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EMPOWERING RURAL PEOPLE:
STRATEGIC PLANNING AND TRAINING
FOR COMMUNITY SURVIVAL

Susan Myers, Bruce Drewlow, Jackie Zerr
University of Minnesota, Morris

*Community Quest is a problem-solving model for rural
communities which connects leadership development with
local issues. Leadership is a lifelong pursuit, developed
through practical experiences in our own communities.
By building on community strengths, a region can clarify
its collective mission to direct power and resources
toward a shared vision. The goal is to link communities
in a shared agenda for the region. Innovative techniques
are used to involve more people in the community's
decision-making process. A three-stage process which
combines research and problem-solving methods brings
decision makers and stakeholders together for strategic
planning.*

A community is always poised between its past and its
future--while grounded in the present. Community Quest is a
problem-solving model for rural communities which connects
leadership development with local issues. The project grew out of
insights on the importance of change being grounded in local
communities to complement regional efforts. This grass roots
community project pioneers new ways of encouraging the
disadvantaged, the disenfranchised, and those negatively impacted
by economic change to participate more fully in their community.
    Its objectives are to: (1) work with leaders to identify
community mission and build on community resources; (2) provide
a forum for leaders to discuss public issues on their community's
agendas; (3) identify each participant's leadership strengths and
broaden leadership skills; and (4), celebrate individual and
community achievements. The goal is to link communities in a
shared agenda for the region. By building on community strengths,
the region can clarify a collective mission to direct its power and
resources to achieve a shared vision. The uniqueness of each
participant is respected, as are the contexts in which they work.
Commitment is built by encouraging individuals to recognize their

collective leadership responsibilities for community and regional issues (Anderson, 1987).

BACKGROUND

The collapse of traditional boundaries of time and space, new international perceptions, and an interdependent globe affect the critical choices being made in rural areas (Marquant, 1986). Changes in the larger world influence our local economic development problems, resulting in added strain on the community infrastructure. Change itself is not the issue as much as the feelings of loss of control, and of living with uncertainty.

Early in a situation, when time seems abundant, there appears to be greater freedom to develop future strategies, and, therefore, more choices (Carse, 1986). Later, as time is rapidly running out, choices become more limited. During that same time, they also become more important.

In our rural communities, just when we think we have exhausted our resources, we are asked to change even more. Many communities which were once self-sufficient have now lost their reason for existence. No one is more resistant to change than someone who is scared. Yet, only that which can change can continue.

Change occurs through people, not economies. Solutions lie in new understandings of people, and of how we associate with one another. Community Quest focuses on increasing the ability of people in the community to cope with a situation of declining resources.

Community survival depends on finding an alternative vision in which we can believe, and which we can make happen. Community Quest brings together decision makers and stakeholders during a three-stage process which adapts and combines research and problem-solving methods for strategic planning.

INTERRELATED PROBLEMS--UNCOORDINATED SOLUTIONS

The problems of the community are similar to putting together a puzzle. Different groups and individuals work on their own areas, but few try to put together the entire puzzle to see how the pieces interlock. As each addresses certain parts of the problem, few see how the decisions they are making impact others, perhaps even creating different problems. But the major problems today are mostly intangible, immeasurable, and difficult to analyze factually. These problems, and others, are in the minds of

humans--the most intangible, immeasurable, and unpredictable of all elements affecting business (Lesly, 1965).

The key to problem-solving is to work together in an organized way. This requires a degree of planning that some may oppose on grounds that it is another example of over-organizing our already too complex society. Others may be reluctant to surrender the tradition of self-sufficiency that provided much of the energy and momentum which motivated the pioneer spirit.

However, the pioneer was not too proud to recognize that a barn could not be raised alone. Neighbors got together to get the job done. The barn-raising was an early-day example of independence through interdependence. Today's leaders must follow this example and find allies and form coalitions to build communities. Leadership must be developed at all levels and strata of the community.

Values

New and innovative solutions to current acknowledged and unacknowledged community problems must be based on a common set of values which are open to alteration. The value system of a community, or of individuals, does not change unless significant emotional experiences are examined, understood, and internalized. Community Quest brings together people who have, and who have not, felt the impact of recent social and economic change and its accompanying feelings of loss, anger, and finally, hope. Old values are confronted with new insights resulting in both added respect for those values that sustain the development of a cohesive community, and a willingness to abandon those values that block this development.

In any community, tensions arise as problems mount. Some issues bring the community together; others divide it. People's differing values are driving forces in societies and economies. Understanding this diversity is critical to understanding the nature of conflicts and the setting of goals. Community Quest builds on existing community values. These values can have negative or positive impacts on behavior, ranging from blocking adaptation to providing direction and encouraging change.

Many of these values (listed in Table 1) sometimes make it difficult to look at innovative ways to solve problems. For example, the economic crisis is a threat to people's ability to provide for themselves and their children, causing many to withdraw from the community instead of reaching out to it. Many times the strength of independence stands in the way of people realizing their interdependency.

Table 1

PARTIAL LIST OF COMMUNITY VALUES
AND THEIR IMPACT*

VALUE	NEGATIVE IMPACT	POSITIVE DIRECTION
Technical information	All decisions must be blessed by experts	Basis for determining alternatives and setting criteria e.g., use of Ag Extension info
Education	Hierarchical School is respository of ALL knowledge	Well educated populace Support for education Lifelong learning
Loyalty to family, community	Difficult to change traditional ways of doing things Unquestioning attitudes Parochial, ethnic and community barriers	Strong support and help for people in trouble People are important
Pride	Assign blame Judgmental Pigeon-holing people Elitism	Desire to keep the community going and look for solutions
Independence/ self-sufficiency	Hiding distress Isolation Competition	Not giving up Look to ourselves for answers
Spiritual values	Fatalism Punishment Exploitation	Sense of future, hope Compassion Working together to build community Faith Stewardship Ecumenism

*Developed for this project
c 1987 Community Quest

Other local values or myths reinforce a belief that there is an expert who has the "answers." Such beliefs must be replaced by the assurance that we are capable of analyzing many different types of information from the many sources which bombard us, and that we can formulate our own decisions and select options which are right for us. Community Quest attempts to provide that assurance through its philosophy that leadership is a lifelong pursuit. That is, there is no "beginning" in the sense that participants must already be leaders; rather, they have not yet acknowledged their leadership skills. Also, there is no "end" when participants will have learned all there is to know about leadership.

Community Quest believes that the best way to learn leadership is to practice it--at all levels. The steepest part of the learning curve is not acquisition of skills, but adoption of new, positive attitudes regarding one's leadership potential (Cleveland, 1987). For these reasons, community involvement is encouraged through practical experiences. The local community becomes the training environment (or classroom), as well as the laboratory for observation and reflection on actions (Peck, 1987). A laboratory is a place designed to be safe for experiments. We need such a place because when we experiment, we are trying out new ways of doing things.

Community Quest's process is based on the spirit of community as a safe place to experiment naturally without barriers and defenses. An experiment is designed to give us new experience from which we can extract new wisdom. So it is through experimental processes that members of Community Quest personally experience and discover new "rules" and new types of behavior.

A three-step process brings community leaders and stakeholders together to define and explain issues in an atmosphere that respects diversity but recognizes that the lives and ambitions of all people in the community intersect. More people become involved in the community's decision-making process, while community leaders become sensitized to the needs of all community members.

METHODOLOGY

A community's viability depends on the self-reliance and sense of purpose of the individuals within that community. Economic development is not empire-building, but community-building. Some questions raised in Community Quest are, how does economic development relate to the needs, resources, and

infrastructure of the community? How is it interrelated with other aspects of community development? Are the people being affected by the decisions included in the decision-making process?

Community Quest brings together stakeholders, opinion leaders, and positional leaders to identify and address common issues and to increase their awareness of one another's perceptions of the same issues.

The three steps include a survey sent to a cross-section of the community, followed by focus groups to gain insights and to begin exploring areas of common concern and differences. Then, a community quality circle, composed of people representing diverse categories and self-selected from those who have participated in previous steps, identifies community strengths and expertise; analyzes community myths and assumptions; suggests ways to celebrate community accomplishments; and explores what the mission of the community could be.

Stakeholders are individuals or groups who depend on the community for the realization of their goals, and are those on whom the community depends. In that sense, anyone living in the community, or using any of the services provided by the community infrastructure, can be regarded as a stakeholder. The community infrastructure is defined as networks of systems that support the functioning of the community (Freeman, 1984).

Opinion leaders are people who may have a significant influence on others because people seek their advice and/or because their actions or recommendations are highly valued by others. Research has shown that opinion leaders are much like the rank and file of their associates, but are of slightly higher education or social status; give greater attention to the topics of their leadership; and are generally better informed, more partisan, and more socially active. Opinion leaders are found in all social classes (Cutlip, 1978).

Opinion leadership results from a combination of factors. It involves *who* one is (social leader in that group), *what* one knows (experience and/or existing knowledge) and *where* one is located. Opinion leadership is not static. It moves from issue to issue. Traditional biases cannot be relied upon, such as rich versus poor, conservative versus liberal, generation versus generation, etc. Each issue or proposal attracts leadership for and against. The same two people may oppose one another on one issue, join in leadership on another, or both sidestep leadership on yet another. It is difficult to determine who the opinion leaders are in any particular group.

Positional leaders are people elected or appointed in government, or whose business or professional positions put them in decision-making roles.

The first step of the survey, an open-ended questionnaire, was sent to 350 community members representative of a cross-section of stakeholders, opinion leaders, and positional leaders. Advisory board members were asked to identify opinion leaders in different categories through a structured questionnaire.

The open-ended questionnaire asked participants to: (1) identify five critical issues the community will face in the next five years, and two issues which they think will be unexpected problems; (2) make suggestions for improving the way problems are solved in the community; and (3), asked them why the community is important to them, what they would like changed in the community, and what (if any) special project they would like to work on.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they would be interested in participating further in a focus group and/or a community quality circle. Forty people, self-selected through this process, participated in five focus groups.

In this project, focus groups (the second step) were composed of people of diverse backgrounds and interests, rather than homogeneous groups typically used in marketing research. The purpose of the focus group was to gain insight into an issue otherwise generally considered inaccessible. Results of the survey were used as a basis for initial discussion and to develop criteria for identifying issues to address in the quality circle.

The third step, the community quality circle, brought groups of people of diverse background, who share similar concerns and visions, together to meet regularly to identify, analyze, give priority to, and address issues and solutions.

Used in business and industry, quality circles are a tool to implement and maintain participatory decision-making. Participants understand the importance of suspending judgment on the values and attitudes of others while seeking a deeper understanding of them. The members of the community quality circle define for themselves the issues they wish to address. This circle focuses the differences of opinion, values, and expertise of the participants into a common view to discover new ideas and to design innovative resolutions to conflicts in the decision-making process.

The people who volunteered to become part of a "community quest" in our test included traditional and non-traditional college students, elected and appointed officials, senior citizens, agency

directors, civic leaders, farmers, volunteers, pink and blue collar workers, professional and business people, handicapped and minorities, new residents, "old families," church and lay workers, and law enforcement personnel. When such a diverse group addresses critical, and often controversial, issues, a sense of community must first be established. As individual questions and concerns are recognized and discussed, a willingness to share the responsibility of working toward common goals is developed.

In strategic planning on a community-wide basis, mission is the soft counterpart of strategy. In his explanation of how "hard" and "soft" decision-making models complement one another, Hurst (1984) points out that the key element in developing a shared purpose is mutual trust. Once the sense of common purpose and mission is established, the group is ready to address the specifics of task, structure, information, and decision processes.

ANALYSIS

The results of the questions about critical issues and unexpected problems are listed in order of priority in Table 2. It is interesting to note that while economic development was the most important concern, the subject of leaders' decision-making processes ranked third on both lists. Also, the idea of a sense of community is on both lists.

In response to the question of how to improve the way problems are solved, the number one response was to include/involve a more diverse group of people and larger numbers of people in the decision-making process. The respondents believed that this could be accomplished through forums and town meetings. It also was believed that the various decision-making bodies (county, city, school board) needed to develop an organized system of cooperation when addressing common issues. Also, respondents indicated that these issues needed to be openly discussed at meetings. Citizen education on the issues facing the community also was deemed a high priority. This education process should involve the media as well as forums, according to responses. Some tied the above goals together and believed that if they were accomplished, a deeper sense of community would be developed whereby leaders could have a sense of responsibility for the public good, as well as citizens taking on a more responsible role in their community.

As to why their community is important to the respondents, the quality of life it provides for its residents and the quality of the education system make it a desirable place to rear a family.

Table 2

RESULTS OF MARSHALL SURVEY

CRITICAL ISSUES IN NEXT FIVE YEARS	UNEXPECTED ISSUES
1. Economic development (jobs, unemployment, financial systems, one-industry town, retraining, exit of business)	1. Economic development
2. Farm economy (farm programs, changes in rural economy)	2. Education
	2. Environment
3. Decision-making process/leaders	3. Leaders/decisionmaking
4. Taxes (shift in tax base, effect on business, fewer dollars in future for services)	4. Elderly
	5. Crime/family violence
5. Environment (water, waste disposal, MCP odor, erosion, recreation)	5. Social and human services
	5. Taxes
6. Population shifts (losing talented youth, increasing elderly)	6. Population shifts
7. Education	6. Regional service center and regional retail trade center
8. Social and human services (costs, needs, overlap)	7. Health care
	7. Farm economy
9. Regional service center and regional retail trade center	8. Recreational facilities
10. Health care	9. Poverty gap
11. Elderly (senior center, health care)	9. Sense of community
12. Chemical dependency (drugs)	10. Youth
13. Transportation (traffic patterns)	10. Housing
14. Poverty gap	11. Transportation
14. Sense of Community	11. Chemical dependency
14. Youth (teen pregnancy, fears, suicides)	11. Single parents need
15. Housing	12. Day care
16. Crime and family violence	12. Energy
17. Single parent needs	12. Telecommunications
18. Energy (costs)	12. Judicial/legal system
19. Telecommunications	

Other characteristics included: "nice" people; opportunities to participate in the community, regional center, community facilities and recreational activities; size of community; progressive attitudes; low crime rate; and the churches.

If respondents were to change their community, the highest priority would be to develop a more positive city image, to include a community celebration. More community participation also was deemed important. Other changes might address recreational programs, long-range planning, sense of community, education, diversified regional services, cultural environment, and better transportation systems. More specific goals could focus on a teen center, the downtown area, or a non-alcoholic restaurant.

Focus groups generated a list of community strengths and assets. Participants also developed criteria for determining which issues could or should be addressed. Among the criteria listed were factors such as achievability, capturing the community's interest, having the greatest good for the greatest number of people, linking with other issues to avoid duplication, long-term impact, and the capacity to promote change.

Several possible projects were suggested as focus groups discussed survey results and developed the criteria. These included a dialogue among leaders in their town and surrounding communities to address common concerns, establish a teen center, and create a private enterprise zone. One participant began her own "community quest" to seek funding to involve more low-income people in testifying at hearings or before boards on issues affecting their needs. Another participant started a local chapter of the Women's Political Caucus. Both decision makers and stakeholders appreciated the opportunity to join in dialogue.

The community quality circle is scheduled to begin in the fall of 1987.

IMPLICATIONS

Many task forces and consultants are available to assess community strengths and weaknesses, but they typically involve only public officials and business leaders, not representatives of all of the community's stakeholders. A limited group is asked to define economic development problems and decide for the entire community which ones will be addressed, and which will be left unresolved--often with little consideration of infrastructure impacts. Community Quest expands the leadership base so decisions are not made by a select few, or imposed on the community by outside "experts."

Community myths provide a context for decision-making. They are the dynamic accumulation of past events and decisions significant for the present and the future. They also give us a sense of the vision that inspired past leaders, which has done much to form the identity of the community. From this, we discover patterns of behavior which might help us avoid reinventing the wheel or making the same mistakes twice. They also help us realize how complicated things can be, and thus prevent us from embracing quick-fix solutions. Tapping the sources of community myths gets people involved, unearths some basic assumptions about what the community has been trying to achieve, and reveals what the stumbling blocks have been.

Community Quest is based on a capacity-building philosophy which has as its major objective the strengthening of the capability to plan, implement, manage, and/or evaluate policies, strategies, and programs. The focus of capacity-building is on the interaction of a community's expectations, resources, and problems, to help that community build internal resources.

The dialogue necessary to reach consensus on the mission of a community serves to empower the people who take part. Typically, those who are negatively economically-impacted by change are poor not only in resources, but also in organization (Reich, 1987). Thus, it is difficult to develop systems of mutual responsibility. When people become part of the solution, self-esteem is enhanced. They are not simply "acted upon" as many programs designed for them tend to do. They are part of the process of identifying needed changes in the community and can offer insights for solutions. People who presently feel isolated from the community, frightened by poverty, or overwhelmed by family responsibilities, talk about the community infrastructure with people who have local decision-making power. By demonstrating their ability to influence and make decisions, they feel ownership and success. Feeling ownership, they will not allow others to make all the decisions affecting them. Successes at the local level empower them to become involved in the ramifications of the effects of the rural economy, and related economic and social issues, at higher policy-making levels.

New leaders emerge through involvement in issues impacting their lives. These leaders gain confidence when their actions tip the balance on issues. Success is "catching." They take more initiative in voicing opinions or becoming involved in decision-making processes such as forums, hearings, committees, letters, etc. (See Table 3 for community impact possibilities).

Initially, there was some blocking by those with a vested interest in the system as it is, those who may not be risktakers, or those who may be afraid to risk their power by allowing others to become part of the process. However, there were enough leaders interested in trying new ways of cooperating to find new solutions who were willing to participate in this process.

Current leaders often believe that they are already acting in the best interests of the community. They assume that their particular leadership styles are most effective in accomplishing goals because of their past achievements. Therefore, traditional leaders often may not see any reason to participate.

However, differing leadership styles may cause conflict or impede progress during the decision-making process because of individual assumptions and personal communication styles. The process used in Community Quest focuses on these different leadership strengths and integrates their diversity into a collective leadership forum.

Action implications include having the information gathered through this process integrated into formal long-range planning processes being conducted by governmental and service entities in the community.

SUMMARY

"Today we are in a period of crisis. Social cohesion grounded in local community integration supplies an important ingredient for mobilizing our human resources. Social cohesion. . .means, in effect, the existence of a communications system by means of which individuals are oriented towards group action" (Janowitz, 1953).

The current situation in rural America could be the subject of the above observation, which was actually a comment on urban problems in the 1950's. Changing community problems reflect changes in our rural areas and in the larger society of which we are a part. Once our community defines its strengths and values, we can choose appropriate outside resources to work with.

Community Quest emphasizes community leadership, rather than individual leadership training. Participants gain new skills as a result of participating in community problem-solving.

Leaders learn leadership by leading--at all levels. People must perform leadership-like acts on their own initiative. Leadership also requires qualified followers. This means participation in the community, and of the community. Leaders are people who become makers of possibilities.

Table 3

COMMUNITY IMPACT POSSIBILITIES
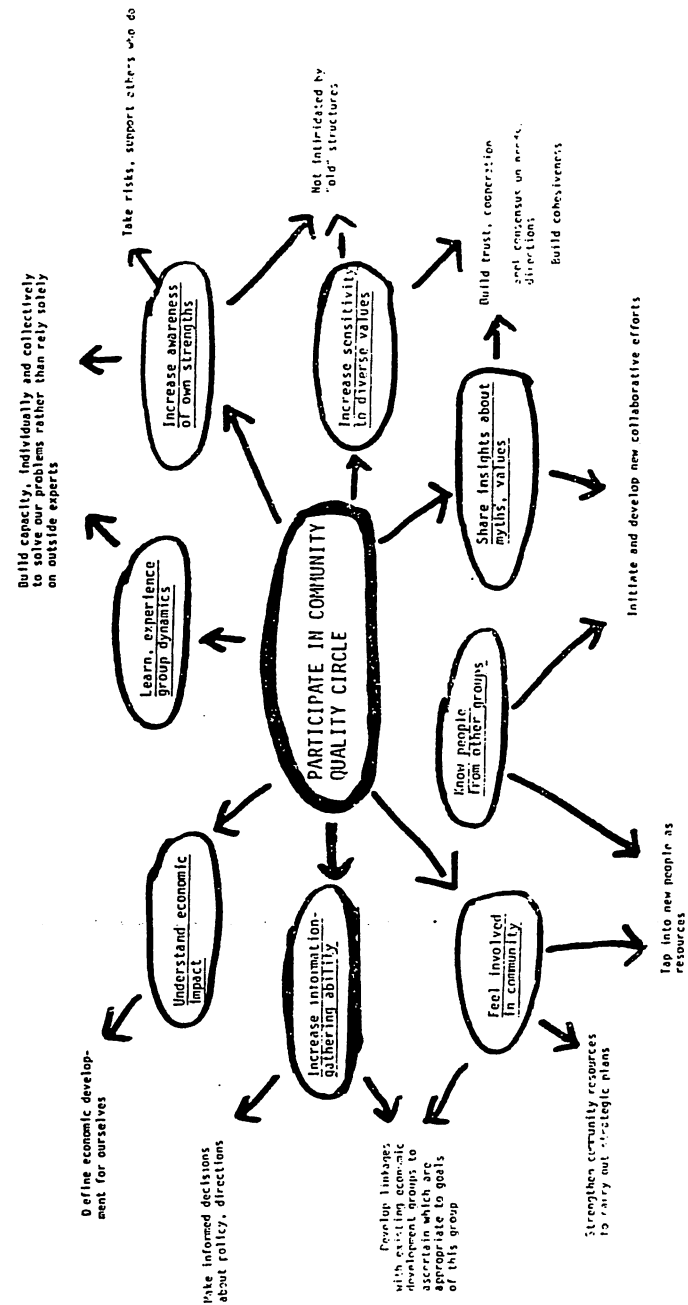
Leaders recognize the importance of developing the capacity to deal with change. The decision-making process does not necessarily have to change. It will change as a result of being observed and talked about, and of having new players participate.

Community Quest develops "change readiness." The decision-making structure and resources can remain the same if people are willing to seek out information, ask new questions, and look for new answers. Leadership requires moral courage, is rooted in values, and can be nourished by a sense of community. Vision that transforms rural communities comes from the qualities illustrated in Table 4.

Community Quest provides current and emerging leaders opportunities to examine their attitudes, commonalities, and options for shaping a promising future for their communities.

The future can hold risk as well as promise. The search for the good, while accepting the risks, led people to find out what was over the next hill. Today's "hills" offer opportunity as well as threats. Our communities depend upon keeping this questing spirit alive in our leaders.
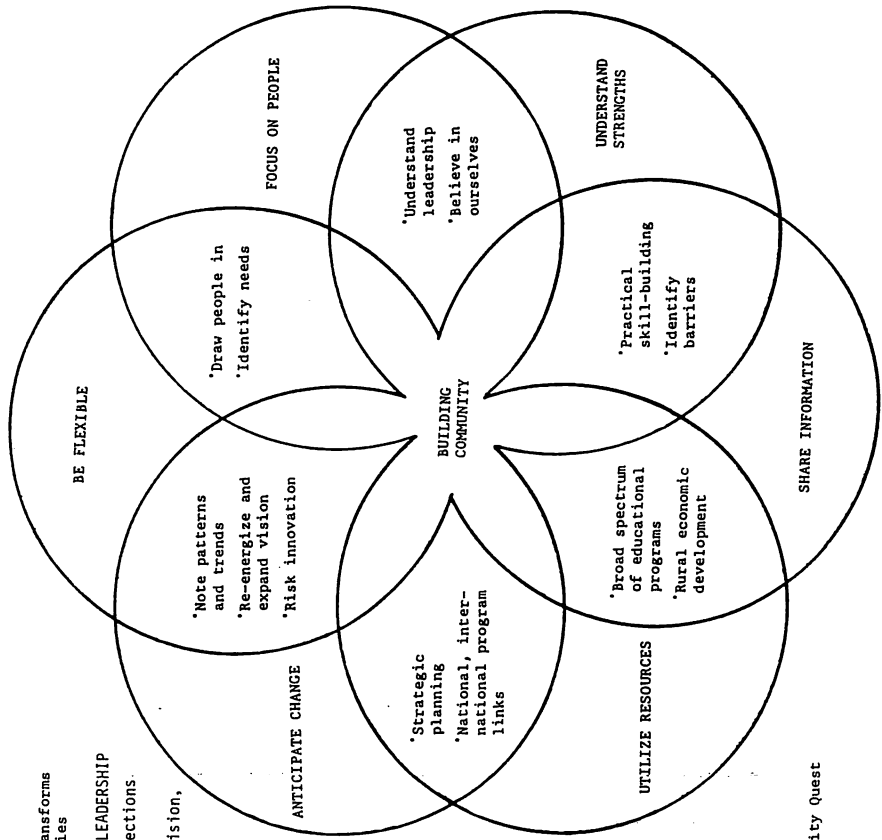
Table 4
Vision That Transforms
Rural Communities

KEYS TO RURAL LEADERSHIP

.Explore intersections.
of mutuality

....Spark shared vision,
integrate
competencies;
"build model"

FOCUS ON PEOPLE

UNDERSTAND STRENGTHS

·Understand leadership
·Believe in ourselves

·Draw people in
·Identify needs

·Practical skill-building
·Identify barriers

BE FLEXIBLE

BUILDING COMMUNITY

SHARE INFORMATION

·Note patterns and trends
·Re-energize and expand vision
·Risk innovation

·Broad spectrum of educational programs
·Rural economic development

·Strategic planning
·National, inter-national program links

ANTICIPATE CHANGE

UTILIZE RESOURCES

c 1987 Community Quest

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A REGIONAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Jerry Knox
Iowa State University

Stagnant or negative growth in population and reduced economic well-being are threatening the future of small towns and rural areas in Iowa and the Midwest, especially those communities with less than 5,000 inhabitants. Clusters of similar-sized towns are in desperate need of strategies for survival. The problems behind these trends will not disappear in the near future. The depth of these problems will require long term planning and the coordination of resources of state, regional, and local government-- as well as the private sector, and the land grant universities. A brief summary of recent trends in the rural Midwest is presented below:

1.　Greater international competition in agriculture and manufacturing has dealt a severe blow to Iowa's two major economic sectors. The farm debt crisis and the national trend of declining employment in manufacturing have made evident the need for changes in economic development strategies in the state.

2.　The internationalization of agriculture, Iowa's major economic base, has made the state increasingly sensitive to international economic and political conditions. Iowa is the nation's number two farm state, behind California, but is number one in the value of farm exports. Since 1980, the agricultural sector of Iowa's population has steadily eroded, with the number of farms decreasing while average farm size has increased.

3.　A restructuring of national and regional economic bases has caused changes in the type of jobs, shifts in required skills and training, relocation of jobs, and a continuing decrease in agriculture related business.

4.　Continued changes in the composition of the rural and small town population have affected the educational needs and problems of businesses, social services, families, and local governments. A particular challenge to the future viability of small towns is the outmigration of young people, and the increase in the number of residual elderly.