

# Building Community Capacity

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## I. Overview

Despite decades of investment and intervention, central Appalachian still has a concentrated block of communities that fall into the category of “economically distressed.” The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) utilizes this designation for counties that fall into the nation’s bottom ten percent as measured by poverty rates, unemployment and per capita income. Particularly troubling is that in some areas, particularly eastern Kentucky, the number of distressed counties has increased in recent years. In 2008, thirty-seven of Kentucky’s ARC counties were distressed; thirty-eight in 2009; and in 2010, forty. The problem is serious, it is long-standing, and for too many communities it is not improving.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson kicked off the War on Poverty in Martin County, Kentucky, at the center of a large swath of distressed counties, most of which still have not shaken off that mantle. Since then, countless programs have sought to address the troubles of the region. These have included massive government investments, initiatives sponsored by private foundations, and efforts developed by various agencies, non-profits, colleges and universities, as well as the private sector.

These efforts have not all been in vain. There have been many notable successes, including better roads, some outstanding schools, clinics, new businesses, and effective organizations meeting real needs. When we zoom in on these successes we see the results of hard work and dedication, and measurable success within the sphere of such endeavors. However, when we pull back to a wider view we cannot escape the harsh reality that, by the numbers, these communities are not succeeding.

Brushy Fork Institute has worked with communities across central Appalachia for more than twenty years, focusing on leadership development, organization development and community development. We have been fortunate to work alongside many of the people who have helped to create real successes in the region. From this work, we have continued to grow our understanding of what it takes to move toward what we call “community transformation.”

John Stephenson, who founded Brushy Fork when he was President of Berea College, observed that the people of the region themselves have the wisdom, the vision and the commitment to guide the development of their own communities. This has been a guiding principle in all our work: you can’t transform someone else’s community.

So when we talk about community transformation, we begin with the clear understanding that it must be locally driven. The history of outsiders bringing their vision of development to the mountains has all too often ranged from ineffectual to tragic. This is not to say that

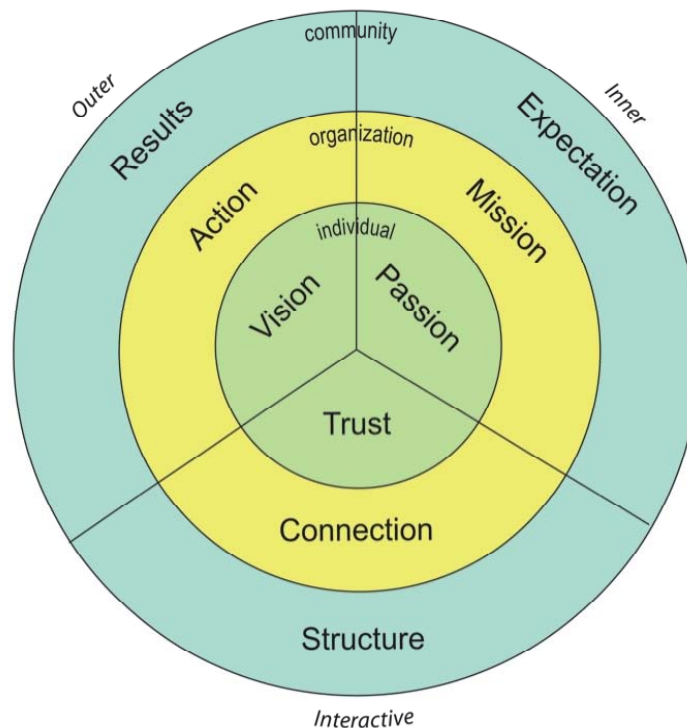
ideas from the outside may not be useful, but only insofar as they are adopted and adapted by the people who will put them into practice.

A second principle is that there must be a certain critical mass of engagement to create positive transformation. The path toward transformation must be built upon a shared vision, and that vision must be shared by people who are willing to act upon it if there is to be any chance of that vision becoming reality. The work of community transformation might start anywhere in a community: in the school system, with the bank or the newspaper, in the extension office, at the public library or among elected officials. But to move forward the effort must become cross-sector, broad-based, inclusive and diverse.

Vast resources can be poured into a community with little or no results to show for it, unless the community has the capacity to capture and direct those resources. This may be the single most important reason why so many efforts from outside have failed to generate lasting and significant positive results. It is a lesson that must be kept in the forefront of any effort to design the next generation of development initiatives.

## II. Brushy Fork's Effective Leadership Model: Individual/Organization/Community

Over the past several years, we have been developing a model that illustrates some of the key elements needed for effective leadership of community transformation. We began with three spheres that are common to many such models—the individual, the organization and the community. We incorporated these in our model as concentric circles, and for each we have identified an outer, an inner and an interactive dimension:



### ***The Individual***

We recognize that the individual leader must have **vision**, **passion**, and the **trust** of others to be effective. Vision is the outer dimension, what the individual sees that ought to be. This could be about things that should be changed, or it could be about things to be preserved. In either case, it involves recognizing the need for some kind of action. Vision of this sort is closely tied to passion, caring deeply enough about something to take on a leadership role, change priorities, be a driving force to bring the vision into reality. Such leaders do not begin sentences with “Somebody ought to.” However, vision and passion alone are not sufficient to lead if the individual does not garner and maintain the trust of others. Trust makes it possible to build outward to the next sphere of the model, the organization.

### ***The Organization***

The inner dimension for an organization is **mission**. Just as passion drives the individual, mission provides the purpose for an organization and guides its work, which is the outer dimension. We refer to this work in the model as **action**, which is informed by vision and driven by mission. Just as the individual cannot lead without the trust of others, the organization cannot function effectively without the ability to communicate, plan, coordinate, garner resources and build networks. We call this **connectivity**.

### ***The Community***

If the action of an organization is effective, it leads to **results**, the outer dimension in the sphere of the community. Among the cumulative effect of such results is a change in how the community views itself, which Robert Putnam identifies as social capital. We call this **expectation**. As Putnam observes, a community’s self-image can be positive or negative, and it will inform people’s belief about what is possible, or impossible. It will also guide what methods are employed to create change. A positive set of expectations would make people feel safe in holding a public dialog, being transparent about their efforts, and seeking to be broadly inclusive. We often see the opposite in communities with low expectations.

Effective individual leaders and organizations can create successes with projects, programs, institutions and even entire sectors. However, to move the community toward broad transformation requires a capacity for planning, implementation and coordination that is cross-sectoral, with a broad purview. We describe this in the model as **structure**, the interactive dimension in the community sphere. This kind of structure provides a venue for addressing issues and building a shared community vision, and coordinating the action of individuals and organizations to maximize the impact of collective work.

No model will ever produce the least bit of community transformation. However, a good model can provide a map and a context for understanding key relationships between various elements of a complex system. Such understanding is critical if we seek to create inputs into the system that will produce desired results. So, as we have been developing the

model as a theoretical framework, we have also been exploring practical applications that can be put into practice in communities.

### **III. Capacity Building: Leadership/Planning/Projects/Structure**

Capacity building can be addressed systematically, and it can be done with outside assistance, but it must be rooted in the community. Absent some threshold of engaged local leadership and effective organizations, outside efforts are not likely to produce lasting results. However, if there is enough local energy to begin the process, then the next step is to create a coordinated path forward.

Over the past several years, we have been involved in a prolonged capacity building effort in one community from which we have learned a great deal. This effort ties together several important threads for community transformation: leadership development, community strategic planning, successful projects, and building structure to sustain the work. What we find particularly promising is the leverage that comes from integrating these elements.

It is important to note that the current efforts did not spring forth in a vacuum, but were built upon a solid foundation of previous work carried out by local leaders and organizations, particularly in the areas of education and health care. In the case of this community, decades of hard work had paid off in a dramatically improved school system that now boasts some of the top test scores in the state. The local hospital had identified an area of specialization that allowed it to thrive and expand. Still, the community has not fully capitalized on its potential and the county remains economically distressed.

The current effort began more than seven years ago with a strategic planning process, for which Brushy Fork was engaged in a consultant capacity. We brought in Vaughn Grisham for the kickoff event. Grisham, one of the nation's leading experts on rural community development, directs the McLean Institute at Old Miss. He has been the chronicler of and a participant in the remarkable transformation of Tupelo, Mississippi.

Grisham recommended that the community not spend six months just planning, but rather that they dive right into work on a half dozen key areas they had already identified. At the two-day kickoff, they created task forces on Education, Health, Economic Development, Beautification and Land Use, Tourism and Leadership. The task forces coordinated their efforts through a steering committee. At the end of the six months, they wrote up what they had done and what needed to be done next, and that provided the core of their strategic plan.

Interestingly, within a few months of publishing the plan, most of the steering committee members had retired, changed jobs, left the community or in one way or another pulled back from their involvement. Fortunately, a key element in the plan was the creation of a local leadership program that helped to rebuild a core group. It began the following year, and included a good cross section of recognized leaders from both the public and the

private sector. Subsequent classes have delved deeper into the community and included both emerging as well as existing leaders.

The strategic plan was printed and included in the notebooks for each of the leadership program participants. They got oriented to the plan as part of the program. Each participant was also expected to carry out a project, and these projects became a vehicle for implementing the plan. Welcome signs, an annual car show, a park clean up, and a new adult education program are just a few of the successful projects that have sprung from the program. Connecting the leadership program to the strategic plan and having the participants do projects has created significant capacity for implementation. Lack of such capacity is often the Achilles heel of even well-designed plans.

For many local leadership programs, the participants' involvement ends after a year of attending program sessions. The community with which we have been working has implemented an additional element that promises even more leverage. After a few years of running the leadership program, they began to convene the program graduates on a monthly basis. This new alumni group provided structure and a venue to discuss community issues. It also provided the platform when it was time to renew the strategic plan last year.

At this point, more than eighty citizens have completed the leadership program and the number grows each year. When the group drafted a letter to one arm of local government about an issue on which they wanted action, with three pages of signatures attached, the response was immediate and positive. They have begun to recognize their power.

Community development is not a linear process. While success does tend to pave the way for more success, there are countless opportunities for the progress to be derailed: a funding stream dries up; a key leader leaves the community; natural disaster strikes and absorbs all the available time, energy and resources. Sometimes the efforts to move the community forward can themselves become polarizing if there is not agreement on the best way to proceed. In this community, planning and zoning was included in the newly revised strategic plan. This has sparked a backlash and the creation of an anti-zoning group. The conflict has clearly impacted the momentum in the community.

Such setbacks are inevitable. Communities will be able to recover more quickly if they have laid a foundation by building strong networks of local leaders and organizations that will enable them to realign their efforts and move forward.

#### **IV. Resources for Building Capacity**

As stated above, we begin our work with the understanding that it is not possible to transform someone else's community. For intermediary organizations, institutions and agencies, the question then becomes how best to encourage, support and provide resources for local efforts.

#### ***Capacity building for organizations and community leaders***

In every community there are a number of small organizations working hard to meet important needs or provide services: child care, food banks, shelters, educational programs, and job training are just a few examples. These organizations may be independent non-profits or they may be connected to service organizations, churches, schools or other institutions. Volunteer fire departments, local museums, fair committees and a host of other groups are all part of the mix. These organizations are typically run by people driven by a genuine desire to improve their communities and the lot of their fellow citizens. However, we also note that these leaders and their organizations may lack critical skill sets in areas such as financial management, fundraising, marketing, communications, or just the basics of running an organization.

In 2005 Brushy Fork began an Annual Institute designed to meet such needs in central Appalachia. Separate tracks provide in-depth training in a range of skills. We have added new tracks as we hear from participants what else they need. We also have more generalized tracks on leadership, community and economic development. The Institute has grown each year, drawing a multi-state audience and demonstrating its value as participants return for more training or send others from their organization. The opportunity for networking and learning about regional issues adds value to the overall experience. Targeted scholarship programs have helped to expand and diversify the participant base.

### ***Teams, training and project funding***

We have observed that combining training and funding can magnify the benefits of both. When a community team participates in training together, the team members can gather more information, reinforce for each other what they have learned, and utilize the training to carry out a project with the funds.

We have a long history of implementing this approach, beginning with Brushy Fork's Leadership Development Program (1988-2005) through which we provided ARC-funded "Seedling Grants" to community teams for six-month projects. The teams were able to use their projects as a laboratory in which they could explore new approaches to effective meetings, distributed responsibility, project planning and implementation.

We have recently updated and expanded this approach through a partnership between Brushy Fork, the Kentucky Department for Local Government and the Appalachian Regional Commission. ARC-funded Flex-E-Grants of up to \$10,000 are available for community capacity-building projects through two funding cycles each year. For the first cycle, communities must pre-qualify by sending a team to Brushy Fork's Annual Institute. The second cycle each year does not have this prerequisite, but the grantees qualify for scholarships to attend the Institute after they have been funded. Now in its second year, this program has begun to generate new activity in distressed counties and has encouraged new collaborations.

There is great potential to expand on the notion of combining training and funding in new ways. Targeted funding could stimulate projects related to creating new economic activity in the region. For example, low-income high school students could be trained in the

fabrication and installation of solar water heaters, and then through collaboration between funders and utilities, subsidies could provide for these systems to be installed on low-income housing in the community.

### ***Economic development***

There is a divide in the arena of community development between what might be termed “traditional economic development” and the kind of capacity building discussed in this paper. The “traditional” approach would include building industrial parks, physical infrastructure and business recruitment. Such work is usually high profile and well funded, often through government agencies. However, economic development agencies charged with this work sometimes overlook the importance of community capacity building.

Evidence of a strong community, with good schools, clear plans, well-functioning organizations and abundant collaboration can help swing the decision of a prospective business seeking a new location. If cheap electricity and available industrial sites alone were sufficient, we’d have far fewer distressed counties in the region. In some ways, it may be easier to build infrastructure than to build communities. But community capacity lays the foundation for economic success and makes it more likely that the big financial investments actually pay off.

The relationship between these arenas of endeavor is illustrated in Vaughn Grisham’s “Pyramid of Community Self-Actualization:”



Capacity building and traditional economic development are not opposites, and should not be seen as competing approaches. Rather, they should be seen as complementary strategies that rely upon each other for success. A small fraction of the funds committed to industrial infrastructure would go a long way in funding a local leadership program, training for young people, or an innovative strategic planning process.

There may be some missed opportunities as well at the intersection between the private sector and the non-profit realm. Non-profits often address areas of fundamental human need such as housing, health care, childcare, or providing for older citizens. But every area of need is also an opportunity for economic development and entrepreneurship. Are there enough carpenters to meet local housing needs, or is this an area where we could add capacity to grow the local economy? When a new hospital is built, could we take into account where the contractors and workers come from, and where the money goes? When investments are made in infrastructure, are we also building local businesses, or just hiring firms from outside the region to build the roads, then take the money and leave? Could we be developing retirement communities that furnish a high quality of life in a rural setting and also meet the health care and other service requirements of that population?

Of course, the answer to each of these questions is yes, we could. But the ability to act on such initiatives requires community leadership, strategic plans, strong and well connected organizations, good governance, high performing schools, a healthy workforce—in short, community capacity.

## **V. Conclusion**

New investments and programs can help to create opportunities for Appalachian communities, but the communities will be better able to capture and capitalize on these opportunities and realize lasting benefits if they “weave a basket” of community capacity. Among the strands that must be woven together are well-informed local leaders who see the big picture and have critical skills and access to resources; strong local organizations and institutions that effectively meet the needs within their sphere of concern as well as understanding the need for cross-sectoral collaboration; and inclusive networks and structures that provide for community planning and implementation of locally-driven initiatives that serve the common good.