A team training model: 
A regional approach to changing economic conditions

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Since the late 1970's many U.S. communities have experienced economic decline. For some, this has been a vivid contrast to the problems and opportunities associated with previous decades of rapid growth and expansion. For others, the slowdown has only compounded the continuing frustrations of long-term stagnation. Rural communities have been particularly vulnerable to the impacts of economic slowdown, as their already limited resources are subjected to increasing pressure.

Cutbacks in inter-governmental revenues have precipitated reductions in public services. In some cases this has improved efficiency, but in many instances the adverse economic circumstances are taking an increasing toll on management and service personnel, budget surpluses, and on the quality of services. As the provision of public services shifts to local governments and private organizations, rural communities are finding that they have too few resources to meet established standards and expectations.

Rural leaders and citizens are under considerable pressure to revise their strategies for dealing with hard times. Old tactics no longer seem appropriate. Communities are questioning the value of bringing in major industries, and soft money for bailing out underfunded services and programs is becoming less available. There is a growing awareness that all resources are limited.

The need is apparent. A real opportunity exists for an educational mechanism that can both develop a community-based, problem solving process that will strengthen existing resources, and provide local citizens with the necessary knowledge and skills to apply this process to their own situations.

Cooperative Extension and the Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) rose to meet this need, and did so with a considerable amount of success. This institutional partnership provided training to local citizens so they, in turn, could help their own communities cope with the consequences of economic decline.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the Hard Times regional training model that was implemented by the Western Rural Development Center in 1983-84. The model has gone through an evolutionary process in which it has been tested and refined several times. To date, indications are that it holds considerable promise for strengthening the abilities of rural leaders to deal with the consequences of economic decline in their own communities. The potential is also apparent for the model to be transferred to other community problems.

This paper is written primarily for community leaders, Extension staff, and community or rural development practitioners. It outlines the evolution of the training model, the underlying concepts on which the model is based, and the process of refinement which the model has undergone. The implementation process is discussed, including three workshops that were held in the western region. Training methods are described and examples are cited of participants who were able to apply the process to local situations. Some early outcomes of the training are cited, along with speculation about further applications.
Background
In 1978-79, the Western Rural Development Center assumed leadership for a series of training workshops on “Coping with Growth.” At that time, there were high rates of population growth in many rural communities. Leaders were under considerable stress responding to the range of human and economic impacts. These workshops marked the introduction of a regional training model which has been well received by university researchers and administrators, Extension staff, community participants, and professional organizations.

The “Coping” model has since evolved and is now being applied, with refinements, to a series of western regional workshops on “Hard Times: Communities in Transition.” Unlike the first training program, the workshops are only one part of a more extensive educational process. The model is more clearly conceptualized as a problem-solving process that integrates subject matter with a set of skills for initiating action in rural communities.

The need for a regional training effort of this type was recognized by the Western Region Extension Directors, each responsible for Cooperative Extension in a land grant university. They knew about the preceding “Coping with Growth” series, and felt the reverse economic trend in rural communities warranted comparable attention. A recommendation to this effect was made to WRDC and the Western Extension Community Resource Development Committee. In early 1982, a steering committee was charged with the responsibility of designing and implementing a training program for rural communities focused on “coping with decline.”

Objectives
In the earliest stages, the planners identified four objectives to guide model development and the implementation process. Participants should become more knowledgeable about:

- Fiscal, social, economic, and demographic consequences of decline.
- Resources available to help their communities cope with the consequences of decline.
- Processes of informing and involving people at home.
- Strategies for economic and social recovery.

The objectives describe, to some degree, the trainers’ expectations for the entire educational process. However, an understanding of both trainers’ and participants’ expectations for the workshop provides a clearer picture of everyone’s needs.

Participants came from a variety of small rural communities. In most cases they came as a “team” of two to five people, each representing different community interests—Chambers of Commerce, economic development groups, the clergy, school boards, volunteer organizations, county Extension offices, tribal councils, small businesses, social service centers and local governments. Participants expressed some of the following expectations of the workshop.

- To increase awareness of how to handle our own problems.
- To find out how other communities are dealing with similar problems.
- To generate enthusiasm in our community to solve our problems.
- To develop tools to reach community goals.
- To learn what type of information businesses want and need.
- To learn techniques for attracting investment money.

Trainers did not expect to provide solutions to community problems, rather, they expected to increase participants’ knowledge of strategies, tools, and available resources. They did expect to provide guidance in tailoring this information to the unique needs of communities. By the conclusion of the workshop, community teams were expected to have developed strategies for their own action.

At the first workshop it quickly became apparent that trainers and participants did not necessarily understand one another’s expectations. This stimulated an important element of each succeeding workshop, a designated time to identify and discuss mutual expectations. Much of the workshop success is dependent on this activity.

The model
The workshops are designed to give teams a new way of looking at their communities’ problems, and to enable participants to develop a simple but workable plan that can be used at home. Participants analyze the existing situation in order to take greater advantage of available resources (human and material), local beliefs, and values. The need to capitalize on existing conditions is emphasized, since it is easy to overlook unique businesses and services, individual skills, cultural beliefs, or treasured local values. The trainers share a common philosophy concerning the value of both economic and noneconomic resources, and about strategies for dealing with community economic stress.

The model is based on four primary concepts which are integrated in a variety of ways throughout the total process: the team; action planning for product attainment; content integration; and model testing and refinement.

The team
The team concept is central to the model, and is applied at two levels, with the multidisciplinary, trainer team drawn from a variety of academic backgrounds, and with the community participant teams, which represent different local interests and responsibilities.

The need for a multidisciplinary team approach was identified at the
The team should represent other sectors of the community in addition to business, since a broad-based effort is required to counter the complex effects of decline.

The community team approach is an effective strategy to foster a support group for examining local problems, setting goals, and implementing strategies. They also identify key resources that are necessary to achieve their goals, and whether they are available or can be acquired. The four-step plan helps refine the goals that were set in the preliminary community analysis (see steps 1 and 2, Figure 1).

Organizing at the community level. Midway through the workshop, activities are directed toward helping teams organize for community action and recovery. The focus is on such things as community development, planning, dealing with public apathy, and concern. Attention is given to developing strategies that are based on collaborative approaches, in an attempt to help participants find alternate solutions to the problems they have defined (see steps 3 and 4, Figure 1).

An action plan summary. By the conclusion of the workshop, community teams have shared ideas and experiences and analyzed the consequences of different strategies for action. By this time, participants have also been exposed to basic social science on community economic decline (see Content Integration, below).

The workshop concludes with each team summarizing its proposed action plan for the entire group (see step 5, Figure 1). The plans should be developed on a worksheet, with short and long term strategies, and a proposed time schedule, a list of people to be involved, and the required resources. This wrap-up session depends on questions from peers and trainers, on their organizations, and on trainer critiques. At each workshop this "open forum" has been a highlight, where plans are improved in the face of threatening environment, and commitment to action at home is built.

These teams move through the steps of the planning process, they are moving through the steps illustrated by the problem solving model in Figure 1. Steps six and seven, "carrying out chosen alternatives" and "evaluation of results," take place later, in the community.

Content integration
One of the reasons this training model succeeds is the balance it subject matter with skills. Excessive treatment of either one would defeat the purpose of the workshop.

Early in the workshop, an overview of the content is introduced through discussions. The content is presented in a way which the entire concept is based. This framework, referred to as "the impact assessment, management, and mitigation model," provides a way to organize for an impact assessment that is comprehensive and realistic. The framework also summarizes the results of psychological, sociological, demographic, economic, and fiscal impacts of plant closing in order to provide a starting point for economic decline (Howell and Bentley 1983).

The model is followed by short presentations of subject matter by trainers from disciplines such as economics, social science, sociology, anthropology, and community development. These presentations focus on tools for analysis of various aspects of community decline, e.g., economic, fiscal, demographic, political, social, and organizational.

Midway through the workshop, content is again introduced and all teams participate in two intensive sessions. One emphasizes economic recovery strategies, including trade development and the economic potential of new and existing businesses. The other directs attention to the techniques for dealing with individual and family stress through, for example, support networks and help-seeking.

There are always a few participants who express little interest in the social or human aspects of economic decline. At the onset, some are quite vocal about their disinterest in the social or community aspects. Others move through the steps of the planning, however, going through the session, express a new awareness of issues, or express a new interest in problems of community slowdown.

1 See Stapp, Setting Group Goals. This brief publication is a discussion of the work of field instructors, by a well-recognized author. It is included helpful data and instructions. Another excellent resource is Two design discussions include brainstorming, circular group technique, and focus group analysis.

2 See Howell and Bracky, Assessing, managing, and mitigating of the impact of economic decline: A community perspective, WRRS 1969 Western Rural Development Center.
The steering committee (Phase 3). As the steering committee refines the training model, each change is scruti-
nized. This scrutiny is repeated as resource people are located and partic-
ipants are recruited. Because the model is further adapted as each phase unfolds, no workshops are identical. Participants and trainers test and evaluate the product in a joint learning process.

Model testing (Phase 4). Several months preceding the first workshop, all resource people and the steering committee gather at a central location to pre-test the materials and methods. For two days the presenters provide visual aids, teaching methods, and activities are screened in a peer review process. Once agreement is reached, necessary revisions, a "first string" team is designated for the initial workshop.

Pre-workshop activities (Phase 5). Community teams gather information prior to the workshop and bring a summary of it to registration, where the trainers use it to tailor the workshop to the needs of the participants.

Workshops (Phase 6). Three workshops were conducted in 1986: one in Farmington, New Mexico, one at South Lake Tahoe, California, and one in Butte, Montana. Another workshop took place in Sitka, Alaska in 1985. At each, the content and methodology were adjusted to fit specific situations. Because the product is not withheld until it is considered "ready for distribution," but is tested as it evolves, a valuable process takes place between trainer teams and community participants.

Each workshop serves as a prototype laboratory for publication materials, and one product of the workshop is a series of publications based on the training model.

Implementation
Application of the model to the workshop involves pre-workshop meet-
ings to gather information, a community case study, a conceptual frame-
work, and an action planning process.

Pre-workshop activities
Each team is asked to gather information about their own community’s economic decline to help define their situation in preparation for the search for appropriate responses. At least one meeting of the community team is encouraged prior to the workshop.

To assess local viewpoints about the community’s economic decline, e.g., the causes and impact of the decline.

To set up preliminary community goals for responses to problems associated with the decline.

To provide an opportunity for the team to develop a written statement that describes the local situation.

To help the team reach tentative agreement on how they might ap-
proach the problem, and thereby identify the team’s expectations for the workshop.

Before the workshop, instructions and worksheets for advance activities are mailed to each community team. These instructions serve as a source of preliminary information about the community’s economic decline.

The key informants are selected to answer different views of the problem, for example:

- Companies/organizations that have laid off workers.
- Workers who have been laid off, or are threatened by job insecurity.
- Families of unemployed workers (single parent household, two-career household, near-retirement household).

- Employers who may represent new job potential.
- Local government officials and decision makers.
- Social and health service agencies/organizations.
- Volunteer organizations.

Using information obtained from the panel of key informants, the community defines the problem and outlines it on a worksheet, as follows:

Backward. What happened to re-
sult in the current situation? History? Factors underlying the problem or causation.

Primary actors. Who is involved? Who are the major sources of impact? Who could help manage or ease the situation?

Impacted groups. What people, groups or organizations are impacted? How long do they feel they can or will be impacted?

How is the community set up to approach the problem? Proposed action.

Team’s workshop goals. What does the team hope to gain from the workshop?

This problem statement is to be turned in at workshop registration.

The results are then turned into a well developed community team.

1. The key informant panel or “focus group” build on the strengths of both different approaches, but compensating for different data collection methods; the key informant method often used by anthropolo-

2. The team leader or key informant should discuss the topic.

3. The purpose of the plan is to focus on, and provide, new ideas for the problem.

4. The community should recognize different community perspectives and interests.

5. The data analysis comes to the meeting with a 5-8 focus group of guides (or not-participants) who plan the plan.

6. The major problems are found in the data, or are the informal feedback.

7. What primary organizations or groups seem to be the most important?

8. What kinds of data are used in evaluation and decision making for the community?

9. What should the community do to respond to the problems?

10. What is different about our situation that actually makes the information summarized by the team and used to state the problem statement for the workshop.

The documentary video tape empha-

1. The case study reveals five prerequisites to community sur-

3. Develop a workable plan that treats problems and not symptoms.

4. Use available resources.

5. Community members must have the determination to do the job, and devote volunteer time to seeing the job done.

With these five elements, a community can succeed. If citizens are willing, almost any problem can be overcome. The greatest limitation in any community is the people.

The conceptual framework
Community problems can be effec-

The framework of this study, identified real life applications of the concept, and provided the organizing framework for the workshop.

This framework gives community teams a tool they can systematically apply to their own problems. The problems can be diagnosed for similar problems within the community, and the framework could be useful in analyzing and assisting communities in their efforts to overcome problems.

The framework describes the nature of the project, its purpose, and the sequence of activities.

The framework of the study, identified real life applications of the concept, and provided the organizing framework for the workshop.

The case study reveals five prerequisites to community survival and growth:

1. It is possible to provide a productive workshop on economic development.

2. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

3. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

4. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

5. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

6. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

7. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

8. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

9. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.

10. The model is useful as a tool for analyzing the problem.
The action planning process
This process was designed to produce strategies for action by the end of the workshop. Community teams have been taken through pre-workshop activities, goal-setting exercises, and organizing approaches. At each step, the teams address their own problems, and to receive input from trainers and participants. Two subject matter sessions during the workshop give specific information on strategies for dealing with economic recovery and social stress.

Tillamook County, Oregon Action Plan
Short Term Goal: Update the Economic Development Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short Term Action</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Who Information Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Expand membership</td>
<td>June 30</td>
<td>County Commissioners, Existing Economic Dev. Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hold meeting</td>
<td>Aug. 1</td>
<td>Present Economic Dev. Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Develop needs and goals</td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>Present committee and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Write update</td>
<td>Nov. 1</td>
<td>New Economic Dev. Team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Homer, Alaska Action Plan
Goal: Promote Bottom Fish Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Strategies</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Who</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Meeting of interested parties</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>Industry, fishermen, local leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Appoint task force with cross section</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Survey industry</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Local fishermen, outside companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Survey markets</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Survey transportation needs</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Educate interested parties</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Alaska Fish/Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Implement public/private partnership</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Task force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bloomfield, New Mexico Action Plan
Goal: Form a core leadership for the "Bloomfield 1990" committee
Action: Organize informational meeting and seminar March 27, 1984.
Method: Bring statistics on current situation and possible solutions.
Who will be involved: This committee (the community team), Extension Specialist, other community leaders.
Information/resources needed: Statistics, video tape of Roswell, resource people.

Community outcomes
Follow-up in over one-third of the parties on an earlier mission used for rapid growing in business.

New Mexico
Following a workshop in Bloomfield, the community team from Bloomfield developed an agenda, made presentations, and acted as workshop facilitators. Although the state economic development specialist was invited to participate, team members felt the skills and knowledge they acquired at Bloomfield prepared them for active leadership and involvement in their own economic development activities. The community has initiated and successfully completed a clean-up campaign, and newly designed and installed information signs are beginning to attract passing tourists.

Montana
A team that was unable to participate in the Butte workshop found it valuable for the community to develop a cooperative approach.

The WallaWallah County team took advantage of what they learned at the workshop and prepared several activities to expand current economic development efforts. The team suggested a focus on retail trade analysis, and a county-wide sample survey to assess the public's views on economic development issues. Cooperative Extension and outside consultant provided technical assistance, but community volunteers assumed major responsibility for survey design and implementation. Results are to be shared with the community and will be available to community groups and businesses who can take advantage of the information.

The three different county teams from Washington participated in the workshop. In each case, the workshop stimulated an active economic development council or task force. Skamania County's team initiated a planning grant proposal which, when funded and combined with in-kind contributions, provided the county with almost $35,000 for economic development planning. They have also conducted a random survey of 10% of the county's registered voters. The questionnaire, which achieved an 82% return, looked at citizens' shopping practices, industry preferences, public values, community goals, and employment preferences. The survey was designed and conducted by community volunteers, with the team assuming primary responsibility. A series of local workshops are planned to communicate survey results.

The Ferry County team left the workshop feeling they needed to focus on the county's economic base. The team made plans to attend the following workshops, that identified initial economic goals and strategies. The economic issues the community decided to initially address is public introduction in the downtown business district. In addition, the county and community had a history of funding a position to provide leadership to the county's economic development plan. This emerging "second-generation" awareness of social issues in association with economic development is an indicator of the changes that occur as a result of the workshop.

A small business education project has been stimulated in Raton. The project will begin with a workshop on "marketing for increased sales," "getting good help and working with people," and "making a computer pay for itself."
Conclusions

It has been the purpose of this paper to describe a team training model that the western region has found highly successful in helping rural citizens deal with the problems of community decline. As efforts are made to follow the progress of communities that participated in this program, there is increasing documentation that the model works, and that it shows considerable promise for even wider application. We credit this success to five factors:

• the synergy of the team approach
• the model's transferability
• the model's adaptability
• the multiplier effect potential
• trainer-team follow-up

Team synergy

Regardless of the type of community, or the size or degree of economic slowdown, at least 38 communities from 10 western states found both the content that was presented and the problem solving process applicable to their situations. Emphasis of the team concept with both trainers and participants stimulates a synergistic training mode which produces community action. The team method also makes it possible to apply an interdisciplinary perspective to problem-solving.

Prior to the development of this model, few educational programs in the west have been able to respond to the closely related social and economic aspects of economic decline.

Transferability

One of the strengths of the model is its potential transferability to other regions of the nation, to other community difficulties, or to different organizational problems. The team concept works well with any problem that has multiple dimensions, so that impacts a diverse population, because it involves a broad range of expertise. The action planning strategy is also applicable to other problems, and to achieving a usable product in a relatively short period of time. It makes both economic and social sense.

Adaptability

Another of the model's attributes is that it can expand or contract to accommodate a variety of circumstances. In Alaska, a two-day weekend session was tailored to meet the needs of business people and public officials who had to travel great distances to attend. The training model also proved versatile enough to accommodate more involvement from local resource people. There is a sufficient balance of subject matter and planning techniques to allow any participant or trainer to extend appropriate elements to other interested groups, even teams that were unable to participate in the workshop.

Multiplier effect

This well-tested Extension method of training local leaders, who in turn train other citizen groups, has proven to be an effective means of spreading educational information. In more than one instance, as a result of training a few community representatives, we observe the original participants acting as trainers for other groups. This may be partly attributable to peer pressure, but it is also due to the teams' "hands on" participation in an action planning process that has focused on real problems from their own communities. The availability of a "training material package" has also made the task more manageable at the community level.

Trainer follow-up

Without the potential for continuous support from an Extension specialist or field practitioner it is doubtful that community teams can sustain the workshop momentum for long. Where teams have had continuing contact with an Extension resource person, or some other strong community leader, there is evidence of greater local accomplishment. In the west, this has sometimes been facilitated through the resources of the Western Rural Development Center. Land grant universities have provided specialist support to team activities. Some teams have drawn heavily on local resource people with strong technical expertise, or enthusiastic public officials who see the value of continued team support.

References


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