

Building Trust, Leadership and Power for Action in Rural Communities

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Abstract

Rural communities in the United States are experiencing rapid change. Farms continue to consolidate, manufacturing firms move to Mexico or China for lower labor costs, rural residents are forced to look elsewhere for their livelihood. Retailers on Main Street struggle to compete with the Super Wal-Marts and urban shopping malls. With a declining tax base, local tax dollars become increasingly stretched over necessary infrastructure needs such as water and sewer systems, roads and bridges, schools, and emergency medical, police and fire facilities. Leadership is provided by residents who are largely volunteers with limited training in leadership skills yet spend countless hours working to make their community a better place. They practise leadership as it was modelled by those who came before them, largely traditional methods focussed more on 'maintenance' than on 'change'. Traditional leadership practices pose severe limitations in today's reality of rapid change. This paper discusses some of the limitations with traditional models of community leadership and introduces a collaborative, consensus-building approach to address changing needs in rural communities. The collaborative model is based on building personal relationships between individuals and organisations to create trust and a sense of reciprocity, creating a learning opportunity for people to become more knowledgeable about issues, and on building the capacity of citizens to work together in collaborative problem solving and decision making. A case study illustrates how the concepts were put into practice in a rural county in Indiana, USA, to build trust, leadership and power for action on high priority issues in the community.

Keywords

Rural, community, leadership, collaboration, visioning

Introduction

Chrislip and Larson, in their book *Collaborative Leadership*, articulate the frustrations experienced by citizens and leaders in many communities.

"There are many people with the power to say no, yet no one person or group has the power to act alone. People do not trust each other. There are hidden agendas. There is no larger vision that brings coherence to actions. No person or group has enough credibility to provide leadership. Nobody will take a leadership role. People lack the leadership capacities or group skills to work together constructively. There are not enough resources to address the problem. Most citizens

are apathetic; they will not take responsibility for shared problems. Leaders and citizens avoid risk for fear of being attacked by others. The problems are complex and interdependent; they cross-jurisdictional boundaries. No one is in charge” (Chrislip and Larson 1994, p. 1).

This description of today's reality reflects the current social and political environment, the increasing complexity of public issues, and the changing nature of community leadership. Traditional community leadership approaches for dealing with public issues are not effective in today's reality. A new community leadership approach is needed that embraces the changes of society, the nature of public issues and the leadership capacity. This new approach, however, is not one that is learned through experience alone. Rather, it consists of a set of processes, knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be taught and learned. There is a role for the land-grant university to play in providing programs for communities that build, nurture and support this new leadership model.

Differences in today's decision-making environment

Rural community leaders find themselves operating in a vastly different environment today than in the past. Several of these changes are worth noting.

Diversity of populations

The population in most communities today is more diverse. Urban populations have moved out into the countryside and people from other countries and cultures have moved into both urban and rural areas. New populations bring new issues, values, and perspectives to the forefront about what is important in a community. Frequently, there are few opportunities for people to communicate with each other and therefore gain an understanding of one another's perspectives.

Cynicism

Citizens are more cynical today, in general, about political processes. Many have dropped out of being involved in public issues because they feel powerless to make a difference or feel the decision has already been made (Chrislip and Larson 1994; Boyte 1989; Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Polarisation

Nonetheless, when an issue affects people directly, they want to be at the decision-making table to ensure that their interests are addressed. Frequently, if they do not have such opportunities to be heard, they organise themselves with experts and legal advice to make sure they get what they want. Because they have not been admitted into the context of the community, they often do so without regard to the community's broader concerns. Their major concern is to 'win' and make sure the other parties can't

implement their solutions. Such approaches invite further polarisation in the community and add little to the community's ability to solve complex issues.

Individualism

A prevalent thread of individualism runs through the US culture (Chrislip and Larson 1994). This deeply-rooted attitude comes to the forefront around such issues as land use that involves property rights. People will argue that "It's my property and I'll do with it what I want". Such individually-focussed attitudes do little to assist the decision-making process when other perspectives are involved. Community leaders are left to deal with choices about meeting individual needs or those of the broader community.

Attitude about complexity

Society's attitude about complexity makes it difficult for leaders in communities (Chrislip and Larson 1994). At a time when people need to be willing to learn and explore, we are still taught in school to 'know the answers'. This is especially challenging for leaders because people look to them to have the answers. In other words, we fail to solve our problems, in part, because of our inability to acknowledge and work with complexity and ambiguity, and to recognise that we do not 'know' the answers (Heifetz 1988). Rather, we need to explore and create new solutions.

Role of elected officials

We live in a representative democracy where we elect representatives to solve our problems for us. Too often, we abdicate our responsibilities to take ownership for our own public issues (Heifetz 1988). When citizens become involved, it is often threatening to those in elected offices. There is an underlying attitude, "You elected us to office. Get out of our way and let us do our job" (Chrislip and Larson 1994). The expectation that elected officials can, or even should, solve today's complex public issues is not only unrealistic, it sets the foundation for ultimate failure (Heifetz 1988).

Characteristics of community issues

The nature of community issues is complex and frequently, controversial. There are many 'stakeholders', those affected by the issue, involved in most issues with different beliefs about what is right and wrong, what is just and unjust. Carpenter and Kennedy (1988) point out some of the unique characteristics of community issues.

Diffusion of responsibility

Community issues involve several parties with vested interests in the outcome of a decision. At the same time, there is no one organisation with unilateral authority to solve the problem without creating unwanted consequences for other parties. Often, public 'gridlock' results and public decision-makers are unable to

take action. This concept, common with contemporary issues, is often referred to as a “no one in charge society” (Gray 1989; Dukes 1996; Bryson and Crosby 1992). Consequently, turf battles ensue, trust declines, cynicism grows and it becomes even more difficult for community leaders to act (Chrislip and Larson 1994).

Varying level of expertise and understanding

Each individual and organisation involved in a community issue has beliefs, opinions, and information from his/her perspective. No one party has all the information needed to resolve the issue. Misinformation abounds. Frequently, issues are addressed from this fragmented, individualistic perspective. Not only does this pit one party against the other, those involved never receive the benefit of gaining a deeper, richer understanding of the issue that comes from hearing other points of view.

Different forms of power

Power comes in a variety of forms — that derived from financial resources, legal authority, knowledge and skills, number of people, access to decision makers, personal respect, friendships, administrative policies and regulations (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988). Power can be used in constructive ways to find resolution or in destructive ways that further fragment the community and escalate the issue.

Strongly held values

Each party has strong feelings about what he/she feels is important. Often, in issues such as land use, the stakes are quite high because they involve significant financial resources, power, environmental resources, and other critical interests. Strong emotions often accompany the issue because the stakes are high. Misunderstanding about one another’s interests abound (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Unmanaged community issues

Contentious community issues, if left unmanaged, can grow in intensity over time. With each turn, the conflict intensifies, the parties become increasingly polarised, and the options for resolution diminish (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988). If community issues are anticipated and addressed early on, simple options might be available. Disputes frequently can be averted if the public are involved openly in the decision-making process. Once the conflict is in motion, it becomes more difficult to stop it. If left unmanaged, the conflict may escalate to costly litigation and destroy relationships within the community. Frequently, community leaders are not aware that they have options, and/or they lack the knowledge and skills to initiate other approaches. Consequently, unmanaged community conflicts are the norm (Gray 1989; Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Traditional community leadership approaches

Susan Carpenter (1990) identifies five traditional leadership approaches to resolving community issues.

Ignore the issue

One approach is to ignore the community issue and hope that it will go away. This is wishful thinking. Community issues do not usually go away. Another 'Bury-Your-Head-in-the-Sand' approach is to hold a public meeting to let people vent their frustrations. This well-intentioned approach may actually increase the intensity of the issue and polarise the community.

Do it yourself

A second approach is the 'Do it yourself'. Community leaders take pride in getting results. When the demand is there to do something, it is quite natural to pull other community leaders together or turn to legal or engineering consultants, come up with a reasonable solution and offer the solution to the community. This response is effective as long as no other group in the community has another idea about what the problem is or how it should be handled. This also requires a high level of trust among community leaders and the rest of the community. With the complexity and controversy surrounding many community issues, and the level of mistrust among parties, this is usually not a successful option.

Stake out a position

Community leaders are asked often where they stand on an issue. The third approach is the 'Stake out a position'. Frequently, they take positions prematurely before all the issues and all the concerns of the parties are known. Once positions have been taken it is difficult to retract or even modify a position without losing face. Staking out a position promotes competition among groups and can eventually polarise a community. Energy gets channelled into advocating and defending positions, rather than working with others to find solutions. Since most community issues involve several parties and different perspectives, this is usually not an effective approach.

Set up a committee

A fourth approach community leaders might take is to 'Set up a committee'. This may or may not be an effective approach, depending upon the intent, who is involved, and the process that is used. Committees are sometimes formed to be a delay tactic in dealing with the real issues. They are often formed with people that leaders feel most comfortable with rather than with the diversity needed to fully address the issue. Committees often do not seek public input. If they do, it is often late in the process, after a draft plan has been crafted. The results of committee efforts frequently receive limited support from the broader community and, at their worst, generate conflict rather than resolve it.

Consult and decide

A fifth approach is 'Consult and decide'. This is where community leaders consult with all major interests before making a decision. They approach the various parties involved in the issue separately, find out the concerns of each group, and seek suggestions for ways to address the issue before making a decision about how to proceed. Initially, people are pleased to be consulted, and the leaders are satisfied that useful information has been gathered and that with it an even better decision can be made. Much to the leaders' surprise, however, the solution will likely be rejected by everyone; not because the solution is inherently unreasonable, but because people did not have the benefit of hearing what other groups needed and did not participate directly in developing the solution. As a consequence, the decision that thoughtfully blends the suggestions of all interests is viewed by all sides as inadequate. People do not understand why the solution does not reflect more of their own ideas.

A collaborative community leadership paradigm

The changes in today's social and political environment and the complexity and controversy surrounding public issues call for a different approach to community leadership and decision-making. Dukes (1996) points out that much of public life today is about conflict and its resolution. Community leadership, in the new paradigm, is thus about the ability to reconcile competing public interests in order to meet the needs of a broader community. It involves bringing divergent interests who have a stake in the decision together and finding common ground. "It involves finding forums and processes where individuals and organisations can be forceful advocates without being adversarial, where public officials can make effective decisions without being dictatorial, and where community can come together rather than split apart when faced with tough problems and divisive conflicts" (Dukes 1996, p. 9).

What's different about the new leadership paradigm? It involves a new way of thinking and acting. One major change is the shift from the focus on just a few elite people who make decisions for the community to a focus on leadership as a process of moving a community forward in its action. Leadership today is not viewed as a few 'great people', rather as a community of leaders at every level and in every segment of the community (Mathews and McAfee n.d., p. 3).

Chrislip and Larson (1994, p. 146) define community leadership as "citizens working together in the community to achieve common goals. This definition is built on a democratic belief that people have the capacity to create their own visions and solve their own problems. If you can bring the appropriate people together (being broadly inclusive) in constructive ways (creating a credible, open process) with good information (bringing about a shared understanding of problems and concerns), they will create realistic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the community."

This collaborative, consensus-building approach as articulated by Chrislip and Larson (1994), Bryson and Crosby (1992), Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), and Gray (1989) is a way for leaders and citizens to work together that has been shown to be effective in dealing with community issues. It brings the involved parties to the decision-making table and engages them in a process whereby they can learn about the different aspects of a problem through the perspective of others. Through a discussion of alternative solutions, analysing the trade-offs and consequences of various actions, they come to solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible and reach decisions that will be supported in the long run.

Collaborative leadership principles

Several general principles underlie the collaborative leadership approach.

Capacity and responsibility

The collaborative leadership paradigm values people as the greatest asset of the community. Capacity is about building leadership from within the community. Citizens and leaders take responsibility for their own community issues. By claiming responsibility, people develop a sense that they are part of the solution rather than bystanders or victims of circumstances. They believe they can make a difference and, in fact, they do.

Commitment to inclusiveness

In all community issues, different points of view and interests exist. When people with diverse viewpoints on an issue are brought together, it encourages discussions that can lead to new understandings and solutions. This involves people who have traditionally not been at the decision-making table. It may involve making a special effort to reach out and include those who have been excluded in the past such as minorities, youth, low resource people, newcomers, or those viewed as 'the enemy'.

Power

In traditional leadership approaches, power is seen as zero-sum and one-way. In other words, there is only so much power and it flows one way — from those with power to those without. Power, in the traditional sense, may involve the amount of financial resources, legal authority, or control over people and institutions. It is something used on people.

In the collaborative leadership paradigm, power is viewed differently. It is regarded as infinite, not scarce, and it can be created. People can grow their power without anyone losing their power. In fact, public power tends to increase as it is used. One idea can generate another, one commitment can inspire

another, one relationship can lead to another. When people join together to work on a public issue, they generate new power through their knowledge, creativity, and problem solving.

Public relationships

Working relationships in a community are essential. This is not a matter of 'good' relationships in terms of familiarity or pleasant associations. Rather, it is the ability to work together to problem solve — even when people don't necessarily like each other. In the new leadership paradigm, relationships are critical such as citizen-to-citizen and citizens-to-government. Three points made by Mathews (1994) are particularly relevant:

- Citizens and government officials working together is not only pragmatic, but essential to finding acceptable solutions to community issues
- Shifting from identifying 'the enemy' to building collaborative ties is necessary and is based not on 'liking' others, but on respecting the interests of the other parties
- Joining diverse groups of citizens in public relationships requires openness to divergent views and ways of acting together that may be new relationships and practices.

Keeping communication open

Understanding each other is vitally important to finding solutions to a problem. People gain understanding through sharing information and dialogue, both of which require good listening skills and a willingness to be open to other people and ideas. People are kept informed, and information is shared freely. Information is not used as a power tool over others. Rather, information is used to inform and enable people to act.

Mutual respect for all

Everyone has some element of validity in his/her perspective on an issue. It is vitally important that people recognise that it is alright to disagree and seek to understand others' perspectives. Name calling, not paying attention, leaving meetings early, and other ways of belittling another's perspective or the group process is not helpful. Participants must keep the focus of their discussion on the issue, not on other people.

Finding shared interests

Participants' shared interests or compatible goals can provide the basis for mutual learning and collaborative work. Participants must accept responsibility for making the process work. It is important that they express themselves to educate one another about their interests. Through this learning process, a common sense of purpose and a more complete understanding of the issue can be developed.

Working for consensus

Mutually acceptable solutions are worth seeking. When everyone involved in the issue agrees on the course of action, implementing and sustaining that solution will be much easier and more effective. Consensus can be developed in even conflict situations by first seeking common ground across peoples' different viewpoints, then building the solution upon those commonalities. Consensus is not the same as unanimity (everyone's first choice) or compromise (everyone gives in). Consensus means that everyone's views have been heard and understood, and that the decision reached is the best that could be made at the time. While not everyone will be equally enthusiastic about the decision, all do accept it and will not block or impede its implementation.

A case study of White County, Indiana

White County, Indiana, is a rural community located in northwestern Indiana, adjacent to Tippecanoe County and Purdue University. The population of the county is just over 25,000. A significant number of Hispanics have moved into the county during the last decade. The economy of the county is based on traditional agriculture (hogs, corn and soybeans), several small manufacturing firms, and tourism. Two lakes and an amusement park bring nearly one million visitors to the county each year. Like most rural communities in Indiana, White County is faced with the structural changes in agriculture and manufacturing, growth from the urban areas into the countryside, the loss of youth from the community, and environmental issues, especially water quality. While there was no one major issue that dominated the public agenda, leaders and citizens were concerned about the future of their community.

During the fall of 2000, the White County Commissioners contacted the author for assistance in conducting a county-wide strategic plan. The intent was to develop a vision, build consensus among residents and organisations in the community, and take action on critical, high priority issues. Working through the local extension office, a steering committee of key community leaders was formed to discuss the program. This was also a time to assess the motivations behind the request and to determine the willingness of the traditional leaders to be inclusive in the process and whether there was a genuine interest in the public good. The committee included a county commissioner, mayor of the county seat town, county council member, executive director of the county's industrial development foundation, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce, director of the community foundation, and the staff from the local extension office.

A meeting was held with these key leaders to discuss their expectations of the program and to introduce the principles and processes of the program. The educational role of extension and the university was clarified. It was agreed by all parties to proceed with the program. The county commissioners allocated

\$15,000 to support the program as well give the approval of a county employee to coordinate the program. This was the first phase of the program.

The collaborative process

The collaborative process is based on the *Take Charge* model that was developed through the North Central Regional Rural Development Center in the late 1980s. The author of this paper was one of the developers of the *Take Charge* program and has conducted it in over 40 communities in Indiana. The program, as it has been refined over the years, consists of five phases carried out over the course of a year. The first phase, as described above, is to determine community readiness.

The second phase is intended to provide citizens and organisations from across the county an opportunity to come together to discuss their common future; to build trust and relationships across organisations and communities; to identify areas of common concern; to build consensus on a shared vision; and to identify high priority issues. To accomplish this goal three, three-hour sessions, held one week apart, were conducted in late January and early February 2001. The first session focussed on activities to determine community identity and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the county. The second session developed a shared vision for the future. The third session identified the critical issues that must be addressed if the vision is to be realised. People were encouraged to make a commitment to attend all three sessions as each one built on the information from the previous one. The activities were carried out through small group work. Each small group reported their discussion to the total group. This enabled everyone to have a chance to speak and to be heard.

The steering committee attempted to be inclusive and involve all segments of the community by geographical areas, organisations, and occupations. Special effort was made to involve youth and members of the Hispanic community. People were contacted in person, through organisations, by letter, and through the news media. Everyone in the community was invited and encouraged to participate in the program. Approximately 142 attended at least one of the three sessions.

The outcome of this second phase was a working vision statement and nine organised taskforces to address the high priority issues that were identified. The author wrote a summary report of the three sessions. Media coverage of the sessions was extensive.

The steering committee was expanded at the conclusion of the second phase to include the chairperson from each of the taskforces. This enabled direct communication between the taskforces and the steering committee in order to coordinate the entire effort. The steering committee met monthly to ensure that the

effort continued to move forward. An email group was established to enable frequent communication between the steering committee members and with the taskforces.

While the second phase of the program focussed on people sharing their stories, perceptions and opinions, the third phase focussed on learning more about the issues by gathering facts, studies and other information. The intent was to build the knowledge base of the community about the high priority issues. This was done in two ways. One method was sponsoring a community session on local finances, taxes and how local government operates. A state and local finance specialist from Purdue was invited to address the group. The second initiative during this time was the work of the taskforces. Their charge was to clarify the nature of the issue they were dealing with, talk with experts, look at previous studies, visit other communities, gather information, conduct surveys, or undertake other tasks to gain more knowledge about the issue and to identify and analyse alternative solutions. The taskforces were asked to have a report of their findings to share with the entire group in early September 2001. The outcome of this third phase was a written report by each of the taskforces about the nature of the issue, alternative solutions and recommended actions.

The fourth phase of the program involved bringing everyone back together in September to hear the reports from the taskforces. They were asked to share what they had learned about the issue with the total group and to lead a discussion about appropriate courses of action. Two taskforces were scheduled for each two-hour evening session. Four sessions were held in November. These reports were then put together into a plan of action. The author, working with the steering committee, wrote with the report. This was completed at the end of 2001.

The fifth phase of the program was the implementation of the plan. Each taskforce was asked to identify specific actions for the coming year. These were highlighted in a brochure that was made available to everyone in the community. Because both decision-makers and citizens were involved in identifying the issues important to them and identifying actions to address the issues, implementation of the actions were expected to be supported by the community and sustainable in the long run.

Outcomes

As the *White County Plan of Action for 2002* was distributed, it became apparent that many of the taskforces were in need of outside funding in order to implement their plan. A community-wide grant writing workshop was held in the spring 2002. The expert who conducted the training was able to focus the workshop on the specific needs that had been identified in the plan. He searched out relevant funding sources prior to the workshop in order to provide leads to the taskforces. The county commissioners paid

the workshop expenses as they felt it was a good investment in the future. Several proposals were written as a result of this workshop; one has already been funded.

Several intangible outcomes have resulted from the program over the last three years including:

- The County Council approved \$500,000 for water and sewer extensions to a new industrial site after hearing that this was a priority by the Economic Development Taskforce
- After hearing that a farmer's market was a priority with the Tourism Taskforce, a staff member from the Indiana Department of Agriculture and a participant in the program, provided information about the services of the department and available funding. A proposal was written by the taskforce, funding was received, and a farmer's market was established. This is a collaborative venture involving public and private organisations.
- The Cultural Diversity Taskforce opened an office to provide information and other resources to the growing Hispanic population. A Rotary Exchange student from Mexico who lived in the community the previous year was contacted and invited to assist with this project. She accepted the offer and spent several months in the community to conduct a needs assessment and develop a resource guide in both English and Spanish.
- A survey was conducted by the Economic Development Taskforce of all the industries in the county to determine their needs. Workforce development was identified as the top priority. This issue was then coordinated with the Education Taskforce. A major grant proposal was written to develop a community learning network in the community to provide educational opportunities utilise existing educational providers and facilities.
- An effort is being made by the county commissioners, working with the local Congressman, to secure federal funding to make improvements to a major roadway. This was one of the high priority issues.
- The issues identified by the Lakes and Natural Resources Taskforce were nearly the same as those identified by the Agriculture and Land Use Taskforce. The two groups combined their efforts and encouraged the county commissioners to revise the county comprehensive land use plan, zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations. The County Council appropriated the funds, a consultant was hired and this process is currently underway.
- The Tourism Taskforce teamed up with a neighboring county and is undertaking joint events and marketing efforts in an effort called Stay Another Day
- The Social Services & Health Care Taskforce initiated respite services for elderly and disabled citizens. They also wrote a grant and received it to purchase and distribute a curriculum for childcare providers in the community.

Lessons Learned

The following points lessons were learned from the author's observations and experiences with strategic visioning programs and collaborative leadership approaches in many Indiana rural communities.

Public life

Francis Moore Lappe and Paul Martin DuBois, in their book titled *The Quickening of America* (1994), talk about the myths of public life. One of the myths is that only officials and celebrities have a public life. In fact, each of us has a public life through school, church, civic and social groups. Citizens do care about their community and the quality of life. They have busy lives that compete for very precious time, but they also want a public life. Citizens want to be a part of the community, to make it better, and in so doing find their lives enriched. The role of community leadership is to recognise that citizens do have a vested interest in the community and want to be involved. They need the opportunities to get involved.

Public space

Citizens need an opportunity, a reason to come together in public, 'public space'. It is through these opportunities that they tell their stories, discuss community issues important to them, build relationships with others and discover they have common concerns. With the regionalisation of schools, businesses and work places, the opportunities for people to come together have become even more important in recent years. The role of community leadership is to create 'public spaces' where citizens and organisations can come together occasionally to discuss the future of the community. One of the steering committee members commented that "This process provided the opportunity for everyone, political and citizen, to sit down and share/voice opinions. Most residents don't take (or cannot) opportunity to attend city/town/county meetings to voice opinions/concerns. As a result the elected officials and department heads have to make decisions on what they *believe* they need to do. This process opened up communication and established teams for on-going communication."

Inclusiveness

It is important to identify *all* segments of the community from the very beginning of the program and to invite them to participate. It requires extra time and commitment to contact key individuals from groups of people who are traditionally not at the public table. This can be done only on a one-on-one basis to understand their interests and to help them know that this will be a safe and effective way to participate in the community. It is the role of community leadership to be inclusive and to recognise that it takes extra time and effort to bring non-traditional groups to the table. In the long run, not only is it the right thing to do, but it creates ownership of the decisions that will be sustainable in the long run.

Mix of leaders

It was important to have credible, traditional leaders in the group. Many people commented about the importance of the county commissioners backing this program. They helped convene, catalyse and sustain the process. They also provided financial resources to initiate and sustain the program. It is also important to have a mix of leaders. In addition to elected officials, there were many community leaders from a variety of social, civic, and business organisations who were involved. These were the people who made things happen, the 'Doers'. New leaders, those who were previously not involved in the community, moved into leadership roles with the various taskforces. Officials learned from the citizens, citizens learned from the officials. New leaders gained confidence and discovered their leadership skills. Throughout the process, new leaders came to the forefront as they discovered they had knowledge and skills to contribute to specific actions. Community leadership is about sharing power, and credit, with others.

Relationships

People recognised that no one person had all the expertise, resources, or capabilities to address the complex community issues. They needed each other. Through sharing their concerns, studying the issues and reaching consensus on what could be done, people developed a synergy with one another. One steering committee member commented that "Through the course of the planning sessions, we discovered that several groups had similar objectives and goals and that we could combine efforts on projects. We were reminded of the resources that already exist within the county, and we were able to put faces with resources." Another person commented "I had the chance to work closely with several individuals that I had never met before. I appreciated the cooperative effort made by several groups and individuals to make this project so successful." Another person stated "Between the process and the people, we have the definition of collaboration. I didn't see turf issues or power plays during this process at all. I think trust was established as part of the process. As stated, each community and group had a voice. The communication process prompted positive dialog and trust."

Vision

Through the visioning activities, people were able to express their hopes and fears about the future of the community. They were able to express things they wanted to change or to preserve. People's values were revealed and they found that others felt similarly. From this, they were able to establish a direction, a vision of what they wanted the community to be and their role in helping to make it happen. Organisations could see how they could allocate their resources toward the vision, and how they could partner with each other to make things happen beyond what any one organisation could do on its own. One person commented that "It was interesting to see this vision evolve and to see the ideas 'click'. By completing the SWOT analysis we all could visualise where we need to head. It helped move from 'I think

we need to...' to 'We have identified that we need to...'. It is the role of community leaders to help the community articulate a shared vision and to keep it before the community. Over time, individuals and organisations may lose sight of the vision. Leaders need to ensure that the vision is before the community and that actions are in alignment to achieve the vision.

Structure and process

This program provided a structure and a process for people to work together collaboratively. It required a person knowledgeable of collaborative public processes in order to design and facilitate a program within the context of the community. Although there are underlying general community development principles, the program works best when it is custom tailored to fit the unique character of the community. Collaborative processes can be modelled with the participants to reinforce the principles of the process as well as to teach the tools and techniques of the process. The taskforces then used collaborative processes as they continued with their work and as they have undertaken other initiatives in the community.

Role of experts

The citizens identified the issues and the action plans in this program and therefore have ownership of it. Experts were used at specific points in time to contribute specific skills or knowledge to assist in understanding issues, analysing alternatives, or conducting training. The difference is where the locus of the work and power lies. The locus remained with the citizens, not with experts. People were amazed at their own assets — the knowledge, skills, and abilities that resided within their own community. And, they are making use of them.

Link with the community

The media plays a very important role in covering all aspects of the process. This keeps the process open, inclusive, and does not generate any surprises for the community. This is a vital link with the rest of the community to keep all citizens informed on the development of the issues. It is the role of the leadership to ensure that communication is open and honest, and that there are no hidden agendas in the process or the outcomes.

A 'do-able' action plan

Large, often over-whelming goals should be broken down into manageable yearly objectives and action steps. The longer-term goals (three to five years) can be broken down into yearly objectives. Each yearly objective can then be broken down into specific action plans that indicate specifically what will be done that year, by whom, what resources will be needed, how it will happen, and in what timeframe. White County wrote yearly objectives and action plans, then celebrated their accomplishments at the end of the

year and set new objectives for the coming year. These fit within the framework of their longer-term goals. Over time, they have a way of measuring their successes and keep their goals moving forward. The accomplishment of goals is important to help citizens recognise that they can do things for themselves and to keep the momentum going over time. This motivated those who were involved in the program and brought new people into the process.

Summary

During these times of rapid change in our communities and complex public issues, the role and type of community leadership is put to the test. It frequently appears that citizens are not connected with their community, they are cynical, powerless, and unwilling to devote personal time to get involved. However, experience with this program has shown that citizens do care about their community and the public issues that affect them. This calls for a different kind of community leadership than in the past. The need is for leaders who recognise the role of citizens in community decision-making, value the diversity of the community and work to be inclusive, and have the skills and knowledge to lead people through collaborative, consensus-based processes. This requires a different understanding about leadership and the concept of power — power that is shared and developed through the synergistic relationships of working with others on common goals. These are not natural ways of working that come from experience. Rather, these include various sources of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can be learned, nurtured and supported.

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