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Cornhusker Economics

Readiness for Change

One community is innovative in addressing long-term issues and situations related to quality of life, economic impact, and demographic renewal. Another community is not. What is the difference? What can communities do to be ready for change? What role can Extension play in helping a community address complex situations such as identifying new leaders, being competitive in a digital economy, creating healthy communities, or attracting new populations and retaining exciting community members? One key to success is assessing community readiness for change.

BACKGROUND

Nebraska Extension has been exploring how to better work with communities to engage in long-term change efforts. This led to the development of a community readiness tool that is based on research previously completed by Dr. Scott Chazdon at the University of Minnesota Extension. Working with Dr. Chazdon, the team researched community readiness theories and designs for assessing when communities are ready for change:

- Ready for Engagement: Using Key Informant Interviews to Measure Community Social Capacity (2010) - Chazdon and Lott, University of Minnesota, Extension Center for Community Vitality
- Community Readiness for Community Change (2014) and Handbook for Using the Community Readiness Model (2005) - Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, Colorado State University
- Quatsino First Nation Community Check-up (2011) - Centre for Innovative & Entrepreneurial Leadership
- The Development of Measures of Community Capacity for Community-based Funding Programs in Canada (2007) - MacLellan-Wright et al., Health Promotion International

- A Community Capacity Assessment Study in the Minnehaha Creek Watershed, Minnesota (2013) - Pradhananga and Davenport, Dept of Forest Resources, University of Minnesota.
- Building Collaborative Capacity in Community Coalitions: A Review and Integrative Framework (2001) - American Journal of Community Psychology.

Research led to six key dimensions that would be field-tested for applicability for determining community readiness for long-term change efforts. Team members conducted external focus group sessions with community leaders, gathered professional input from the community and economic development colleagues and conducted field applications. The assessment is found to be effective in helping community leaders consider their connectedness, openness to new populations, willingness to change, and future orientation. Researchers continue to evaluate the readiness tool and appreciate feedback on its usage and applicability.

THE READINESS ASSESSMENT

The readiness assessment can be used to help community leaders and residents better understand their community's ability to successfully implement change and address one or more of the six dimensions. It can also help Educators better understand the needs of the community and develop programming and/or make referrals around one of the identified needs.

ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

The Community Readiness assessment has 24 questions based on six dimensions that are provided to community leaders and members to self-assess their perceptions of their community.

- *Leadership Energy* - Leadership Energy is about seeking new ideas, being adaptive and proactive toward community change. Energetic leaders encourage the development of individuals to assume both formal and informal leadership roles and individuals actively seek these roles.
- *Cooperative/Collaborative Climate* – a collaborative climate is fostered through the community and its organizations' ability to draw the community together to achieve community-wide goals. Inclusivity - Community's willingness to seek out and include a broad spectrum of individuals in community organizations, activities, and leadership.
- *Civic Engagement* - Citizens' willingness to participate in the life of the community to improve conditions and create a better future.
- *Strategic Capacity* - Capacity of the community to activate and manage human, physical, and financial resources for the benefit of the community goals and strategic vision.
- *Entrepreneurial Attitude* - Community is proactive in identifying and encouraging business opportunities.

Individual responses are added to form a composite score, which is then used to determine whether the dimension is a strength or opportunity for growth for the community.

For each dimension there is a series of questions to explore. For example, the cooperative/collaborative climate is fully described as a collaborative climate that is fostered through the community and its organizations' ability to draw the community together to achieve community-wide goals. Collaboration is built and supported through the coalition structure, member relationships, and the programs that are offered. A collaborative climate is also supported through positive attitudes, a common vision and a diverse representation of differing viewpoints, skills/knowledge and expertise. Collaboration is maintained when members have access to both internal and external resources and can grow in their leadership and shared decision-making.

Cooperative/Collaborative Climate Questions

- Is the community able to deal constructively with conflict?
- Do community groups and organizations collaborate toward goals that benefit the entire community?
- Is there trust among individuals in the community?
- Is there trust among groups and organizations in the community?

If the community wants to strengthen its cooperative/collaborative climate, they can explore ways to do that amongst each other.

- Create safe places where community members can share ideas and work towards common goals.
- Conduct a community visioning process with broad representations and shared decision-making.
- Increase positive and transparent communications through social media, cross-organizational dialogue, print media to reach broad and diverse audiences.
- Create opportunities for greater citizen participation, provide childcare, transportation, etc.)
- Provide opportunities to build the capacity of citizens through leadership training, skills building and increasing knowledge around community problems/issues.

APPLICATION

The community readiness assessment is a quick insight into how a community has functioned in the past and how it may function in the future. It is only a starting point for discussion as to how prepared a community is for implementing action and change. It highlights areas where a community can focus efforts and build leadership and planning capacity.

Contact a Rural Prosperity Nebraska Extension Educator to assist your community in understanding its readiness to succeed.

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