

# **Leadership Education Strengthens Social Capital in Farming Communities**

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## **Introduction**

Our rural communities need more leaders. Our civic organizations are withering away and dying and fewer people are stepping-up to take on leadership positions. Many of our committees are dealing with consistent conflict and their goal-attainment is at an all-time low. Beginning in the 1960's Americans began to join less, trust less, give less and vote less. Over the past thirty years church attendance has gone down over 33%, involvement in community life has gone down over 35%, having friends over to the house has gone down over 45%, and participating in clubs and civic organizations has gone down over 50% (Putnam, 2000).

In many communities throughout rural Arkansas, people seem to be somewhat apathetic and/or overwhelmed when confronted with leadership responsibilities. Many family members state that they are too busy juggling their daily lives to participate in civic engagement, and others admit to a lack of confidence in their leadership abilities. In order to change this growing trend, the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (UACES) teamed up with the Arkansas Farm Bureau (ARFB) to provide free leadership programming for young farmers and ranchers (those under age 40), as well as their spouses and other interested parties within the community.

## **Background**

The curriculum for this course was developed under the leadership program entitled *ConnectAR*. *ConnectAR* is a leadership educational program that was designed to help strengthen the skills of lay-leaders and future leaders throughout Arkansas. *ConnectAR* leadership

curriculum is developed for the use of Extension Specialists and County Agents, so that they may offer leadership programming to their clientele. Participants of *ConnectAR* programs learn ways to positively impact their community. They learn how to communicate effectively, inspire trust and cooperation, manage conflict, cope with criticism, identify and adapt to new challenges, and much more.

### **How It Works**

To develop their problem solving and conflict resolution skills, the participants who take the *ConnectAR* leadership course that is offered by the ARFB, meet once a month for three hours in the evening, for three months in a row. While using experts to facilitate a roundtable process of group discussion, participants spend time analyzing local, state, and national issues of the day. They determine who the competing forces are within a particular issue, who stands to gain or lose from different outcomes of an issue, what the underlying motives and agendas are for each party involved, and who benefits from alliances.

- Participants were invited to join the 9-hour program via newsletter mailings, articles and ads within newspapers and local radio stations, and personal invitations from local administrators. Both the Cooperative Extension Service and Farm Bureau *Organization & Member* administrators worked to spread the word to young farmers and ranchers, and interested community residents.
- During the first class, participants have opportunity to work in small group discussions where they discuss economic indicators which are familiar to them, for example: school closings, job loss, need for new industry, and “new Wal-Mart in town.” They are then introduced to tools and techniques that can use to assess more unfamiliar economic indicators, such as: population demographics, specific income

levels, teen pregnancy and infant mortality rates, number of female headed households, number of students with free and/or reduced lunches in their county's schools, source of farm income, etc. Through a process of inquiry and discussion, participants learn to sharpen their assessment skills while simultaneously discerning the strengths and weaknesses of their community.

- During the second and third, three-hour sessions, participants are exposed to guest speakers who have specialized knowledge about specific economic indicators. Some examples include: natural resources, infrastructure needs, public health, tourism, and water rights. During these sessions, specialists offer an overview of their specific subject-matter then interface with the group in order to engage them in problem-solving and role-playing activities.

### **Results to Date**

In 2007, there were approximately 170 people who participated in the 9-hour leadership sessions from one of six different locations around the state of Arkansas. During their time together, participants synthesized the given topics, found common interests among the parties involved, and discussed practical ways to address specific problems. Through this type of networking, new dialogues and relationships were established. Participants stated that the program increased their confidence in their leadership abilities. They also stated that their knowledge of community issues and resources, and their ability to take on more leadership roles within their community, had been increased. All of these outcomes will inevitably increase the *Social Capital* within their respective communities.

### **Conclusion**

*Social Capital* is the byproduct of positive connections among people, which together add value to a society similar to that of financial capital. By increasing the networking capabilities of rural residents, there will be positive interactions and a deeper level of commitment to one another. This heightened sense of community will enable residents to establish or renew their commitment to their community's overall health, which will increase their community development efforts.

Participants of the *Association of Leadership Educators, Inc* conference who attend this session will learn how this type of rural leadership programming can strengthen the health and social capital of farming communities. They will also learn how to replicate the process of collaborating with organizations like Farm Bureau, and the methods for, and successes of, a collaborative leadership program that can be used with rural farm families, lay-leaders and grass-roots participants.

## **References**

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.