

Association of Leadership Educators
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PRESENTATION PROPOSAL

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2. Title of Presentation: Bridging the Leadership Gap Among Rural Communities
3. Presentation Track: Practice
4. Description:
Would your community benefit if leaders and citizens came together in non-partisan settings to build a collective agenda? Do you work in rural areas that are losing legislative influence? Do you hear grumbling about lack of communication amongst community leaders, and do you want to do something about it? This workshop will enable you to learn how to get started building support for a bridging leadership program, position yourself and your organization as a key organizer of the effort, develop a board of directors, and plan quality educational experiences for elected officials and community leaders. A power point presentation and accompanying discussion and fact sheets will help you replicate this highly visible, publicly valued program in your area.
5. Biographical Profile
Catherine Rasmussen is a Regional Extension Educator and Associate Professor with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. She has over 25 years of teaching experience from her previous work in secondary education and her current work in the area of leadership and civic engagement. She has worked with appointed and elected officials, state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and community groups in developing new skills for working together. Her passion in developing working relationships among communities resulted in creating a customized countywide leadership program which has received statewide recognition. Besides her work with local boards and community groups, Catherine has been a presenter/trainer for state conferences and leadership development programs.

Bridging the Leadership Gap Among Rural Communities

Introduction

Our communities are in a changing world. Globalization, changing demographics, speed and dissemination of information technology, and economic restructuring are impacting the communities in which we live. No longer can we think of our “community” as only the town or village in which we live. We also belong to a larger community – the community formed by all the residents of a county or geographical region. In today’s world we are a neighborhood of communities linked together by many common challenges and opportunities.

But small rural communities are deeply rooted in their own identity and continue to nurture a history of competition. How does one convince the leaders and the residents of these neighboring communities that they need to work together if they are to survive in this new world?

The workshop will share the successful development of a countywide leadership program to address the gap in rural communities, including:

- 1) Gap among the current leaders in the communities to communicate and work together
- 2) Gap in emerging leaders within communities to step up to the plate

Background

Recognizing the need for more working relationships among the leaders of Brown County, the idea of a “bridging” program was envisioned by a small group of six citizens who came together in the spring of 1999. Under the leadership of Catherine Rasmussen, Regional Extension Educator, the idea was developed into an innovative community leadership program called Bridging Brown County.

Today, over 700 people have been involved by participating in Bridging Brown County sponsored activities including:

- Monthly meetings of community representatives
- Annual workshops for county citizens and community leaders around current issues
- Quarterly forums for elected and appointed Officials
- Countywide leadership program
- Marketing activities and trainings for local producers and businesses
- Networking opportunities

How It Works

Bridging Brown County is more than a leadership program. It is an intergenerational effort committed to creating active citizen leaders who will help build a stronger county community. Bridging Brown County builds the capacity of communities to effectively connect people and resources. It is a catalyst and a framework that supports everyone engaged in community development.

Bridging Brown County brings together representatives of private and public organizations, businesses, education, media and retired citizens from communities across the county. Appointed and elected officials from the county, cities, school districts and townships are involved as well as local legislators.

What makes this program different from typical leadership programs is that many community leadership programs select classes who begin and end the program. While in the leadership trenches, they are expected to recall what they learned. Bridging Brown County is an ongoing learning experience for those currently providing leadership with timely information and resources for real issues.

Secondly, leadership programs often target only emerging leaders, thinking that elected and appointed leaders are too busy to come to any more meetings. But, if properly designed and implemented, a bridging program can be THE information source, the networking place TO BE, and a resource to assist leaders in decision-making on key issues.

Bridging Brown County was developed as one of the U-Lead programs of the Leadership and Civic Engagement Area, Community Vitality and Development Unit, University of Minnesota Extension Service, in partnership with the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. U-Lead programs draw directly on the leadership theories of former and current University of Minnesota scholars Robert Terry (*Authentic Leadership*, 1993, and *Seven Zones for Leadership*, 2001), and John Bryson and Barbara Crosby (*Leadership for the Common Good*, 1991 and second edition, 2004).

The main program tool used was the *U-Lead Program Development and Management Guide*, co-authored by the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and the University of Minnesota Extension Service, 2004. This resource provides program design and development templates, evaluation templates, needs/interest assessment tools, curriculum development, etc.

Results to Date

Three methods of evaluation were used to measure outcomes of the Bridging Brown County U-Lead Program. These methods included: 1) Written evaluations completed by workshop participants, 2) Telephone interviews with elected leaders participating in the Brown County Congress of Elected and Appointed Officials, and 3) The *Community Leadership Program Survey*, by Dr. Kenneth Pigg, University of Missouri, completed by individuals who had been active in the program for two years.

1) Workshop Evaluations

Evaluations were completed following the three workshops held from 2001-2004. A total of 195 participants attended the workshops. Evaluation survey results indicated:

- 85% strongly agreed or agreed that the workshop provided knowledge that is useful and relevant
- 89% strongly agreed or agreed that the round table discussion were beneficial in identifying and addressing community issues
- 83% strongly agreed or agreed that the workshop met their expectations for the goals that were stated

Workshop participants were asked, “What did you think was most useful/helpful about the workshop?” Outcomes most often mentioned included: Networking and creating new partnerships in the community, greater insight into the county and issue presented, learning resources available, and understanding of the need to work together on issues.

2) Interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted to determine the impact of the Brown County Congress of Elected and Appointed Officials. The selection criteria was those elected leaders who had been attending the quarterly forums on a regular basis. The sample was comprised of two to three individuals from each of the represented entities (county, cities, schools, townships and legislators.). The purpose of the interviews was to determine what value, if any, they found in attending the congresses. Twelve interviews in all were conducted for a sample of 36%.

All respondents felt that the quarterly forums were of great value. Comments by those interviewed indicated that the county congresses had increased in their knowledge about the interconnectedness of communities.

“We’re developing a deeper understanding and empathy for the needs of other organizations and finding where we can partner together.” (School Superintendent)

“We get to know each other better, and this helps us be more effective in bringing in new business or promoting tourism. Everyone seems to benefit.” (County Commissioner)

Elected leaders also reported that their participation in the quarterly forums had helped them identify ways to strategically build relationships and involve other key individuals and groups to create opportunities and/or tackle an issue.

“Bridging Brown County has broken down barriers and taken away some of the competitiveness among communities. It also helps representatives of the various government units better understand each other’s spending needs and financial challenges.” (City Council President)

“Decisions need to work well for the entire county. The more people you can contact and feel comfortable contacting when you deal with one of those weighty issues, the better it works. I now feel more comfortable contacting people on the other side of the county and asking what they think about an issue.” (County Commissioner)

“The federal people also need to hear our concerns because we’re losing so much representation at the state level.” (Township Association Officer)

3) Community Leadership Program Survey

The *Community Leadership Survey* by Dr. Kenneth Pigg, University of Missouri 2001, was used to conduct an analysis of the outcomes and impacts by participants in the program from 2001-2004. The evaluation design asked participants in the program to rate their pre-and post- levels of achievement of a set of seventy specific outcomes. The resulting difference between these scores was interpreted to be the outcome of the program, with those items that had a change of at least 0.5 level being statistically significant.

A research team from the Center for Small Towns objectively analyzed the survey results. The report showed sixteen outcomes with a greater than 0.5 change:

<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Know steps needed to obtain broad-based support	0.842
Understand the importance of building agreement	0.722
Have knowledge of local, county, and state resources	0.684
Felt that I have a good understanding of public issues	0.667
Sense of mission	0.632
Understand how new ideas are adopted	0.632
Consider myself to be well qualified for public issues	0.579
Regard change as a source of vitality	0.579
Move out of my comfort zone and learn to grow	0.579
Aim to improve consensus-building skills	0.556
Articulate convincing vision of future of community	0.526
Seek out different perspectives	0.526
Use my leadership skills in different situations	0.526
Improve my public speaking skills	0.500
Know how to assess and tackle problems	0.500
Have a strong sense of community ownership	0.500

Another outcome the survey indicated was that participants experienced an increase in civic engagement and leadership roles.

- 44% took on an active role in at least one new organization
- 15% increase in leadership positions held in communities

- A total of 95 active and leadership positions were held in community organizations after the program

Specific examples of outcome impacts that have occurred as a result of Bridging Brown County include:

- City managers meet monthly to dialogue on common issues
- City EDA directors collaborated on a JOBZ application for the county
- County board has voted in support of community specific projects (a city bike trail, use of the county dredge for a city lake)
- Development of countywide tourism projects
- Continuing to fund the Bridging Brown County program despite a tight county budget

Conclusions and Future Implications

The evaluation results from all three instruments indicate that Bridging Brown County has impacted participants' thinking and attitude. Outcomes indicated are increased knowledge of countywide issues, positive attitude towards the other communities, and increased understanding that they belong to a larger county community. Although it is too premature to predict the future impacts within communities, the especially high scores on the group's values of civic engagement and shared future/purpose indicate the potential for increased public participation.

References

Bryson, John M. and Barbara Crosby, *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World* (Jossey Bass Public Administration Series), 1992. Second edition, 2004.

Pigg, Kenneth, *EXCEL: Experience in Community Enterprise and Leadership*, Columbia, MO: University Outreach and Extension, University of Missouri, June 2001.

Terry, Robert, *Authentic Leadership: Courage in Action* published by Jossey Bass, San Francisco. CA, 1993

Terry, Robert, *Seven Zones For Leadership: Acting Authentically in Stability and Chaos* published by Davies-Black, Palo Alto, CA, 2001.

U-Lead Program Development and Management Guide, co-authored by the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and the University of Minnesota Extension Service, 2004.

