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Volunteer Administration
in the 21st Century:

Networking in Communities:
Building Leadership Capacity by Engaging Opinion Leaders

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Networking is the creation and strengthening of connections between people. These connections enable people and organizations to share knowledge and resources so that in the future they can accomplish goals more quickly.

Networking can be an effective tool for county Extension agents seeking to establish community development programs. To use this tool successfully, county agents need to understand the roles and importance of change agents, social systems, power structures and opinion leaders in a community.

Change agents: Change agents convince others to adopt innovative ideas. They also recruit key people from outside the change process to bring their knowledge and resources to the problem being addressed. Some communities look to their county Extension agents to be change agents.

However, change agents must balance the new ideas with the community's needs. If the ideas become too far-fetched for the community, the agents' efforts will fail. County agents balance innovative ideas with community needs by bringing people together on different boards and committees to share ideas for the betterment of the community.

To be successful as change agents, county Extension agents must develop effective networking skills and identify key people in the community who can help them reach their goals.

Social systems: Social systems are interrelated groups of people who work together to solve problems. The members of a social system may be individuals, informal groups and/or organizations. All of these subgroups are identifiable within the group and have distinguishable characteristics.

According to *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett M. Rogers, these groups have a common goal: the prosperity of the community. The definition of *prosperity* can include community development, youth development, economic growth or any issues that can improve a community.

Although networking is often used for fund raising, it can be used for much more than that. It can also help people and communities develop programs and identify leadership opportunities.

When networking, county Extension agents should seek people who can contribute to a specific program or issue. For example, an agent seeking to improve a Beef Quality Assurance Program might work to build a relationship with a local packing plant owner. The owner's knowledge of issues related to carcass quality, good management practices and Beef Quality Assurance provisions could be used to strengthen the program.

Because county Extension agents work in the community every day, they are familiar with issues relevant to that community. Although the Extension agents are not experts on every issue, they must be aware of the issues in their communities. They also must be able to identify their target audience as well as that audience's needs. Networking can bring those issues, audiences and needs to the agents' attention.

Once they have identified the issues in the community, Extension agents can contact specialists or experts who can help implement appropriate programs. Networking can also help the agents form relationships with these experts to implement more effective programs in their community.

Power structures in communities: A successful community has a power base that provides resources and works toward positive change. When networking, change agents must be able to identify the people in the community who have knowledge, use power and can influence others. These people are the members of the community's power base.

According to "How and Why Community Groups Use Maps and Geographic Information," by William J. Craig and Sarah A. Elwood, there are two types of power structures in a community: the internal power base, which is the community itself, and the external power base, which includes those who control the resources. Change agents must motivate people in both power bases.

To motivate the internal power base, the agent must choose relevant issues and make sure that the members feel that they are a part of the action. These individuals do this by participating in community groups. Being a part of a large group can provide the individuals a sense of security and power. Internal power base members can become more politically involved by forming coalitions, forming key opinions on certain issues and using the power of the vote.

As community groups collaborate, they bring knowledge, expertise and the power based on the size of their membership to the coalitions in their communities, wrote Craig and Elwood.

Community groups do not require money to be influential; however, those groups with little or no money must be diligent and focused on their cause. "The roads to influence … are more than one," wrote Thomas R. Dye and Susan MacManus in their book, *Politics in States and Communities,* "elites and non-elites can travel them and the toll can be paid with energy and initiative as well as wealth." Active community groups attract members who have power in the community, thus strengthening the group and motivating the members.

However, community groups are difficult to motivate because of their size. To move a community group to action, the change agent must make sure that the issue being addressed is relevant, or the community group will not participate. The change agent must always make the group members feel involved and informed.

Change agents also need to identify the community's external power structure—people who have knowledge and resources such as money, land, businesses, community status and legislative power. By bringing these people on board, a change agent can capitalize on their influence and be more likely to make a new program or effort successful.

According to Ronald C. Powers in "Identifying the Community Power Structure," people with external power are usually:

- Age 50 or older

- In the higher income group in the community

- Controllers of such resources as credit, money, jobs, mass media or firms employing several people, or holders of elective offices

- Above average in education

- Self-employed, company owners or executives

- Long-time residents of the community

To become influential, Powers wrote, people generally follow a six-step process:

1. Become active in community affairs, doing legwork for a variety of community projects

2. Be financially successful in business

3. Check out ideas for community change or projects with other powerful people

4. Be trustworthy and dependable in dealing with others

5. Join the "right" groups

6. Be elected to office in these groups

Many county Extension agents and other educators are not involved in the external power structures of their communities. To be more effective, change agents must identify the members of the community's power structure and develop relationships with them.

Opinion leaders in communities: As change agents introduce and implement new ideas in a community, they often find themselves moving into unfamiliar subject areas. Opinion leaders—knowledgeable and influential people within a community—can help the county Extension agent understand local issues more clearly, advise the Extension agent on specific decisions and influence others in the community to adopt the changes being promoted.

Opinion leaders usually are the innovators in specific areas. People often turn to them for advice on specific subjects. According to *Diffusion of Innovations*, the characteristics that set opinion leaders apart from the rest of society and make them influential include:

- *Access to new ideas and information:* Opinion leaders have more access to mass media and up-to-date information than do other people. They also are considered more cosmopolitan—that is, more willing to adopt new practices, ideas or information and move away from the traditional practices of an organization or community.

  In 2007, selected Texas AgriLife Extension Service county agents were asked about opinion leaders with strong external communications abilities. The agents described the opinion leaders as having:

  o Positive relations with news media in the community

  o A willingness to be an advocate for Extension programs in the community and state

  o Insight into issues and opportunities that are affecting the community

- *Access to resources and people:* Opinion leaders have more access to resources and networks. They can communicate through direct contact and informal conversations in meetings and social gatherings. Rogers found that opinion leaders also tend to be more trusted and socially accepted than others in the community.

  The county Extension agents listed these characteristics of opinion leaders with good accessibility:

  o Able to find resources when needed

  o Involved in numerous committees, boards and organizations

  o Easy to communicate with and trust

- *Socioeconomic status:* Opinion leaders hold a higher status within an organization, Rogers found. Their high status helps bring a community's issues to the attention of legislative or other political officials. However, the opinion leaders' status should not be so high that others feel inferior and are unwilling to ask them for advice.

  County Extension agents describing opinion leaders with high socioeconomic status said that those leaders:

  o Have access to local and state governments

  o Own businesses

  o Are involved in the community

  o Help educate citizens about local and state government

- *Innovativeness:* Innovative opinion leaders can provide revolutionary ideas that take the community to new heights and encourage new areas of community development. However, opinion leaders who are too innovative can cause a community to regress, become unmotivated and lose respect for those leaders.

  Opinion leaders must understand their communities. Highly innovative communities expect highly innovative opinion leaders, according to *Diffusion of Innovations*. Communities that are more traditional and less innovative expect their opinion leaders to be less innovative and less cosmopolitan.

  County Extension agents reported that opinion leaders who are innovative:

  o Strive for realistic ways to improve the lifestyle of citizens of the community

  o Have followers who trust them because of their past success

  o Recognize that too much innovation can cause chaos in an organization

Individuals who possess these characteristics usually stand out as opinion leaders and are recognized for their ability to lead, connect with people around them and gain followers from fellow community members.

Once the community's opinion leaders have been identified, it is important to choose those who understand and can establish relationships with the target audiences. If not matched with the proper target audiences, the opinion leaders may be asked to give advice on subject matters outside their realm of expertise. This not only lowers their credibility, but it also misinforms the target group.

How do we network effectively? The first step in networking is to identify people in the community who have power, knowledge and influence, which are the key elements to effecting change. By identifying and building relationships with the people who possess all three characteristics, change agents can reach their goals more easily and quickly.

The next step is to develop a name for yourself, according to marketing consultants Keith Ferrazzi and Tahl Raz in their book, *Never Eat Alone.* To make a name for yourself, Ferrazzi and Raz wrote, you must prove to be a credible, distinctive and a trustworthy person. Then you can attract respected community members to your cause and benefit from their power, knowledge and influence. If satisfied with what they find, these people will spread the word through their networks, and other people will be drawn to the cause.

However, networking that is implemented inefficiently can do more harm than good. People may be offended by their first impression and reject the cause. That is why the first impression must be a positive one.

To network effectively in a community, consider adopting the following seven strategies, which are based on *Leadership: Theory, Application, Skill Development,* by Robert N. Lussier and Christopher F. Achua:

Strategy	Good practices
1. Become a participant	Go where the action is—participate in committees and professional groups. Find a network that fits you and your organization's needs.
2. Develop a plan.	Join these groups with the intention to contribute. Commit to only the amount of time that you can. The more specific you are about what you want to do, the easier it becomes to develop a strategy to accomplish it.
3. Do your homework.	Figure out what interests the people in your group. When you meet them, discuss something about them that shows them you are interesed in them as individuals.
4. Be generous.	Provide a positive experience for the contact. Generosity and sincerity are the most important elements when establishing new relationships.
5. Make the first move.	The best first step can be a simple hello. To remember the name of a new acquaintance, Scott Hagwood, four-time winner of the USA National Memory Championship, immediately repeats the person's name out loud.
6. Nurture the relationships.	Personal visits and phone calls are good for close contacts, but writing is effective for more distant contacts. E-mail makes the job quick and easy, but a handwritten note is more personal.
7. Don't give up easily.	Successful networkers must work hard to maintain good relationships and continue building new ones.

Networking is a key component of community development. Change agents need to identify opinion leaders, social systems and power sources in a community so they can involve them in the change process. The agents need to use opinion leaders to their highest potential but not overuse them, asking them for advice only within their areas of expertise.

By using the seven strategies listed, change agents can begin new relationships and network with key people in their communities. This process can enable the county Extension agents to bring in new resources and possible funding for their community development initiatives.

Definitions

Change agent: A person who influences clients' innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency (Example: a county Extension agent).

Cosmopolitan: The willingness to adopt new practices, ideas or information and move away from the traditional practices of an organization or community.

External power: People who are considered a part of the community's power structure and who hold the resources within the community.

Innovation: An idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or group.

Internal power: People who are part of the community's power structure and who are considered the community members itself.

Networking: The creation of connections between people to gain and nurture contacts for the future.

Opinion leaders: People who can often influence others' attitudes or behavior in a desired way.

Power base: A source of influence or authority based on the size and the commitment of the people involved; it can be the community itself (internal) or those who control the resources (external).

Social system: A set of interrelated units or individuals who solve problems together to accomplish a common goal.

For more information

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____1. An idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or group

____2. Willing to adopt new practices, ideas or information and move away from the traditional practices of an organization or community

____3. A leadership tool used to create connections between people to gain and nurture contacts for the future

____4. A source of influence or authority derived from the number and committment of the people who are a part of it

____5. A set of interrelated untis or individuals who solve problems together to accomplish a common goal

____6. People who can often influence others' attitudes or behavior in a desired way.

____7. A person (such as a county Extension agent) who influences others' decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency

____8. People who are a part of the power structure of the community and who hold the resources in the community

____9. People who are a part of the power structure of the community and who are considered members of the community itself

A. **Opinion leaders**

B. **Innovation**

C. **Networking**

D. **Power base**

E. **Social system**

F. **Change agent**

G. **Cosmopolitan**

H. **Internal power**

I. **External power**

Don't look at answers until you're done!

1B 2G 3C 4D 5E 6A 7F 8I 9H