

# Tools for Facilitating Change in Rural Communities

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## Introduction

Rural communities face many challenges to their growth and development, including poverty, population decline, limited resources, and youth at risk for drug and alcohol abuse. Furthermore, efforts to address these problems are often complicated by low population, geographic isolation, and other problems (Oregon State University, n.d.). Despite these challenges, change is possible when residents are empowered and provided with the means to create a stable community for themselves (Rural Assistance Center, n.d.).

Local civic and government leaders who want to inspire change can draw upon a range of proven techniques and tools to strengthen their communities. Many tools and resources for implementing community change have developed over the years as various local civic and nonprofit groups, city and county governments, and educational organizations have worked to better their communities.

This publication focuses on the tools used in the Idaho Horizons program, which aimed to facilitate the reduction of poverty in small rural communities. Rural communities seeking to implement their own change process will benefit from using the tools presented here.

## Background

The Horizons program, funded by the Minnesota-based Northwest Area Foundation, was created to reduce poverty and build leadership capacity in rural communities with a population of fewer than 5,000 and a poverty rate of at least 10 percent as indicated in the 2000 census. The program was designed to empower citizens to make their communities a place

where everyone has a chance to thrive. The Horizons program was used from 2003 to 2011 in more than 300 communities across seven states. The University of Idaho Extension brought Horizons to Idaho communities.

The 18-month program guided communities through the following foundational steps: community conversations, leadership building, community visioning, and action plan implementation. These phases are modeled after the University of Kansas (KU) Community Change Model. Horizons communities were required to meet participation thresholds within defined time frames during each segment to maximize community involvement during skill development (table 1).

The KU Community Change Model is a six-phase process designed to facilitate community change (Berkowitz et al., n.d.). The six phases are:

1. Understanding community context;
2. Collaborative planning;
3. Developing leadership and enhancing participation;

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4. Community action and intervention;
5. Evaluating community initiatives; and
6. Promoting and sustaining the initiative.

Supporting each phase are tools shown to be effective in facilitating change in rural communities. This publication discusses the tools that the Horizons program found to be effective community changers. The Horizons program implemented the first four phases of change, which focus on developing community change; phases five and six, which focus on continuing the change once a program is established, were not conducted during the Horizons program.

## Implementing the Four Phases of Change

### Phase 1: Understanding community context

The first phase of community engagement involves documenting community assets and needs. A variety of tools developed by community development professionals and practiced in the Horizons program have proven effective in discovering challenges and opportunities within a community. The Horizons program used tools including asset mapping, community conversations, and community forums to

identify problems and generate possible strategies and solutions.

Dialogue focusing on successes and strengths, rather than problems, best helps a community use its assets, set priorities, and better understand itself (Heaven, n.d.). One well-established approach to leading this kind of dialogue is called appreciative inquiry, which focuses on finding positive attributes and solutions rather than negative attributes or problems. The approach largely involves discovering what gives a system “life,” when it is most effective, and when it is most productive economically, socially, and ecologically (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000).

### Asset mapping

■ **The tool:** Asset mapping encourages a community’s members to work in groups to identify its strengths and assets, identify assets considered weak, and then develop strategies to strengthen weak assets and build community relationships. When the capacities of local residents are identified, valued, and used, communities become strong (Kretzmann & McKnight, 2003).

■ **How to use it:** Community leaders employ a variety of methods to assess the strengths of a community (University of Missouri System & Lincoln University, 2003). The discussion group(s) should consist of interested community members representing the

**Table 1.** Horizons program outline.

Time frame	Segment	Expectations	Action/threshold
First two months	Community recruitment	Community demonstrates awareness and interest in poverty reduction.	At least five community members attend an informational meeting. A minimum of 30 people agree to participate in the project and sign an application.
Program begins—four months	Community conversations: Study circles	Community begins to recognize and own poverty as a community issue.	At least six community members facilitate 12 hours of conversations to learn what poverty looks like and what they can do about it. Thirty community members or 2% of the population, whichever was greater, were required to participate. Community completes one action item.
Five months	Leadership building	Communities define leadership for poverty reduction as collective rather than individual actions. Communities directly engage people living in poverty in leadership training and action planning.	Using the LeadershipPlenty® curriculum, at least 25 people commit 30 hours to leadership training, taught by three people from their community who have been training in the program.
Three months	Community visioning	Communities are mobilized to create and adopt a shared vision and plan with targets for poverty reduction.	Communities come together with a minimum of 15% of their residents to create a shared vision.
Six months	Implementation of action plans	Communities implement and sustain changes that contribute to poverty reduction in the community and the region, thus demonstrating progress toward reducing poverty.	Community members identify strategies and a plan to reduce poverty. Their action items include outcomes connected to poverty reduction. They work to make significant progress on these projects.



by Everyday Democracy. Facilitators also do not need to be experts on the discussion topic. However, study circle facilitators are more successful if they are trained to help lead a conversation and create a friendly, comfortable, and relaxed environment. It's essential that facilitators remain neutral and avoid offering personal opinions. Their role is to focus discussion and enforce ground rules established by the group. The facilitator prevents anyone from dominating the conversation and leads participants to turn to each other for answers. Facilitators also ask participants to summarize the key points and conclusions of the group throughout the process (Cummins et al., 2012).

A note-taker is also helpful. The group can refer to the notes as members work toward the study circle's goals, which include deepening individuals' understanding of complex issues affecting their community, moving the group to action, and developing relationships. It's important to allow adequate time (one to two hours) for each session and to hold continuing sessions several times, extending the conversation with the same group (Petty et al., 2010). Study circles help people build the trusting relationships necessary for long-term change (Rourke, 2008).

### *Community forums*

■ **The tool:** Sometimes called town hall meetings, community forums are designed to identify community needs and concerns from a large number and wide variety of community members.

■ **How to use it:** The key to a successful community forum is attracting community member involvement. Several factors affect the turnout and success for an open event like this:

- The facility should be easy to find and provide adequate seating, parking, and lighting. Also be sure to have a good sound system and accessibility for those with disabilities. Equally significant is the venue's feel of neutrality and comfort. Facilities such as schools, community centers, and civic auditoriums typically provide a safe, neutral atmosphere that allows everyone to voice their opinions openly. When selecting a location, it is critical to be aware of personal biases and carefully examine barriers to full community participation, such as transportation and child-care needs. Designing an appropriate environment will contribute significantly to the success of the event.
- Event promotion will directly impact attendance. Standard advertising practices can be effective, but rural communities often benefit from word-of-mouth communication. Inclusive promotion to community groups is also beneficial. For example, to attract parents with young children, promotion

could include distributing fliers at Mother's of Pre-Schoolers (MOPS) groups. Enlisting an advocate who is a parent of young children to distribute the fliers and offer personal invitations will also increase effectiveness. Under-represented groups might be reached by contacting a group insider or leader and using his or her standing in the group to encourage attendance. These informal social networks help spread the word and encourage attendance.

Formal networks and established groups also provide access to diverse members of the community. Communicating through parent-teacher organizations, civic organizations, and ministerial associations is an efficient way to share event invitations. Established organizations and groups might also allow the use of their distribution lists, newsletters, and meeting agendas to pass along event information.

Rural communities use standard advertising media including newspapers, radio, fliers, and television. Other methods that reach a diverse audience and are particularly advantageous in the culture of a rural community include staffing booths at fairs and festivals, participating in parades, and handing out fliers at local gathering events like concerts. A sense of partnership between the organizing group and the community, community involvement, and a community-wide presence is very helpful in spreading the word at a grass-roots level. Creative advertising options may exist. Celebrate a community's values, perhaps by printing materials using the local high school colors or by using images of an important landmark.

- During the event, a clear schedule is important to manage the group. A planned agenda that includes time for table work as well as full group discussion allows for voices to be heard but keeps the program from getting derailed. A facilitator is necessary to guide these discussions.

### **Phase 2: Collaborative planning**

The second phase of the KU Community Change Model focuses on moving several entities to action in a planned and shared direction. While in many rural communities there is no shortage of organizations working to better the community, the groups may be unfocused in direction, as illustrated in figure 2. Successful communities create an alignment of groups that work collaboratively toward a common unifying vision for the whole community. This unleashes amazing passion and vitality in a community. This phase helps direct stakeholder engagement and action toward building long-term sustainable change (Future

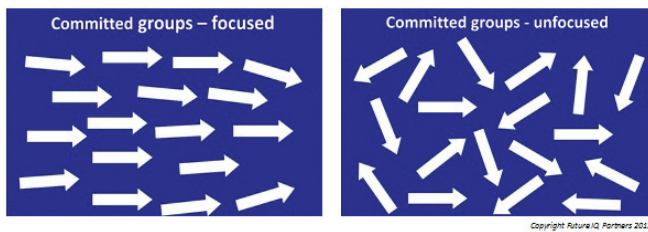


Figure 2. This illustrates the impact of aligning the goals of community groups. Used by permission.

iQ Partners, n.d.). The primary tool that Horizons used to achieve this goal was vision rallies.

### Vision rallies

■ **The tool:** Many local leaders recognize the need to have a vision for their communities. A powerful, inclusive vision brings people and groups together to work toward an overall community future. A vision rally event brings community members together to craft a shared vision of the community’s future. The facilitator-led event builds passion in the community and forms an eight- to 10-year goal of what the community should look like.

■ **How to use it:** When planning a vision rally event, the location and advertising recommendations previously discussed for community forums should be considered. In addition, vision rallies should include local policymakers such as county commissioners and city council members to foster community buy-in and incorporation into long-term community planning. A good representation of diverse community members will provide the best results. The Horizons program sought attendance by 10 percent of a community’s population for the vision rally.

Aside from location and attendance, it’s important to develop an effective agenda for the event. Keeping the event short (three hours or less) will help keep people interested and engaged in the process.

In addition, tools to facilitate conversations about the future are also useful. The Horizons program used the “10 Attributes of a Successful Community” tool presented by David Beurle of Leadership Australia. This helped the group discuss areas of need and success within the community. This is done easily with large or small groups. Write each of the 10 attributes on a large sheet of paper or flip chart. Give each attendee a set of five orange and five green stickers and ask everyone to “vote” by placing their green stickers on the attributes they believe are strengths in the community and their orange stickers on the attributes they believe are weaknesses. The attributes are then discussed as a group.

The “10 Attributes of a Successful Community” are:

1. Evidence of strong community pride and inclusive culture
2. Investment in the future
3. Participatory approach to community decision-making
4. Creatively building new economic opportunities
5. Support for local businesses
6. Deliberate transition of power to new leaders
7. Strong belief in and support for education
8. Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life
9. Willingness to seek help from the outside
10. Self-reliant

Beurle adapted this list from “20 Clues to Rural Community Survival” (Heartland Centre, n.d.) for use in vision rallies.

The vision rally facilitator guides the conversation with a series of questions in order to craft a vision statement. An accurate volunteer note-taker is necessary to document participant responses for inclusion in the vision statement. Questions might include:

- *What kind of economy do we want to build?*
- *What kind of community values and community lifestyle do we want to create?*
- *What strategic issues do we need to address in order to make the vision a reality?*

Encourage the group to create a vision eight to 10 years out that is grounded in reality but considers opportunities and aspirations for the future. These conversations happen in smaller table groups if the group is large. The smaller table groups then report back to the group as a whole.

A small group should formulate the first draft of the vision statement based on the outcomes of the attributes activity. This is done while the rally participants take a short break. A vision statement should:

- Be strong and powerful;
- Represent the ideal future;
- Mobilize and energize individuals;
- Emphasize a positive climate;
- Be easy to read, understand, and remember;
- Be compelling, motivational, and inspirational; and
- Speak to the entire community (Berkowitz et al., n.d.).

## Phase 3: Developing leadership and enhancing participation

Leadership development and community participation are integrated into the community change process in partnership with phases 1 and 2. Recruiting people directly from phases 1 and 2 helps build buy-in. Preparing community members with the tools needed to assume leadership positions in action teams and planning processes increases engagement (Hoffman et al., 2013).

Leadership development and participation are supported in formalized settings such as leadership courses, as well as through work on committees and teams including youth/adult partnerships, steering committees, and focus groups and listening sessions.

### *Leadership courses*

■ **The tool:** Formalized leadership courses are a great tool to reach a large number of residents. There are many curricula available to buy, receive training in, and present in the community. Hiring professionals to implement curricula in a community is another way to offer leadership education. While these programs are very successful, they require a budget that may not be available. Alternatively, learning from peers and local experts is also very effective in small communities.

■ **How to use it:** Classes should be appropriate for both experienced and inexperienced leaders. A successful leadership course is:

- Affordable and provides scholarships to include low-income participants;
- Appropriate for those with minimal leadership experience;
- Inclusive of nontraditional leaders;
- Held at convenient times;
- Centered around a topic that has broad-based community interest; and
- Something employers could use in an employee training program.

These qualities attract a diverse audience and provide leadership training to a large group. The events can be held weekly, over a series of days, or in a single all-day event. Choose a format that best fits the community and its potential leaders. A combination of training schedules may be the best option to reach a variety of potential leaders.

Leadership courses help engage nontraditional leaders. For example, a community leadership program during the Idaho Horizons program gave several participants the skills they felt they needed to run for public office (Hoffman et al., 2013).

### *Youth/adult partnerships*

■ **The tool:** While young people are often under-represented in their community, engaging them has a number of benefits. Research shows that organizations and communities benefit from youth participation and decision-making, as young people apply their unique skills, knowledge, and talents to solve problems and create new opportunities (McNeil, 2014). One way to achieve this is through a quality youth/adult partnership.

■ **How to use it:** As the term implies, a youth/adult partnership is a working relationship between groups of youths and adults. For example, a group of teens and adults concerned about alcohol use by teens in the community may work together in planning and implementing a community carnival to provide alcohol-free entertainment.

Keys to a successful youth/adult partnership include having more than one youth member, allowing youth to take leadership roles within the organization, treating them as you would an adult member of the team, and, most importantly, providing them with opportunities to be engaged in the process.

### *Steering committees*

■ **The tool:** A steering committee is a group of community members working together to lead community change. These committees coordinate events, direct policy, and govern activities on a formalized basis.

■ **How to use it:** Committees are most effective when they have a clear purpose and goals to achieve, such as coordinating events or administering grant funds. Steering committees should have diverse representation and create an inclusive atmosphere. Committee members may benefit from additional training and opportunities to build cohesiveness. Providing opportunities for committee members to learn together strengthens the group and maintains effective committees.

### *Focus groups and listening sessions*

■ **The tool:** A focus group is a facilitator-driven small-group discussion. It is directed by a series of questions exploring a specific topic. Focus groups shape the direction of community programming. Listening sessions are less structured and allow participants to share more candidly.

■ **How to use it:** Focus groups and listening sessions should include stakeholders with a vested interest in the community program being discussed. These stakeholders include traditional community leaders, the population being affected, and under-served audiences.

Focus groups and listening sessions give community members ownership in a program and make them more committed to the program's success. These tools spur them toward action in the community. Focus groups and listening sessions move beyond the discussion and exploration of a community topic to exploring solutions to problems or highlighting successes.

## Phase 4: Community action and intervention

Moving a community to action is challenging. Talking about a problem and developing a vision or an action plan has minimal impact without an organizational infrastructure for community involvement. Excitement created through action teams or inspirational community-wide events moves residents to action.

### Action teams

■ **The tool:** Following community visioning or community assessments with action gives residents an opportunity to engage in change. Action teams capitalize on the inspiration and motivation developed from the community events in phases 1 and 2.

■ **How to use it:** More than one action item or priority is usually established at community events and each priority or item can be categorized in an action team. This will focus community members on issues that most interest them. Action teams are most effective when:

- A leader is established to keep the team on task;
- Regular meeting times are scheduled;
- Each team picks one or two projects to focus on; and
- Each team establishes an action plan.

### Community-wide events

■ **The tool:** Many community events are designed to promote change by providing information and opportunities for involvement. Community events that create awareness and bring the community together are beneficial as well. Recently, community organizing through events has matured and evolved into a bright and strong force for social change (Foster & Louie, 2010). Community-wide events can build passion, move people to action, and engage community members.

■ **How to use it:** Events such as fairs and festivals celebrate a community's self-identified assets and emphasize its values. Information gained from asset maps, study circles, and vision rallies helps determine these community priorities and values. Many of the same planning practices mentioned previously also apply to the planning of community-wide events.

## Engaging Community Members to Facilitate Change

Community member involvement is key to building relationships and long-term engagement in a community change process. When community members are active in the process, it builds opportunities for better results (The Bridgespan Group, 2013). The tools outlined in this publication will help in implementing a model to effect community change.

Building excitement, a sense of togetherness, and hope for the future engages members of rural communities. By encouraging residents to take an active role in change and to share their voices, leaders can keep them attending events, taking on leadership roles, and making their own changes. Bringing rural community members together around a common cause and instilling a sense of community pride moves them to long-term action.

Residents can develop community pride not only through positive community-building events like celebrations and awards ceremonies, but also through group participation in programs or social gatherings that bring people together and strengthen their ties. Rural community members depend on one another to succeed. Programs that bring people together will engage them in their future.

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