

Meeting Leaders Where They Are: Lessons from the Rural Community Leadership Program

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Introduction

Economic and community vitality in rural communities is a long game that requires resiliency, tenacity and innovation. During the last half-century, rural areas have been bombarded with crisis after crisis, including regulatory changes to resource-based economies, wildfires and other natural disasters, the Great Recession and the coronavirus pandemic. And in comparison to more populous areas, rural places are generally harder hit and take longer to recover, and rural people and communities often find themselves left behind once urban areas have bounced back. The events of 2020 (the pandemic, natural disasters and social unrest) have amplified the need for attention to rural community and economic recovery.

Rural areas encompass about 19% of the U.S. population, and nearly 97% of our nation's landmass. The long trend of urbanization has extracted human, social, natural, financial, political, cultural and intellectual capitals from rural communities. People in rural places face complex social, economic and environmental challenges but do so in geographic isolation; with limited financial, political and economic resources; with fewer people to do the work; with rarer models designed to fit their situations; and with more-confusing or less-trusted information sources.

Leadership and power are defined differently in rural places. The traditional definition of a leader is unhelpful, particularly in a rural community context. "White knights" riding in from outside the community, and other people and programs claiming "silver bullet" solutions, have often left rural communities trying to rebuild and adapt to new economic realities worse off than before. However, the presence of strong, locally invested rural leadership might be the difference between why some communities thrive and others struggle.

Rural leadership is less about power and privilege and more about who steps up to move things along when there is a community need. Community needs demand attention, and rural leaders take on multiple leadership roles

and find themselves involved in project after project to keep the community working. Rural leaders are likely unpaid volunteers. They are stretched thin and most often do their community work outside of their formal jobs.

The Rural Community Leadership Program: A Case Study

The sharp declines in economic opportunity and subsequent drains of human, intellectual and financial resources in the rural Pacific Northwest during the late 1980s and 1990s created the need for rural people and communities to step up and act to try to outpace the multiple declines they were facing. The situation created a high demand for locally invested people willing to take the lead in recovery efforts. Rural Development Initiatives (RDI), a regional rural development hub organization active in facilitating federally funded rural economic recovery plans, saw the need and quickly responded by adding a state-funded leadership development program to its services. At the time, other rural-serving organizations throughout the country were also centering rural recovery work around leadership development.

In 2002, after federal and state resources had all but dried up, the Ford Institute for Community Building (the Institute), an initiative of The Ford Family Foundation (TFFF) of Roseburg, Oregon, stepped into the sphere of rural community development funding in an unprecedented way. It married its rurally focused philanthropic resources with RDI's leadership and economic development activity in the region. TFFF also collaborated with several other organizations experienced in rural leadership development—the Heartland Center for Leadership Development in Nebraska, the Brushy Fork Leadership Institute housed at Berea College in Kentucky, and the Nonprofit Association of Oregon.

What resulted was what the Institute's director, Tom Gallagher, called a "grand experiment." RDI and the Institute outlined an audacious plan to deliver five years of leadership development, organizational development and capacity building in each of 88 community hubs, which would serve every rural community in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California, over a 14-year period. These delivery hubs, defined as regions with shared economic assets, typically at a county level, allowed RDI to maximize the number of community members trained with limited resources, and promoted networking in the region. The program's curriculum¹ matched

RDI's community-driven approach, which is based on The Luke Center for Catalytic Leadership model,² the findings from the Heartland Center's "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" research,³ and the Brushy Fork Leadership Institute's program,⁴ which is based on a theory of change known as the Tupelo Model.⁵

The program, which continues beyond its 14-year TFFF-funded commitment, is grounded in the beliefs that (1) leadership can be an intentional and learned skill, (2) locally led action is more sustainable and resilient than externally led action, and (3) anyone anywhere can grow into a leader. This Rural Community Leadership Program (RCLP, formerly known as the Ford Institute Leadership Program) has evolved every year since its first delivery in the fall of 2002. What has remained consistent is the emphasis on defining leadership in ways that afford opportunity for all to be involved, and the focus on skills and experiences that strengthen individual capacity to work with others to improve their communities. RDI's outreach practices aim to recruit the diversity in the community with a special emphasis on different political affiliations, people of color, youth and other underrepresented groups. Specific activities include mobilizing diverse local teams of key connectors as recruiters and focusing intentionally on diverse communication channels.

Inclusive

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The purpose of the RCLP is to build and sustain a critical mass of skilled, active and connected resident leaders to support locally driven community- and economy-building initiatives, develop community-specific solutions and sustain the leadership needed for the long haul. The program aims to provide skill building training to 100 or more community residents while connecting them to one another and to their communities in ways that promote small successes and ultimately result in social, economic and environmental

vitality. The five years of the TFFF-funded program, delivered in each community, included three separate yearlong leadership development trainings, one training series dedicated to the effectiveness of local nonprofit organizations, and one training series focused on building community-centered collaboration skills across sectors and interests.

Throughout the leadership development experience, RDI weaves in best practices from the field of rural community and economic development, and the values of diversity, equity and inclusion—all centered on community.

Topics of the current RCLP curriculum include:

- Community-based leadership and the value of connections and social capital
- Asset- and values-driven community-building models
- Understanding rural diversity and working across differences: personalities, generations and cultures
- Working in groups, effective meetings, inclusion and basic facilitation
- Communication, giving presentations, and framing and advocating issues
- Group decision-making and project prioritization tools
- Project impact analysis, and involving stakeholders and volunteers
- Project planning, implementation structures and fund development basics
- Managing conflict and change
- Celebrating success and building momentum

Tailored

RDI tailors its leadership development experiences to the communities it serves ... [and] trains teams of local champions in each regional hub to help adapt the curriculum to their communities' unique needs.

RDI delivers the RCLP in an interactive, experiential and facilitative style rather than as classroom lectures. Classes draw on the knowledge and skills of those in the room, augmented by short lessons, activities and a relatively small community project that creates the opportunity for a sustained and deep learning experience. RDI tailors its leadership development

experiences to the communities it serves and delivers programs in the Spanish language, for all-youth audiences and in virtual formats, which stretch the potential reach of the program outside of the Pacific Northwest.

The RCLP is community driven. RDI trains teams of local champions in each regional hub—called Community Ambassadors—to help adapt the curriculum to their communities’ unique needs, recruit and train participants, and obtain local funding support. Local partner organizations maintain and further cultivate the relationships built through the program, fund the class projects and foster leadership development in their regions and communities. Having local champion teams and partners decreases the financial burden of the program and builds local program sustainability. RDI plays a hands-on role during the first three years of leadership development in each region as it builds toward the 60 to 100 leaders that constitute critical mass. It then supports local teams to sustain their leadership development efforts by providing licensing, evaluation, coaching and peer learning opportunities. In La Pine, Oregon, for example, the team of local leaders trained and connected through RDI’s program subsequently turned to economic action planning, championing local events to promote community pride and increase downtown foot traffic, and took general ideas about economic development and translated those concepts into concrete, actionable proj-

Resilient

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ects. Over time, this group of leaders has been instrumental in the transformation of the La Pine community.

Over the organization’s 29-year life span, RDI has facilitated approximately 450 leadership classes, resulting in more than 10,000 regional graduates and 600 trained Community Ambassadors. To reach all 88 of the TFFF-supported hubs, RDI and the Institute added eight new communities every year into the five-year delivery pipeline. At the height of the project, RDI was delivering 24 classes per year. RDI also provides consultation and trainer

qualification services to organizations and community groups to support the development of customized and scaled leadership programs in other regions.

Designed for a diverse mix of community members, a typical class consists of 25 to 35 individuals of different ages, interests and experience. The RCLP brings together emerging leaders and youth with existing community leaders who act as mentors and community connectors. In the TFFF-funded program, 18% of participants were teenagers and 16% were retired. Women outnumbered men in the classes, about two to one. Over 30% of participants held formal leadership positions—such as county commissioner, city councilor or organization director—but most were emerging or potential leaders. Connections and collaborations formed regionally rather than at a community level, and the sessions included modules to address increasing awareness of other groups, and to facilitate ways that groups with similar goals could collaborate to share resources, resulting in more-robust funding requests and more-sustainable programs.

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This broad base of community leaders is making a difference by developing projects and programs that increase the vitality of their communities, and by passing along their acquired leadership skills both formally and informally. They also often move into formal leadership positions that strengthen organizations and elected bodies, and give them a platform to initiate collaborative efforts. In Cornelius, Oregon, for example, RDI partnered with an existing cultural nonprofit, Centro Cultural, to include emerging Latinx leaders in community cohorts and the Community Ambassador training. These leaders subsequently strengthened and sustained both RDI's efforts and Centro Cultural's programs.

Community leaders also stave off extraordinary outside threats. In 2010, John Day River Territory leaders pushed back an Aryan Nations group threatening to set up headquarters in the eastern Oregon region, and in 2017

a network of rural leaders moved into action to support their neighbors as the Eagle Creek wildfire threatened the community of Cascade Locks in the Columbia River Gorge. In 2016, an armed militia group from Nevada took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in a remote county in southeast Oregon. Seventy-nine Harney County leadership graduates and the established collaborative culture were integral to the peaceful resolution of that situation. The community response was a direct result of the critical mass of networked leaders, strengthened during RDI's program, and the formation of the High Desert Partnership, an organization formed to promote collaborative approaches to complex community issues. In short, Harney County residents had built a foundation of trust, collaboration and communication that served them well during a community crisis. Today, Harney County's leaders have returned their focus to rebuilding their downtowns, supporting local entrepreneurs and strengthening connections among the communities, the Burns Paiute Tribe and the agencies that manage 75% of their federally owned land.

When graduates were asked, most described participation in the program as a "life-changing experience." They also reported being more optimistic about their communities' future and more willing to step up as leaders. A formal evaluation found graduates gained significantly in leadership knowledge and skill, and that their gains did not diminish over time.⁶

- Participant volunteerism nearly tripled
- 92% indicated working more effectively in teams
- 90% expanded their network and resources
- 89% increased their knowledge and appreciation of their community assets
- 85% reported the training helped them create a better future for their communities
- 82% said the program increased the number of community leaders in their towns

Lessons from the Field of Rural Leadership Development

RDI is currently directing the RuraLead Learning Initiative⁷ with a collaborative of rural leadership development partners from across the country. RuraLead is a national learning initiative that aims to improve place- and

people-based approaches and increase investment and support for rural leadership development. The RuraLead practitioner inventory, designed to map the field, has collected nearly 400 unique efforts from across the country.

Rural leadership development practitioners are actively developing and delivering rural models that center community equity and values into their work, concepts that include impacting all populations and diversities, understanding neighbors better and learning what skills and systems change is needed to make a sustainable difference.

Approaches that incorporate equity principles can make a change at the community level but must be tailored to rural culture and values. Ultimately, rural leadership can serve to create bridges of understanding where there are seemingly unsurmountable cultural and political divides. RDI has observed a significant increase in program participants' bravely wading into group discussions around civil discourse and justice, diversity, equity and inclusion. In one region, the cohort coalesced around a class project to provide tools to local small businesses to be more welcoming to culturally diverse people in their retail stores.

Rural leadership programs face challenges in staffing and capacity, and in overcoming the burdens of travel and the isolation inherent in rural places. However, by far the biggest challenge reported by rural leadership developers is funding for the efforts and support to keep the organizations who do the work in existence. RuraLead participants reported funding from many sources, including foundations (59%), government agencies (45%), private donations (45%), fees and tuition (33%), and fundraising events (29%).

Conclusions

If rural communities are to achieve their vision of community vitality, leadership development is foundational to that effort, and government programs and philanthropic organizations need to acknowledge and increase funding to leadership programs. It is important to understand that foundation giving and other public and private financial resources allocated to rural areas in the United States are disproportionately low. In addition, existing funding practices do not work as well in rural places. Rural organizations have minimal staff capacity to write complicated grants and track required outcomes. They struggle to accumulate matching funds and to compete when there are short turnaround times or population-based measures of success.

RDI has learned countless lessons in its experiences in rural leadership development, but a few stand out in its potential to help rural places thrive. First, regardless of unproductive stereotypes, rural people are neither culturally nor politically homogeneous. Helping rural communities identify, embrace and build from the strength of their diversity is important to the internal and external working relationships of communities. There is creative tension between the inherent rural values of neighborliness and community, and their rugged individualism. Rural community leaders can feel that tension and are stepping up to lead creatively designed solutions to help support their communities' capacity to work better across their differences and with more inclusivity.

Rural development hub organizations such as RDI play an essential role in bringing in outside ideas and resources, and creating networks of rural leaders to share information across communities and give voice to rural needs. RDI's original mission focused on economic recovery, but over time, the organization has evolved to use a three-pronged approach—which includes economy-building, leadership development and public policy—to increase rural community vitality.

Rural community leaders need approaches that address their issues and are designed with their rural culture and scale in mind. All too often, under-resourced communities are forced by funders to continually innovate their own solutions, or retrofit an urban-based model, because there are not enough programs designed specifically for rural places. When one rural community successfully adapts and implements a strategy, its experience provides invaluable clues to others, but only if there is a mechanism through which to share that information. Rural development hub organizations not only bring in models but serve a networking function, and can aggregate the needs of multiple communities to create more-compelling funding opportunities and policy ideas.

Evidence of good rural leadership shows up in countless small ways, with innumerable small and important successes, but it takes a very long time to prove that developing skills, strengthening networks and increasing local involvement are vital components to rebuilding community vitality. It helps to have partners that invest resources in evaluation, and to measure short-term outcomes using what RDI considers the foundational capitals—social,

intellectual and human—from the “Community Capitals” framework.⁸ It is also important to couple leadership development programs, from the beginning, with community planning and action-oriented approaches that build momentum from the learning. Strategies are needed to support the leaders to take on larger, more impactful community initiatives beyond the initial leadership development investment.

It has never been an option for RDI to do economic recovery work without simultaneously developing the skills and capacities of local people to lead and sustain the work. The mission to revitalize rural places is too big, and each community is in a unique situation. RDI knew from the beginning of the 14-year project with TFFF that the partnership and the opportunity to do sustained and well-funded work to help rural places were incredibly rare gifts to the organization and to rural communities in the Pacific Northwest. When asked “What would you do if you could do just one thing?” RDI staff and board responded, “Develop rural leaders!” It is not enough, but it provides the foundation for every other rural strategy.

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Endnotes

¹ See Rural Development Initiatives.

² See The Luke Center for Catalytic Leadership.

³ See Heartland Center for Leadership Development.

⁴ See Berea College, “The Brushy Fork Community Leadership Curriculum.”

⁵ See Berea College, “The Tupelo Model of Community Development.”

⁶ See Sektnan et al.

⁷ See RuraLead Learning Initiative.

⁸ See Flora et al.

