MAKING A RURAL DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT: The managers of most non-profit agencies are interested in improving their local community. The managers of organizations in rural areas have a particularly good opportunity to make a difference; however, learning to listen and to collaborate with other organizations can be difficult. This paper describes how this process can result in the education of a more effective manager and also in the solving of a serious community issue.

Key words: manager, rural, community, collaboration

The managers of most non-profit agencies are interested in making a difference. We want to lead our organizations in improving our communities. The author believes that managers of organizations in rural areas have a particularly good opportunity to make a difference. However, we need to learn a few things first. During the past twenty-one years as President and CEO of a non-profit organization in Buckhorn, Kentucky, the author learned a great deal. The learning was often painful, but well worth it. The result was not only the education of a more effective manager but also the solving of a serious community issue.

THINKING AND ACTING "RURAL"

The successful completion of any major project in a rural area requires a particular set of skills and talents. Each rural community has its own unique culture. It has often been said, "When you've seen one rural community--well, you've seen one rural community." However, there are some common elements of rural life that can be identified. Wanda Urbanska and Frank Levering's book, *Moving to a Small Town, A Guidebook for Moving from Urban to Rural America* is an excellent tool for those who are considering the exciting option of working effectively in a rural community. In Chapter Six, "Making a Place for Yourself", Urbanska and Levering teach us how to tackle the most difficult and delicate challenge that awaits in a move to a small town--making a place for one's self in this foreign land--learning the art of crossing cultures.

Here, we learn valuable lessons in how to behave in a community, and these apply whether one is a new front-line worker, a new manager, or the new manager's spouse. Here are actions we should definitely take and ones we should carefully avoid. These include: (a) don't prejudge--learn to wait until you understand the history and the context; (b) don't say you know how things should be--give advice very carefully, and only when asked; (c) don't expect everything from the city to be in the small town--bagels and latte are not available in most small towns; (d) cultivate

a giving attitude--everyone is prepared to help; (e) seek input from the old guard--in rural America, there definitely is reverence for the wisdom of age and experience; (f) don't be the first voice to speak--wait, and then wait again; (g) avoid directness of speech--rural people see each other in so many different contexts, they have learned how to be careful and how not to offend each other.

Rural living is not right for everyone, but a small town can be the safest place to be a child, the most supportive place to be a parent, the most creative place to be a working adult, and the most comforting place to grow old. A small town is "family" at its very best.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

It is obvious that the manager who is of the same cultural heritage as the clients served will have the easiest task in building initial relationships. Of course, this is not always possible, and a manager of a different race or culture, who is sensitive to the heritage of the clients, can also build successful relationships.

In the author's opinion, the successful manager only need acquire three specific talents to communicate successfully with another culture:

Quiet observational skills. The skill of listening quietly while observing individual, family or group interaction is a necessity. The manager may need to spend several hours in the general store, not interacting, but quietly observing the mores and interactions of community members.

An ear for dialect. Obviously, anyone who is working with Hispanic or Native American community members who do not speak English must learn to speak their language. Not so obviously, perhaps, there are many spoken versions of English that also need to be learned. Rural communities often speak a local version of English that is highly idiomatic. Some words and phrases will be unknown to visitors, and outsiders, in their defensiveness, often label the natives as ignorant and backward. Rural communities are traditional and conservative. They are suspicious of strangers, often with good cause. Sounding like an outsider can be detrimental in working to become a part of the community.

Finding a local consultant. If you are new to a particular culture, it's important that one of the first resources you develop is a relationship with someone with whom you can informally discuss cultural elements you don't understand. The best person for this role is someone that you like and respect immediately, who is a native of the area and who has, preferably, lived or traveled outside of the particular rural community at sometime in his/her life. This may often be an older person who has developed the ability to be able to speak both the local dialect and Standard English and can interpret for you.

(The excellent manual, *Cross-Cultural Skills in Indian Child Welfare,* developed by the Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute (1987), clearly articulates how the values of Native Americans must also be understood by the non-Indian in order for her/him to be successful in this largely

rural environment.)

Each culture has specific characteristics of language and behavior that can be learned in specialized training sessions, by reading, and through observation. There are two crucial mistakes to avoid. First, don't think the major responsibility lies with the natives; you have the primary obligation of communication. Second, and related to the first, don't ever assume you've learned all you need to know about a culture--there are subtleties that an outsider can never learn. When you make a mistake, a sincere apology is always in order.

THE NEED FOR VISION

All communities, if they are to prosper, need leadership. One particular talent of good leaders is that of acting as a visionary. This talent allows the leader to see beyond today's concerns to a brighter future. A visionary leader can articulate that future in ways that mobilize others to undertake the effort that will make the vision a reality. John Shelby Spong (2000) clearly describes this quality:

> My idea of an effective ... leader generally, was found in two distinctly different styles. A leader could be a visionary who sees the future and by dint of his or her competence and energy can call the institution into that vision. A leader could also be one whose personal sense of security is so great that he or she can allow, without being personally threatened, the vision of those who serve that institution below the level of the head to become operative. Both styles could be effective. (p.156)

Every community has concerns and problems crying out for solutions. Gathering the resources to address a problem is what leaders are about. Choosing the particular problem that can be addressed requires a vision for change. A rural community will often be unable to begin to address concerns simply because no one has provided the vision needed, and the vital job of the manager will be to provide that vision.

RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In rural communities, there is great concern about what might be called "rural infrastructure"--housing, public water, sewers, garbage pick-up, fire and police protection, public transportation etc. In other words, the services citizens expect from the government; unfortunately, these services are often non-existent in rural America. This lack of the basic elements of civilized living is often shocking to urban visitors. They may ask the question, "In the wealthiest nation on earth, how can so many people not have basic governmental services?" By illustration, nearly every home in America has access to electric power. The National Rural Electric Cooperative was founded in 1942 by President Roosevelt and funded by Congress to deal with wartime shortages of electric power.

Since that first step to address the need for utilities in rural areas, Congress has failed to create similar organizations for safe drinking water, sewers, etc. The Rural Water Authority and the Rural Sewer Authority were never formed. It is not surprising that rural Americans often feel ignored and exploited when rural areas provide valuable minerals for industry, farm produce for the nation, and timber for construction with little from government in return.

Speaking of the colonial nature of coal mining in his classic book, Night Comes to the Cumberlands, Harry Caudill (1963) speaks of how industry removes the natural resources to the industrial sections of the country while returning little of lasting value to the people of the region. There are no water or sewer systems, no schools or libraries left behind, but (writes Caudill):

> they have brought economic depression, to be sure, and it lies like a grey pall over the whole land. But a deeper tragedy lies in the depression of the spirit, which has fallen upon so many of the people, making them, for the moment at least, listless, hopeless, and without ambition. (p.325)

COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

Much attention has been given here to the skills and attitudes needed for one to build relationships and become a part of a rural community. Eventually, with patience and perseverance, the opportunity will present itself that will allow the manager to use those relationships for the common good of the community.

Given the importance of personal relationships, resources in the rural community are not transferable. Each manager of a rural organization must develop his/her own relationships within the community. It will take years to build the influence and relationship networks with elected officials and others of community influence that are needed for changes on the macro level. These contacts can develop into successful applications for water projects, sewer lines and other major assistance for the community you serve. This kind of lasting impact on a community is often possible only for the manager who leads an organization in a rural area. Every community has resources, just waiting for development.

In his essay, "The Work of Local Culture", the novelist, poet, and farmer Wendell Berry (1990) describes how we are rapidly losing our sense of community, easily apparent in cities and suburbs, and now even in rural America. He believes that our basic national values are threatened when families no longer plan for sons and daughters to return "home" to live and work in the hometown.

A very real part of the work of the rural manager who wants to make a lasting difference, then, must be this building of local culture and community. The dismantling of the federal welfare state, by granting fewer dollars but more programmatic freedom to state governments, is quickly

being copied by states passing along fewer dollars but more freedom to local governments and communities. This process of devolution, as it is called, is painful and harmful to rural communities, but it is a reality.

A rural manager who is willing to join in the life of the community, over the long haul, has an opportunity to contribute to the lasting difference Berry (1990) describes:

> In this difficult time of failed public expectations, when thoughtful people wonder where to look for hope, I keep returning in my own mind to the thought of the renewal of the rural communities. I know that one revived rural community would be more convincing and more encouraging than all the government and university programs of the last fifty years, and I think that it could be the beginning of the renewal of our county, for the renewal of rural communities ultimately implies the renewal of urban ones. ... It would have to be done not from the outside by the instruction of visiting experts, but from the inside by the ancient rule of neighborliness, by the love of precious things, and by the wish to be at home. (p.168)

PROBLEM AND OPPORTUNITY: ONE EXAMPLE

For many decades, the children and families of the rural communities surrounding the Presbyterian Child Welfare Agency (PCWA) in Buckhorn, Kentucky, wished for safe drinking water. Everyone in this Appalachia area relied on wells for their source of water. Drilling and maintaining a well is expensive, and it is an additional burden for families in an area with a very high rate of poverty.

Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified a serious health risk with all the wells in the area. The amount of the mineral barium that was dissolved in well water exceeded the maximum EPA standard, and in some cases, the water in a family well contained five times the maximum recommended safe amount. However, since barium is an odorless and tasteless compound, most families ignored the EPA warning. This was often also an economic decision, since the only viable solutions for most families to remove the barium were prohibitively expensive.

In 1996, the four largest organizations in the Buckhorn community began a series of conversations about collaborating to solve their own individual water concerns and also to bring safe drinking water to the children and families residing in the area. Those agencies represented the federal government (the Corps of Engineers at the Buckhorn Dam), the state government (the Buckhorn Lake State Park), the county school system (the Perry County Board of Education), and a private voluntary organization (the Presbyterian Child Welfare Agency).

All of the organizations at the initial meeting quickly agreed that a public water system would certainly involve less work than the current

situation with each individual organization operating its own water purification system. It seemed likely that a public water system would also be less expensive, since each organization now maintained a system including wells, pumps, and storage tanks with ongoing expenses for filters and chemicals for water treatment, as well as the employment of at least one certified water system operator for each organization.

Success required over two years of effort and involved the incorporation of a municipal government--the Village of Buckhorn--and the investment of nearly a million dollars by the four organizations. This investment was prorated based on the annual number of gallons used by each organization and proved significantly less expensive, when spread over twenty years, than the ongoing expense of continuing with the current individual water systems. Additionally, their cash investment leveraged significantly more state and federal grant dollars to provide safe, barium-free public water to the low-income families of the community. Leadership, vision, and organizational collaboration resulted in good water for everyone.

Of course, not all the parties and not all the local citizens welcomed logical arguments, long-term savings, or even discussions about community health. After the local managers agreed, good listening skills were still critical in meeting with higher level federal, state, and county officials needed to approve the project in the state capitol and in Washington. Years of investment in relationship building were vital in a series of community meetings with citizens suspicious of "government" at any level.

Eventually, the project was approved and completed. The author was elected as the Mayor of the Village of Buckhorn, and the Village Council believes that many more improvements will result through collaboration and citizen involvement. Local 24-hour ambulance service is already a reality and the dreams of a new fire station and family/community recreation center are forming.

Managers of rural voluntary organizations can be change agents for improved quality of life if we are willing to commit ourselves to becoming collaborators and partners, rather than specialists and bureaucrats, and if we are willing to engage ourselves and our own families in the process of community building. Such a process is not over at five o'clock each day; it is a life's work, for it includes the building of a healthy physical and social environment for all of our children.

CONCLUSION

Before any manager congratulates himself on a successful project, it's always important to remember how much more he has to learn. A formal education is not the only source of knowledge nor is it a sure indicator of intelligence. The rural humorist, Loyal Jones, is fond of telling this story:

When the warriors in President Johnson's skirmish against poverty came, they had their own ideas about us. They did a lot of good, but they too were not content to help us with education, social services, and jobs.

They also wanted to change us. They had discovered values, thanks to sociology, and they plotted endlessly for ways to intervene in the cycle of poverty that was the current targetal thrust. We toyed with them too. One well-dressed poverty fighter, driving a fancy car, was asked by a mountain man what he did. "I'm with the War on Poverty," he said. "Looks like you won," the mountaineer observed.

The VISTA workers living with mountaineers wrote back home about all of the things mountain people didn't know about, like museums, subways, and art galleries. Their hosts talked with each other in wonder about people who didn't know how to milk a cow, plant a garden, slaughter a hog, or piece a quilt. (pp. 18-19)

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