

Designing Leadership Development Programs

Description

Leadership development programs are relatively short-term training sequences designed to expand the human resources of a community specifically for guiding and promoting community improvement activities. Of course, the participants in such programs may use their new skills and information for leadership of other activities, but here the aim is an enhanced picture for CED. As such, leadership programs for CED tend to focus most particularly on the special skills for mobilizing collaborative effort.

The training will ordinarily include such topics as: orientation to gaining information for and about the community; developing ways to recognize local changes, trends, and opportunities; group process skills such as techniques for effective meetings, identifying clues to group anxiety, etc.; and organizing the planning activities.

The sparseness of population in rural areas suggests that these programs are especially appropriate for creating collaborative relations across a wider community/region than just a single town or village.

Benefits

A program specifically aimed at leadership development can generate a personal sense of accomplishment in the participants, as well as create powerfully sharpened capacities for community change and resilience. Through participation, people build optimism in the community, defining the future as something that can reasonably be tackled rather than as a hopeless fate. And having gone through the training sequence together, the participants have learned to work together and as alumni will be accessible as a network for further community improvement. Thus the program can have the result of helping to bridge differences and traditional rivalries between various smaller communities in the region they share.

Major challenges

While generic leadership training programs can be useful, the most positive results will probably come from locating and defining a reasonably sized, specific problem that the newly equipped leaders can address in the process of the training. Thus the training is focussed on a practical goal for the community as a whole, rather than just being another self-improvement course. Defining that orienting problem may, however, be a formidable task itself; it means people mobilizing around it as an intended outcome of their training

itself. Selecting participants (or properly arranging for self-selection) may be dependent in part upon that problem-definition.

Some practical steps

1. The immediate issue of financial support will have to be addressed first by deciding whether the program is conceived as a continuing affair with new participants for succeeding sequences or whether, at the moment, it is seen as significant to launch it as a one-shot matter, whether or not it might be continued. While naturally a single sequence is cheaper to finance, it may actually be easier to raise funds for a more sustained program.
2. Raising funds will require that the sponsors do more than state the value of greater leadership resources. The case made for financial support must be specified in terms of the community or regional issues demanding additional leadership resources.
3. Recruiting participants can be a touchy matter, so it must be carefully thought through with clear and public criteria, as responsibly formulated by a representative committee. In the end, the major consideration must be that the participants themselves represent well the target community or region.
4. Financial and/or non-financial support from key groups and residents should be sought, even if these would not participate directly in the training.
5. Program goals can be quite general (such as creating the conditions for cross-community networking on common problems), but they must be specified and clear, with a readily recognizable set of outcomes.
6. Attention to the practical details and logistics of the training will be important in assuring rich participation. Location(s), times, child care arrangements, meals or refreshments, a-v equipment, budget, and, of course, a facilitator/trainer and selected speakers.
7. The sponsoring committee will need to have well worked out understandings with the facilitator/trainer whom they recruit, especially as to the content and process of the sequence.
8. Some arrangements should be made for on-going and final evaluation and feedback from participants.

Resource organizations & contacts

- The Heartland Center for Leadership Development has worked with both U.S. and Canadian rural communities (941 O Street, Lincoln, NE 68508).
- Some of the technical assistance groups associated with the Canadian CED Network have design and facilitator services for leadership training programs. Call toll free: 877-202-2268.

Publications

- *Building Local Leadership: How to Start a Program for Your Town or County*, available through the Heartland Centre above.
- “Expanding Leadership Base” in *Measuring Community Capacity Building: A Workbook-in-Progress for Rural Communities* (published by the Aspen Institute, P.O. Box 222, Queenstown, MD 21658). How to identify, improve and measure local leadership resources.
- “*Leadership*,” a participant workbook prepared by the Skills Program for Management Volunteers, for Fitness Canada (write for this and other relevant items: National Skills Program, 1600 James Naismith Drive, Gloucester, ON K1B 5N4 or contact the B.C. provincial government Recreation and Sports Branch). This happens to have been designed for volunteers in sports, fitness, and recreation nonprofits, but it is readily applicable to the CED setting and can be used as a basis for group workshops or by individuals.