaders often impact neighborhoods (i.e. Opportunity Corridor – a $330 million dollar roadway project that is under construction in Cleveland and is routed through distressed east side minority communities).

Ironically, few community leaders are given the chance to sit and work side-by-side with civic leaders. Civic leaders are often "appointed" or "selected" based on their field of employment or the size and perceived importance of the organization they lead or work for, which often provides instant credibility and a welcomed seat at the table. Civic leaders also tend to work closely with chief elected officials at the city, county and state levels because the scope of their work is typically broader than the community level. Examples of organizations that rely on civic leadership include chambers of commerce, economic development intermediaries, convention and visitors' bureaus, government appointed boards and commissions, arts and culture institutions, and philanthropic organizations.

Civic leaders may operate at very high levels while remaining under the radar. They drive some of the city's most critically important initiatives and organizations, but can go unnoticed because chief executive officers of civic organizations handle the bulk of the community-facing responsibilities. Civic leaders most often have the financial wherewithal to invest in critical projects and/or to garner additional resources that helps to move projects and initiatives forward. They are outcome-driven, as most people leading major companies and organizations have to be, and they are more democratic (small "d") in the way they evaluate, prioritize and execute projects. Cleveland's civic leaders lobbied for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the renovation of the Quicken Loans arena, the selection of Cleveland for the Republican National Convention and the attempt to bring an Amazon headquarters to Cleveland, as just a few examples. As is plain to see, civic leaders are critical to a community's progress, but community credibility is not necessarily a requirement. Being a civic leader usually stems from proven leadership in other realms, most often the business or non-profit sector.

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The first step for any emerging leaders should be to decide the leadership category or position that best fits their current circumstances, network reach and career status. It obviously takes education, skill and experience to rise in the ranks of a corporation and to be recognized as a corporate or business leader. Individuals usually develop into civic leaders after they have defined themselves through being in positions of power and having the interest and inclination to lead civic initiatives. Community leadership is attained after individuals have demonstrated consistently

that they are "willing workers" and fervent ambassadors of initiatives that lead to community uplift. Such a designation is only bestowed on those who show up and remain committed to the community (or to a particular cause) on a long-term basis. And finally, political leaders are chosen by voters and are therefore charged with convincing the general public that they are the right leaders at the right time to address the challenges and seize the opportunities that are at hand.

With these categories of leadership defined, the answer to the pressing question of "Where are the black leaders?" should be easier to answer. They are represented in each of the aforementioned categories, achieving a level of gains and facing different challenges in each of the leadership roles. Some leaders in the African American community have leadership skills that allow them to cross domains, but it is helpful when minority leaders identify a "lane" where they can build credibility and demonstrate success, as attempting to be expert in several areas may stretch their leadership capacity thin and diminish their credibility.
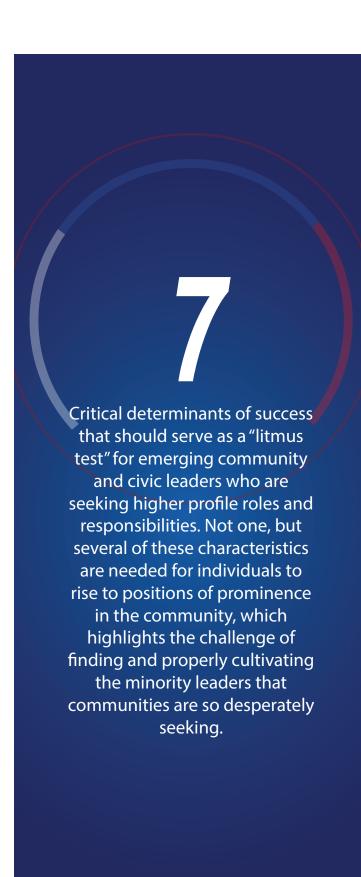
In addition to understanding the categories of leadership opportunities, several other factors must be accounted for when individuals decide that they want to play a leadership role in any community or for any issue. Leaders, particularly ones representing minority or underrepresented groups, are often challenged, sized up and questioned about why or how they were "given" a title or position of leadership. They often have to prove some level of capacity or importance to be considered "worthy" enough to be accepted as the leader of a community, organization, issue or cause. This vetting process can be extremely difficult and may result in many capable potential leaders opting out of leadership posts altogether, again provoking the question of "Where are the black leaders?" Additionally, some capable and well-intentioned leaders can be blind-sided by the impact of not possessing some leadership characteristics that are critical to success.

Below are seven critical determinants of success that should serve as a "litmus test" for emerging community and civic leaders who are seeking higher profile roles and responsibilities. Not one, but several of these characteristics are needed for individuals to rise to positions of prominence in the community, which highlights the challenge of finding and properly cultivating the minority leaders that communities are so desperately seeking.

Seven Critical Determinants of Success

1) Credibility in the Grassroots Community

2) Credibility in Civic/Corporate Circles

3) Knowledge of the Issues

4) Track Record of Success

5) Appetite for Leadership

6) Autonomy

7) Courage

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1) Credibility in the Grassroots Community –

As noted earlier, dedicated community leaders work tirelessly to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods. They are savvy, hardworking and mindful of the many broken promises and setbacks that have plagued their communities over time. They are also not fond of "lip service," as they have a sense of urgency to see projects and initiatives come to fruition.

Winning the trust and respect of the grassroots community does not come easy, but when a leader can accomplish such a feat, it is noteworthy and most likely reflects the time and effort the individual has spent listening to and advocating for neighborhoods. Developing credibility at the grassroots level can help leaders move agendas, as they have small armies (residents) who are willing to support them. This is how many elected officials are voted into office: They build on their credibility in grassroots communities and recruit campaign volunteers and donors who believe they are properly suited to work on behalf of the community at higher levels.

Grassroots credibility can also pay big dividends for new initiatives and projects that need community support and buy-in, which is why community development corporations help residents with community organizing efforts. The takeaway here is that community credibility is paramount for any aspiring leader.

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2) Credibility in Civic/Corporate Circles –
Establishing credibility in civic and corporate circles can be challenging, especially for the community leader who is not well-known. Corporations play a big role in urban core communities: Beyond the important role of providing employment opportunities to residents in the area, they provide sponsorship support and contributions to charitable organizations. Corporations are also a major source of talent for organizations and associations that look for civic leaders with prestige, resources and power.

Tapping the many resources that corporations have to offer requires being familiar with corporate leaders and their respective corporation's interests. This is difficult, even for those working in corporations, as relationships among corporate power brokers often boil down to friendships and familiarity. Political leaders have long sought to establish relationships with corporate leaders because they serve as both a donor base and a potential job creator for constituents. But any individual who wants to become a respected civic leader will also benefit tremendously by having some name recognition and credibility among corporate leaders.

Some community leaders prefer to remain at the grassroots level and have no interest in playing a role on the larger "civic leadership" stage. This is a respectable position. However, even for grassroots-focused community leaders, it is still a worthwhile exercise to know who the corporate and civic leaders are in order to understand and communicate how they might be leveraged for the good of the community.

3) Knowledge of the Issues – Regardless of the type or category of leader, credibility is established when individuals can speak with authority about facts and statistics as related to community problems and opportunities. Issues and topics facing Cleveland, ranging from education and economic development to public health, safety and transportation, all require more than mere pontification. Those with professional experience, research expertise and a keen understanding of possibilities are far more likely to get attention and support. Urban core communities need answers, and those who are knowledgeable about key issues, best practices and available resources are important community assets.

Being a leader who can be trusted with resources and recognized as an adviser to elected officials or civic organizations is a critical position, as investments needed in the urban core are many while available resources are few. Those who are the most knowledgeable and offer the most promising ideas and approaches to community problems become leaders in their own right.

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4) Track Record of Success – Another critical determinant of leadership credibility is a track record of success. Those who have demonstrated an ability to deliver on projects and initiatives on a consistent basis are viewed differently than those who have "high potential" to deliver on projects but years down the road. Given that civic leaders often come from the private sector, where bottom-line performance is vital, individuals who can show a consistency of effort and results on civic and community projects are more likely to be recognized as leaders. Reputation plays heavily into leadership opportunities, as leaders have a propensity to trust other leaders who are tested and proven.

It takes time and a few projects under the belt before newer leaders can become recognized as credible and proven leaders. The period of time it takes to build a track record of success, however, can feel like an eternity for some and has been the source of discouragement for many younger leaders who feel their progress has been unfairly delayed. In many cases, young leaders do, in fact, have to wait too long and, as a result, decide to either walk away from leadership posts or move away to communities that they consider more welcoming of new perspectives and ideas. In fairness, many established leaders will take risks on "unproven" leaders, perhaps because of the individual's profession, expertise or references. Notwithstanding, the importance of a track record is something that cannot be denied and is a sure way to be respected and solicited as a leader.

5) Appetite for Leadership – Although this analysis poses the question "Where are the leaders in the black community," it is important to note that many smart, capable members of the African American community are exhibiting their leadership prowess in large corporations, nonprofit agencies, universities, law firms, medical centers, community development corporations, churches and block clubs, among many other places. These individuals are talented leaders who build compelling visions, set and achieve goals and objectives, successfully lead and motivate teams, and move the needle on any number of initiatives and projects.

Such individuals are often sought out and asked to run for office or to lead important community or civic initiatives. But, despite the phenomenal levels of talent they possess, they may not have the interest or appetite for putting their leadership skills to work improving the larger community or addressing social issues. Many talented African American leaders are more than capable of taking the reins of some of Cleveland's largest civic organizations and community assignments, but they prefer to do without the political strife, unflattering media coverage and community ill will that often comes with stepping up and out as a leader. In other words, having leadership ability isn't enough; the leaders that Cleveland and other urban core communities need have to be willing to step into roles that matter with an understanding that "no good deed goes unpunished." The key is finding minority leaders in our community with such an appetite.

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6) Autonomy – Being a leader often requires challenging the status quo, speaking truth to power, and pushing new ideas and perspectives. This can be difficult to do for those leaders who work for organizations that are not supportive of their efforts or that may be part of the status quo paradigm. This can be problematic because stepping out as a leader in this case may challenge one's livelihood. Such a dilemma results in many leaders who may have something of significance to say or offer remaining quiet because of the potential repercussions that could affect their jobs and financial well-being. This is a deterrent to community leadership that cannot be taken lightly.

Leaders are thus often more comfortable stepping forward when they have some level of community autonomy or "political cover" that eliminates the chances of someone calling their bosses to suggest that they not take controversial positions on community or civic matters (Numerous would-be leaders in Cleveland, for example, have stories of their careers being threatened by community power-brokers.). Without political cover, it would be a tall order for minority leaders who are trying to establish successful careers to risk being viewed by their employers as confrontational or combative. If stepping up as a community leader comes at the expense of a job, potential leaders will have to do what is best for them and their families, which is most likely to work hard and remain silent on controversial community issues. This has been a reality for far too many Clevelanders who have wanted to assert themselves as leaders, and has perpetuated the notion that the community at-large is not in favor of new leaders and new ideas. This reality has also unfortunately diminished the potential of Cleveland's next generation of leaders, and thus the promise and potential of Cleveland.

7) Courage – Leadership in any civic or community capacity requires significant courage: Courage to stand up to leaders who are more powerful. Courage to accept the risks that being a leader can cause in the workplace. Courage to be quoted or misquoted by media sources. Courage to endure the likely negative hits to one's community standing and overall reputation. And courage to put oneself in harm's way when taking positions that may be construed as personal attacks.

Many community leaders want to become engaged, but they view the leadership arena as having more risks than rewards. In fairness to them, being bold is one thing, but putting unnecessary strain on them and their families requires some soul searching. Those who are courageous will certainly make headway in the leadership ecosystem, but not without significant risks. And it is important to remember that every successful leader has at some point required courage to take on a particular challenge, problem or movement. Courage is a key tool all emerging leaders need in their leadership toolbox.

The seven determinants of success presented here are not offered as a cure for the leadership void that plagues many urban core communities. Several other factors play into community leadership dynamics. However, understanding these specific factors can help "demystify" community leadership expectations and opportunities and may shed light on what limits the emergence of new leaders in the civic and community arenas.

Recommendations

The previous section highlighted the determinants of community leadership success, including the individual qualities and characteristics necessary. Yet, creating the environment for individuals to step forward for leadership roles and assignments won't be easy and will require the elimination of some old practices, which might make some in the community uncomfortable. Despite the difficulty and possible discomfort, a new leadership ecosystem must be nurtured. Cleveland and other urban core communities cannot afford to lose another generation of leaders with the skills and perspectives to offer new solutions to old problems.

The following steps and actions will help ensure new leaders emerge in the African American community and generate new levels of success:

Foster relationships among a broader mix of leaders – There should be ample opportunities for leaders in all of the aforementioned categories – political, business, community and civic – to interact, compare notes, share ideas and explore opportunities to help each other. This could be done in the form of a larger annual convening or as a series of smaller meetings. Bringing leaders from across the community together would build trust, eliminate the "us versus them" mindset and, quite frankly, generate more comprehensive solutions to our community's problems. Such efforts could be coordinated by area philanthropic organizations, the Greater Cleveland Partnership and the Mayor's Office to start, with more partners recruited thereafter.

Design new outlets that allow minority leaders to be heard – Minority leaders have many concerns and are working tirelessly on myriad issues, including gun violence, education, workforce development, social justice, the environment, health inequities, mass incarceration, lead poisoning and entrepreneurship. Many individuals are working to provide leadership in each of these categories, but one of their biggest challenges is communication. The decreasing presence of print media and the recently discovered fractious nature of social media mean that leaders need other avenues to discuss problems and opportunities and to share their ideas and perspectives. This could include City Club forums, more television and radio programs dedicated to minority issues, sponsored keynotes at non-profit organizations and local universities, community dialogues and school-based essay contests and talk-back sessions. Funding and in-kind support should be made available by businesses and philanthropy to support such initiatives.

Incorporate community leadership into high school and college curriculums – Community and civic leadership might be covered lightly in the few schools (if any) that still teach "civics" courses. Yet, Cleveland's rich history of civic engagement and the challenges community leaders have worked to address deserve to be mandatory components of high school curriculums. Students need to understand how everyday citizens can make indelible marks on their communities and learn about the likes of Ray Shepardson, who led the charge to save Playhouse Square, and Inez Killingsworth, who challenged major banking institutions to stop redlining and other unethical practices on Cleveland's Southeast side, and many others. Learning about former and current leaders and their experiences may plant the seed for students to think about roles they can play in their communities immediately and throughout their lives. College students in the area could follow a similar curriculum and participate in internships and projects that place students on the front lines of addressing our community's most pressing issues and challenges.

Support civic and community training programs aimed at minority communities – There is a need to help minority communities understand how to gather information about issues affecting them, vet political candidates, track government spending, promulgate public policy recommendations, dialogue with elected officials and rally their members to vote. In today's climate, no citizen can sit on the sidelines and expect that someone else will handle the issues and concerns that affect his or her family, block, neighborhood or local school. Courses in public policy advocacy should be taught at the neighborhood level to equip residents with the tools necessary to advocate on their own behalf. Other community training programs, such as the Racial Equity Institute (REI) and environmental health or social justice "action" workshops, can encourage residents to monitor more closely the impact of systemic racism, neighborhood disinvestment and weak political leadership. Local agencies and non-profits could lead this training with the proper levels of funding support from local philanthropy, businesses and civic organizations.

Closing

African Americans, now more than ever, need to engage in voting and the overall political process. They need to do so because too often their communities are high on the priority list for campaign season promises, but low on the priority list for post-election investments and resources that impact change. Holding elected officials accountable is one way that African Americans can ensure that their views and concerns are heard and acted upon. Community engagement is an equally important strategy.

African American leaders have spent many years knocking on the door (unsuccessfully) for a seat at the table in civic, community and political spaces, causing many of these leaders to become discouraged and/or to simply walk away. Or, as the Russian disinformation campaign showed, potential African American leaders who disengage may turn to social media as their only outlet for sharing ideas and frustrations or seeking direction for how they can best improve their respective communities. If the actions taken by well-intentioned African American citizens are based on input from Russia instead of their own local leaders, something has gone terribly wrong.

There are obviously reasons that Russian operatives decided to focus so squarely on African American voters with the disinformation campaign. Whatever the reason, this development shines light on the dearth of African American leaders who are considered "trusted advisors" and who are capable of countering malicious social media chatter by demonstrating effective leadership. These leaders can and should "tee-up" critical issues and cajole the people and organizations with means to establish actionable solutions. As a first step, these leaders need to be identified, nurtured and supported, regardless of the leadership category that they represent.

The time has come for the African American community to own up to its missteps of alienating some current leaders and failing to develop the next generation of leaders. This will require that some established leaders acknowledge their mistakes or capitulate their power and position to others, with an emphasis on emerging leaders. The African American community will be at its best when the focus shifts to developing a broad base of leaders versus a mere few. "Strength in numbers" should be the mantra that guides the way forward.

Those who ask the question "Where are the black leaders?" should hear as the common retort "Where aren't the black leaders?" They can be found in political spaces, communities, businesses and civic organizations. However, it is only through active engagement that they will become the critical community resources that Cleveland needs to thrive.

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