

RURAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

HandMade in America



*How can we
develop and
nurture the
leadership skills
we need to
guide plans for
revitalization?*



The Challenge

Rural areas in the 21st century face challenges on multiple fronts. For some communities, the challenge comes in the form of rapidly growing urban and suburban areas that are encroaching on nearby rural communities, bringing interstates and strip malls that threaten to extinguish a small town's identity and heritage. This growth can also bring increased property values—a welcome source of revenue in one respect, but such “gentrification” of a rural community can also force long-time residents to look for a more affordable place to live.

For other regions, the challenge is not growth, but stagnation. As higher costs and lower prices for crops make farming a less viable employment option, many rural communities are losing population. Young people move to nearby—or faraway—cities to work and raise their families. Many who manage to maintain their residence in rural communities commute to urban areas to make a living, often leaving the remaining spouse to run the household during the week. There are few people with any time or energy left over to devote to local civic efforts.

In both scenarios the ultimate challenge is the same: How can our community remain economically viable while maintaining its identity and honoring its roots? How can we develop and nurture the leadership skills we need to guide our own plans for revitalization? These two questions are inseparable: in order to plan, carry out, and evaluate any revitalization effort, a rural community must attend to its own internal capacity to do so.

Challenges unique to rural leadership development include:

- Due to the limited scale of local government, rural communities often have to rely on an all-volunteer leadership base.

By Becky Anderson and Pat Cabe of HandMade in America and Margaret Carlson of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

- Philanthropic funding is extraordinarily difficult to obtain. For example, there is little corporate or foundation support for rural leadership development.
- Most leadership training does not result in true capacity building for small communities. In the typical model, an individual is sent away for a week to a university-based program outside of the rural area. This individual is then expected to come back and be the leadership for the community.



The Invention

An asset-based revitalization initiative for rural areas and small towns to enhance local economies and community capacity.



The Solution: Getting the Idea to Fly

Our recommendations for getting started are based on a few core assumptions. Communities are not built from the outside in, or the top down. Local motivation and commitment to renewal is essential, and an effective program fosters this by focusing on the assets, skills, and capabilities present in a community, rather than its problems or deficiencies.

Take stock. Begin with a community assessment.¹ Take an inventory of local resources and assets: cultural, architectural, natural, social, and historic. What is special about your community? How can you build on these assets to enhance the unique appeal of your area? Look for individuals with planning, downtown development, and/or economic expertise to assist you in your assessment. In many states, the Department of Commerce has a Division of Community Assistance that offers financial and technical support to local communities that wish to start a revitalization effort.

Invite area residents to share their ideas about “who we are as a town” and “what we might do to steer our future” (maybe over a potluck supper—food is a great incentive!). Don’t forget the people who live outside the town limits. There is likely to be a large surrounding region of farms and unincorporated communities containing folks who identify with—and have an interest in—your town.

¹ Parts of this section were adapted from *Small Voices, Big Songs: A Story of American Renewal* by Elizabeth C. Hunter and Kim Yates McGill. Asheville, NC: HandMade in America, 1999.



Rural Leadership
Development

This community assessment accomplishes several things: it generates excitement for renewal in the community, it creates new conversations about new possibilities, and it increases the number and diversity of people actively involved in community decision-making. It forms the foundation for all subsequent plans and projects.

Form a steering committee. Who is interested in working to improve the community? Elected officials, downtown businesspeople, and representatives from local civic organizations frequently top the list. Don't forget the informal opinion leaders in the community—even if they appear to be naysayers at the moment. If not included, they're almost guaranteed to block

ABOUT HANDMADE IN AMERICA

HandMade in America is a nonprofit organization serving the mountains of western North Carolina with the aim of creating community and economic development opportunities based on the region's cultural, historical, and natural assets. Founded in 1993, HandMade has initiated and implemented award-winning projects including its series of Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina guidebooks; its Farms, Gardens & Countryside Trails of Western North Carolina guide; a Small Towns Revitalization Program; landfill craft studio incubators; and its education, leadership, and marketing training programs.

Community empowerment, resource development, partnerships, and local self-reliance are the hallmarks of the Small Towns Revitalization Program, an initiative that is aimed at helping small communities in western North Carolina plan and carry out revitalization projects that reflect their unique heritage and history. Leadership and organizational development are built into the process. Community volunteer teams learn by doing, applying their new skills in project planning and management to actual projects in the community. There is also an emphasis on participants in the program helping and mentoring one another.

HandMade's unique approach led to it being named one of the country's Top 100 nonprofits by *Worth* magazine in its January 2003 issue.

the process; if invited to participate, they can bring a valuable perspective and help the group think through all aspects of an issue.

Explore possible partners at the regional and state level as well. As mentioned before, the Department of Commerce's Division of Community Assistance can provide financial and technical support, as can the Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service.

Create an organization. Once the community assessment has occurred and the steering committee has had its first meeting, many people want to jump in and get to work—meaning, start on a project. But one important piece remains: you need to “build a container” for your revitalization efforts. A permanent organization becomes the place to coordinate day-to-day activities and store financial information. It is the mechanism that allows your community to sustain its work and gives your program a life beyond “Fred and Bobby having coffee and talking.” As a nonprofit organization, it will also help you access funds.

Remember that your organization will need basic liability insurance coverage to protect yourselves in case a volunteer gets injured during a litter pickup drive, festival, or other revitalization activity.

Have a shared vision and a plan for renewal. The community assessment helps create a shared vision for where the community is at the present time, and where it is headed in the future. An energizing, engaging vision is necessary, but not sufficient. Many processes fail because they do a vision-



*Rural Leadership
Development*



ing process—sketching out the big picture of where they want to take their community—but not a planning process. A plan for renewal will give focus and direction to the dream of the future captured in the shared vision.

To carry out a project successfully, you need to map it from start to finish, including the details of “who will do what.” Think of the step-by-step guidance offered by a cookbook as your model; ideally, a written plan should have that level of specificity.

Select a highly visible, doable project. In the excitement of starting out, many groups want to tackle something major, such as a courthouse renovation. Highly visible? No question. Doable? Less certain. Remember that you’re working with a volunteer base. Look for places where you can achieve small successes, and then build on the momentum. Examples of small initial successes may include planting flowers or cleaning up a frequently used roadway. A more advanced, but still manageable, project could be sponsoring a festival or community event. Don’t underestimate the impact of the simplest project. It’s easier to motivate volunteers (and publicize your efforts) by racking up a list of small successes, rather than to set the bar too high and fail to reach your goal.

Be organized. If you want potential funders to look on your requests favorably, it’s imperative to establish and document your efforts in a way that presents you as a credible, accountable entity. Some of the basic steps in organizing include:

- Define an organizational structure, functions, and purpose
- Develop a mission statement, goals, and objectives
- Develop a budget; set up a bank account
- Initiate committees and assign functions and duties
- Write by-laws and gain legal incorporation
- Choose board members and leadership

Make it as easy as possible for people to contact your revitalization organization and get involved. Set a regular meeting time and place and stick to it. Even though plenty of work and conversation will—and should—occur between meetings, it’s important for volunteers to have a scheduled time for face-to-face discussions of progress, obstacles they’ve encountered, and so on.

Develop good working relationships. For most rural communities, paid staffing to support the revitalization process is not always possible. As mentioned in the first section on rural challenges, these efforts need to rely on a volunteer leadership base. Each project involves a new cycle of identifying what you want to do, figuring out where the talents lie, and finding the partners who can contribute those skills. The question “Who are possible partners?” is never answered just once. It is a continuing process of discovery.

Be creative in your search for potential and unusual partners. For example, on the federal level, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park System, and the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission understand and share many interests with rural communities. The community college system is also an important, and often underutilized, resource in many rural areas. You are not imposing on these organizations or asking for a favor; on the contrary, the partner agencies also benefit from sharing their expertise and resources in traditionally underserved areas. Learn how to help potential partners look good, and you’ll both win.

Tourism offices and chambers of commerce are often eager to promote your community. You may also be able to take advantage of the growing trend toward “serenity seekers” in the tourism industry—individuals who are looking for a rural experience to soothe their spirits after the daily battle of urban living.

Develop outside resources. Many of the partners mentioned above are potential funders as well. In the next two sections, we discuss how to document your progress in language that is persuasive to private foundations and public agencies.



*Rural Leadership
Development*



Measuring and Adapting: Did It Fly?

So you’ve moved forward on your revitalization project. How it is doing is a crucial question. When selecting measurement and evaluation tools, keep in mind that the data-collection process, along with all other aspects of your revitalization effort, is likely to be done by volunteers. Therefore, there are two questions to ask yourself when considering a potential measure: 1) Will this give us the information we need to evaluate our progress?; and 2) Will we be able to capture this information without too much time and effort?

Recall that you are attending to two interconnected outcomes: economic revitalization and increased community capacity. It is possible—in



fact, it's necessary—to measure both, although the second is usually less visible than the first. The “hard” numbers on economic improvements will give you the data you need to promote your successes within and outside your community. The “soft” measures of leadership development and increased capacity will help you track strengthened relationships and communication, and the increased use of skills, knowledge, and ability of local people.

For economic revitalization, there are some standard measures used by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Streets program to assess economic progress in a community. These include the number of building renovations, public money invested, private money invested, and net job and business gains. (For other potential economic development measures, see the Resource List at the end of this chapter.)

While these traditional quantitative measures are certainly important, you will also want to track the less tangible—but equally “real”—aspects of your revitalization effort. Some questions you might use to assess increased community capacity include the following:

- How many citizens are involved in revitalization efforts?
- How well are newcomers being integrated into the community revitalization teams?
- Is the community team maintaining and/or increasing its membership?
- How are projects moving along?

- Are there smooth transitions in leadership? Or are the same one or two people leading everything?
- How well organized is the structure that supports the revitalization effort? For example, are records accurate and accessible?

One indicator that is particularly helpful to measure from the beginning of any revitalization process is the number of volunteer hours contributed. Even though it is more an input than an outcome, the numbers can add up quickly, and this statistic can be a very powerful demonstration to funders that the community is investing in itself.



*Rural Leadership
Development*

How to interpret the information. It can be tempting to collect information on your program only when someone is requesting it, such as a potential outside funder or a reporter who wants the information as part of a story about your success. These requests may provide some incentive, but remember that the main purpose of measuring your progress is to give you the information you need to make minor (or major) course corrections as you steer toward your goal. Some hints on adapting your program based on the information you collect:

- Look for trends, but don't put too much stock in one indicator of progress (or the lack of it). In a small community, a single business opening or closing can dramatically affect the net jobs lost or gained in a year, for instance.
- Keep tabs on the number of citizens involved in projects and number of volunteer hours logged. If these numbers are going down, it can be an early warning sign that citizens are losing momentum. They may lack the skills or knowledge they need to move on to the next stage of the project, or perhaps they are frustrated with the pace or direction of the revitalization effort. Monitoring this in the early stages gives you an opportunity to regroup and find out what people need to restore their energy and commitment.



The Ripple Effect: Expect it and Encourage it

When you are just starting out, it seems challenging enough just to identify all the steps needed to keep your revitalization effort going. It may seem like wishful thinking to project into the future and begin planning ways to harness the momentum of small successes to turn them into larger ones. But it's not too early to map out a plan for growing—in fact, it's

vital to document small successes so you can present them to a funder as evidence that the community is investing in itself. Here are some suggested steps:

Capture and share lessons learned. Before the memories of your latest project fade, take some time to sit down as a revitalization team and identify the key things you've learned. What went well? What would you like to do differently next time? Keep notes on helpful resources that you've used, including contact numbers. You (and your successors) will be glad you did.

Celebrate success. Don't move on to the next initiative without celebrating the successful completion of this one! Have a potluck gathering. Take lots of pictures (and mount them in an album that records the progress of your community). Take a moment to savor the good feeling that comes from turning your dreams into realities.

Thank everyone. With a volunteer leadership base, it's clear that people are not expecting a financial reward. Still, everyone appreciates recognition for a job well done. Be lavish with praise and pats on the back. In an era of high-tech communications, a handwritten thank-you note is as cherished as ever. Let people know that you've noticed and appreciate their energy and commitment.

Publicize results. Local newspapers and television stations are often happy to showcase the results of your community's hard work, particularly when there is a visible product (a gazebo, a park, or a new sign at the entry to town) and a story that goes with it (different community groups collaborating in new ways, a festival to raise money to buy trees and benches).

Recruit new talent. Now is the ideal time to capitalize on the community's focus on the success of your last project. Ask people for their ideas on next steps and listen carefully to their answers. Find out what they can contribute: Do you have a bookkeeping whiz in your midst who has been hidden until now? A neighbor with a backhoe? This ongoing process of finding out where the talents lie will help inject fresh energy and ideas into your revitalization efforts.

Identify your next project. If you have a written plan for renewal, you will already have some guidance on this front. But don't be so committed to your original plan that you overlook the chance to build on an oppor-

tunity that offers higher leverage. If a new business owner has expressed interest in sprucing up a downtown storefront, you may want to support her effort by moving your plan for planters and decorative streetlights higher up on the priority list.



Caution

In a small community, people can get too personally identified with projects, which can affect egos and discourage participation. Success can bring its own pitfalls: watch out for the “club effect,” which occurs when the revitalization team has been together since its inception and experienced some successes. Frequently, the team becomes the center of social as well as civic life, and it’s easy for other members of the community to see the team as an impenetrable clique.

Don’t view private properties the same as public properties. An initial wave of enthusiasm can lead people to proclaim, “We’ve cleaned up the courthouse square, now let’s clean up Joe’s yard!” Be aware of what is—and is not—within your control as a revitalization team.

Even though you need the involvement and cooperation of elected officials to support your efforts, it’s important to establish the independence of your revitalization organization. We found that in cases where the revitalization process has been part of the town government structure, it has been more at risk. The local revitalization organization should not be so embedded in the government structure that it falls apart if and when the political winds shift.

A final caution: don’t chase money for money’s sake! Often, fledgling organizations operate under the conception that a grant will solve all their woes. It’s very tempting to “invent” a project that fits a particular funder’s criteria. Before applying for any funding, make sure the project for which you are seeking support is part of your organization’s true mission. Develop a “litmus test” before applying for grants to make sure the project is a fit for your revitalization organization. Funds are always tight and organizations that chase after each and every grant not only dilute their vision and momentum, but also may wind up making enemies of other organizations that may be more deserving of a particular funder’s support.



*Rural Leadership
Development*



Summary

Rural communities are faced with negative changes, but citizens don't have to sit back and just watch the changes happen. With local motivation, a clear plan for renewal, and a basic organizational structure to support your efforts, you're on your way. Supportive partnerships, projects designed for early successes, and a documented track record of your progress will help you get the resources you need to continue your work to make positive change.

RESOURCES

ON HANDMADE IN AMERICA'S SMALL TOWN REVITALIZATION PROJECT

HandMade in America web site: <http://www.handmadeinamerica.org> *Small*

Voices, Big Songs: A Story of American Renewal by E. C. Hunter and K. Y.

McGill. Asheville, NC: HandMade in America, 1999.

Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods: Communities Leading the Way.

Washington, DC: National Neighborhood Coalition, 2000.

www.neighborhoodcoalition.org

Solutions for America: What's Already Out There. Richmond, VA: Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 2002:

www.pew-partnership.org/

ON COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community Tool Box: Bringing Solutions to Light:

ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/

Coming Together: Building Community Collaboration and Consensus:

www.communitycollaboration.net/

McKnight, J. L. and Kretzman, J. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.* Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications, 1993. Phone 800.397.2282.

Morse, S. W. *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

ON RURAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Center for the Study of Rural America:

www.kc.frb.org

The Heartland Center for Leadership Development:

www.heartlandcenter.info/

Pew Partnership for Civic Change:

www.pew-partnership.org/leadershipplenty/

Southern Rural Development Center:

srdc.msstate.edu/

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development:

www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/

Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development:

www.cas.ncrcrd.psu.edu/

Western Rural Development Center:

extension.usu.edu/WRDC/