



Communities Achieving
Responsive Services

Fact Sheet #5

Leadership Succession

Although Operational Leaders are essential to community mobilization, action must be owned by the community and not by the Operational Leaders. The most effective test of strong leadership is the ability for a community to continue with action even when there is a change in leadership, whether that change is in Community or Operational Leadership. Many great initiatives have been lost when communities did not think about or plan ahead for such change. Leadership change is inevitable – the issue is not **if** leadership change will occur but **when** leadership change will occur. The CARS process helps communities be proactive by helping them concretely plan for a change in leadership.

You may be comfortable, and perhaps familiar, with the concept of Leadership Succession Planning when talking about businesses or large organizations. But few of us think of Leadership Succession Planning when we are involved in collaborations or collective community efforts? After all, we are usually talking about energetic volunteers, creative community partners and loosely held relationships. In our experience, people frequently talk about “good things happening in good places by good people” when they think of successful community initiatives. CARS reaches beyond this explanation of success to concrete actions such as developing a common collective vision, stated common values, goals and objectives and a facilitative rather than directive approach to leadership. Those involved in the CARS process have a plan for community action. With some deliberate preparation, that plan can sustain itself through many changes in leadership. Remember, leadership is a learned skill.

Steps in Leadership Succession Planning

Leadership succession planning really involves four steps:

1. Assessing your Group/Organization
2. Assessing your Leaders
3. Developing skills in other members of your group
4. Creating a concrete action plan for the replacement of present CARS Leaders

All four steps will take some concentrated effort to accomplish and will have to be revisited regularly in the course of your group’s progress. CARS training will show you how to incorporate these steps into other natural planning processes, like building action plans, longer term strategic plans or plans for recruitment of volunteers. You will gain these skills as we move further into the CARS process. For now, it is enough to explore these four steps and to think about how naturally they could fit into the steps of the CARS process.

Assessing your Group/Organization

Over the course of developing the CARS resources we have reflected on the departure of both Operational and Community Leaders in our own communities and in the communities that worked with us to develop these resources. What we have come to realize is that those communities who weathered the change in leadership did not necessarily have similar leaders – they instead had another key similarity – a strong sense of purpose defined by a common community vision and a clear action plan.

The first step in leadership succession planning is to ensure your group has a clear written vision, values, goals and objectives and an action plan that will keep you progressing forward. To ensure clarity, this information needs to include a description of the three “R’s” of organizational culture – roles, responsibilities and relationships.

Assessing your Leaders

Step Two in the leadership succession planning process involves some investigative work. Step Two involves getting to really know your leaders? Here are just some of the questions you might entertain as you assess the leaders of your group:

- Do you know what makes your present leaders good leaders?
- What skills do they bring to the table?
- What attributes do you admire?
- What kind of leadership do they provide?
- How many people are involved in the leadership of your group?
- What are the assets and needs of the present group leaders?
- How will this reflect on future recruitment of future group leaders?

Developing Skills in Members of Your Group

Everyone has the potential to assume a leadership role in their community. Everyone can contribute to the leadership process and towards achieving the goals of the group. Step Three in the leadership succession planning process involves ensuring that all members of the group have an opportunity to lead – even if for a moment. It is important to take an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach to leadership in the CARS process. Remember, leaders are found in the strangest of places! Consider these questions:

- Do you rotate roles such as chairing meetings or taking minutes?
- Do you have an inventory of the assets of your participants?
- Do you provide skill and development opportunities for all members of your group?
- Do your present leaders mentor other people in your group?
- Do you recognize and reward developing leadership?

Creating a Plan for replacement, when necessary, of Leaders

The final step in leadership succession planning is to take all the information gathered in the first three steps and use it to write a concrete, step by step plan that can be followed if a change in leadership occurs.

As we work through the steps of the CARS process we will return to leadership succession planning in more concrete ways. For now, Rural Voices, CARS Training Resource is food for thought.

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