

# our most neglected resources are human

---

R. L. Reeder

As community development continues to grow in its importance to rural areas, and as practitioners multiply in various agencies, it's puzzling that we continue to neglect our people resources in resource development. Extension's code books are likely to list 25 computer numbers under community resource development, all the way from air pollution to wildlife, but you'll be lucky to find any numbers at all for getting people together to work on their problems. Our workshops deal interminably with planning, zoning, public finance, energy and pollution, water and soil, emergency health services, but scarcely a word about how people work together to meet such problems.

---

**We'll have to be able to stand aside and view our own behavior in the group as objectively as we can, so we won't intrude on the right of others to have the great adventure of discovery in the wonderland of human behavior.**

---

## No Cure-All

Almost two decades ago, rural sociologists produced the much-needed pattern of the social action process.<sup>1</sup> We in Extension grabbed what looked like a simple recipe for success and dismissed the sociologists. We didn't wait for them to tell us it wasn't a universal cure-all. We found it useful in getting adoption of what we wanted done.

Now it's time to begin listening to the sociologists again, not to ask how to get people to do what we want, but how to get people to work together to get what they want in their communities. It won't be enough to make surveys and devise questions for the computer about the bulk views of people on their physical community problems. Finding that 37% want area planning, 37% don't want it, and 26% don't care may help us design better workshops for the natural sciences. It's not telling us enough about the human resource side.

A long time ago, True Morse, before he was undersecretary for rural area development, said, "People are the most

---

*R. L. Reeder: Associate Professor of Agricultural Information and Information Specialist of Community Development, Cooperative Extension Service, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.*

---

important asset of any area.”<sup>4</sup> He didn’t mean because they could answer questionnaires on community problems. He meant because they could work together and do something about those problems.

## **Need People Development**

Our inattention in Extension is more in deed than in word. We talk about cooperation, organization, leadership, and group decision making. Our meeting speakers have nice phrases, such as “the essence of community resource development is creating groups to make decisions” and “it’s necessary to develop effective groups of people to implement various community improvements.” Yet when we get down to the nitty gritty, we start again describing the physical improvements we want, or relating success stories about physical resources we have developed, rather than boasting about people improvement.

Our national and state programs are overcrowded with authorities on the specifications and regulations for success with physical resources, stuff we’ll have to get later out of a handbook anyway. Meanwhile, most of us are fidgeting nervously, hoping to get into the corridors to talk with our peers about our problems in the organization of human resources.

---

**We talk about cooperation, organization, leadership, and group decision making . . . . Yet when we get down to the nitty gritty, we start again describing the physical improvements we want, . . . rather than boasting about people involvement.**

---

Program planners say, “Oh, we’ll take care of that by putting some local people on the program.” Then we ask them to give case study reports of success in getting the retirement home, recreation area, new industry, or regional planning. We don’t ask for reports about success or failure in getting groups to work together for community decision making. It would seem that such people would break out occasionally on their own and talk about the human side of development, but they never do. Perhaps it’s because we don’t know how to ask them. More likely though, there’s a kind of social taboo against describing what we’ve come to regard as people manipulation.

Sometimes we nod in the human resource direction by saying on the program that “a discussion period will follow” (the talk is on physical resources, of course). Or we may say, “Now it’s your turn to respond and we’ll turn the program back to you.” Such comments usually come about 3:30, at the end of a day of speeches when “unfortunately we’re running behind schedule,” and anyone who wants to start things up again runs the risk of being drummed out of the

conference. Another ploy is to have small groups take off by themselves (again to talk about what they've heard on physical resource problems). They're to settle in 35 minutes or 35 words, for reporting back to the general group, some problems that have been unsettled for years.

Yet, in spite of our attempts at failure, occasionally a small group or a general group comes up with something constructive, thoughtful, and important.<sup>3</sup> Why? How could this come about? What happened in the group, or what happened to an individual in the group that shed new light on a worn-out subject? How could one small group out of the dozens you sit with each year produce a product that seems worthwhile? This is the kind of thing we ought to be trying to find out instead of what percentage of approval we got for our ideas. It's like the baseball scout who called the manager excitedly to report that he'd found a young pitcher who threw a one-hitter. "Never mind him," the manager shouted back, "find out about the guy who got the hit."

### People Just Talking

One of these days we'll have to begin breaking down the barrier to open discussion about these human problems in community resource development. A breakthrough may have started already in a little workshop at Colorado State University, quietly moving the last five summers under the direction of a team of sociologists and economists.<sup>4</sup>

Some of those who have been through the workshop regard it as the best experience of their training programs in community development. Some regard it as two weeks of extreme frustration. Some leave after a few days with clenched fists and minds. A few who drop by as curious visitors for a day report that "nothing is going on here—just people sitting around talking." Some get hooked on what's happening and stay a while.

One of the latter was Ray Vlasin, chairman of resource development at Michigan State, who dropped by for a quick look and escape enroute to Vail for a national meeting. He didn't get away fast enough. He had stepped into a circle of people so intent on their discussion that they didn't notice him. They were hard after their experiences in the use of conflict versus cooperation in development. After half an hour, he found himself talking as part of the group, and asked if he could join one of the small groups in the afternoon. There he took part in an unplanned seminar on the question about manipulation of people, questions that had been roused during the morning about use of "power" in a community.

"I guess if this kind of thing has been happening, I should have been here all the time," Ray said. Then he added wistfully, "They were so engrossed in their discussion that they let me pitch in without ever asking who I was."

## People Resources

Vlasin may have come close to stating a reason why the workshop has had a rough time explaining its philosophy—that the people who attend are a competent resource. Some administrators question a program that has no speeches by local or national authorities on community resource development. Even some of the participants are horrified that no hour-by-hour schedule is handed to them when they arrive. They are certain that hidden agendas exist somewhere and devote precious time to searching for them. Admittedly, it's upsetting to most of us to attend a workshop expecting to get the tablets of stone handed down, only to find that we brought them with us.

"Come on now," a disgruntled participant grumbled about the third day. "These guys expect us to come up with something important to them. Somebody expects us to prove something."

## Community Laboratory

Our laboratory was a nearby community, Wellington, and we thought maybe the people of that community expected us to help them solve their problems. We asked Wilson Leeper what his community expected. "Frankly," he said succinctly, "not a damned thing."

Pressure for answers kept building. We've become so accustomed to getting and giving pat answers that we expect some for our workshop money. We demand a formula, a recipe we can follow step by step to success. Yet we really know that community development isn't that kind of business. Public policy isn't that kind of business. Most of the things we do in Extension that require working with people aren't that kind of business. Yet our search goes on for that formula or that magician who can say the magic words.

## Open Sesame

Much of the pressure for answers at the workshop fell on the Colorado team, and particularly on Coordinator Don Sorensen and Consulting Sociologist Glenn Dildine. It was about even money after a week that they'd have to recognize this and structure the remaining time. There seemed almost unanimous support for the idea that these two men must tell us what they wanted us to accomplish for them, for the laboratory community, or for just anybody.

Suddenly in one of the small groups, a young participant went to the board and started drawing lines and writing words. "It's just hit me," he said, "that Dildine and Sorensen can't tell me what I'm here to do because they don't know. People in the Wellington community aren't going to get me to solve their problems in two weeks. I'm here to take a look at myself and my problems in working with people. Maybe you and the people of Wellington can help me with this, but I have to go after it myself. It's up to me."

Gradually it came to some of the rest of us that he'd said it well, and that we too should begin to look around at the individuals and the groups who made up the workshop. If none of us really believed in the "myth of the born leader,"<sup>5</sup> then we must believe that the potential for leadership was right here in the individuals of the workshop. Each of us was something of an expert at being a human being, and we'd just watched a young man take a piece of chalk and become a leader of a group because he had a new idea.

If a workshop group could produce this kind of miracle, then what were the limitations on the individuals and groups here or in our home situations? We were trying in our groups to multiply our knowledge and competence by working together. By leaving the door open to the ideas of each individual, we were making it possible to share ideas without any compulsion to accept them. As do our home communities, Wellington had its working committees—its town meeting, citizen advisory committee, planning committees, and even a women's committee to put out a local newspaper.

## Community of Groups

As we looked around the workshop, we found that it, too, in its short life, had become a community of groups. First, there was the general group that met each morning. We found that total-group concern was very difficult to establish here, just as total-community concern is difficult at home. It takes time, more time in a large group, for the leadership with total concern to emerge and open the doors to others. Simple honesty with each other comes harder as the group size increases, the kind of honesty that lets us discuss the anatomy of failure as well as success. There's more reluctance in the large group to be patient and let each person have his say, to listen with compassion, yet continue to be ourselves as individuals.

It was easier in the small group to watch each other grow. One of our group members had come with a chip on his shoulder about a program of his that had been rejected at home, and each day he tried to get the rest of us to help carry his banner. Finally I broke in with a thought of my own on a different subject, which brought immediate response from a more tolerant group member.

"Why are you breaking into his talk?" she asked me. "Are you trying to let him know that you're tired of listening to his comments?"

"Well, yes," I answered. "I guess I was trying to get across the idea that the subject was worn out."

"We may be tired of it," she said, "but if we turn him off, how do we know we won't lose his other competence as a valuable human resource? Don't we face this kind of thing in all community groups? At least he can help us find better

ways of coping with a similar situation when we get home—maybe keep us from unknowingly making an enemy.”

Then we openly discussed with him why he kept pounding the same note, what could be done in a community group if such a problem existed. I knew then that the group had come of age. We could get things into the open, put them on the table where we could view them clinically together rather than as embattled individuals. He said he'd learned something about leadership and we'd all learned again the value of listening.

Of course, not all groups were able in two weeks to reach such a peak of empathy. In fact, one of the groups gave up entirely on itself, reporting back at the end that it was unable to reach any kind of understanding about what it could accomplish. In a way, this was unfortunate for those in the group, but it was honest and showed how well the laboratory experience matched that of communities in which we work, where there have been groups that disbanded—or worse didn't disband—without accomplishment.

*After-Hours  
Groups*

Not to be overlooked, of course, were the after-hours groups that met informally at and after meals. What happens between formal meetings is as important to a workshop group as it is in the life of a community. People who have been quite difficult to understand one day will suddenly the next day become quite clear because they've moved toward our point of view or we toward theirs. We inquired into such mysteries quite openly in our group, asking who got together last evening and what did you decide? Almost always there had been a compromise session of some kind over a beer or pizza that could explain some of the events of the next day.

*Women's  
Groups*

Particular excitement came from the unscheduled formation of a separate women's group to look into the leadership role of women in the laboratory community. This made them suspect to some of the men who couldn't imagine an open revolt against male leadership. It turned out that they found something of importance to the workshop. The women of the Wellington community had formed a social group that was putting out a local newspaper, thereby not only having their say, but a place to say it. Our women's group had engaged in logical inquiry and brought back valuable information, as human resources should. It may all have been a portent of things to come, both in workshops and communities.

*Power  
Structure*

Another group to be understood in any workshop or any community is the so-called power structure. In our case it was the Colorado team of workshop staff—Sorensen, Dildine, and Dale Pfau. Their group and its member attitudes changed

as did other groups during the two weeks. It's a difficult job, just as it is in a community where the leaders must come under constant public scrutiny. Such a group must be able, not only to observe behavior of other groups, but be able to back off and look at itself in relation to the workshop.

## Reunion

This came out most forcefully last spring at a reunion in Arizona of some of the summer workshop participants. It was a new experience to staff as well as participants, and no one knew what to expect. Would the 22 who returned want to build some total-group identity or return to their small group environment? How much review of the summer experience would be helpful? What problems had we found at home that related to the summer workshop? We found:

First, we wanted to get back and share experiences in the small groups.

Second, our experience in sharing, in listening, in two-way communication wasn't easily accepted in a community accustomed to vertical communication.

Third, time was more a factor than we'd expected.

Fourth, we weren't as interested in a review of the summer as we were in planning ahead how to get horizontal communication working at home.

---

**If we truly believe that we can best do our Extension job by finding and developing the competence of people in our communities, if we believe inquiry and innovation are important to the educational process, then how do we fit our new key into the old locks?**

---

## Meanings of the Workshop

Those of us who have taken part in the Western regional workshops believe they give us a key to some of the communication problems in our home communities. That key, however, may need some careful smoothing and turning before we rush in with it, expecting to break the headlock of many years of one-way communication. If we truly believe that we can best do our Extension job by finding and developing the competence of people in our communities, if we believe inquiry and innovation are important to the educational process, then how do we fit our new key into the old locks?

1. We'll need to regard ourselves as a part of the community team, ready to share competencies needed for the sake of the total community.
2. We'll know that we must earn our way onto that team, not according to our rules, but according to those determined by the team.
3. Leadership, whether learned by us or by others among our clientele, must walk the narrow line between being too indecisive and too structured.

That means some vertical communication must be carefully mixed with horizontal communication.

4. Two-way communication (horizontal) must be as well-planned and intentional as the one-way (vertical). This means it will become as much a goal of the group as any other goal.
5. We must be willing to accept the new leadership that comes as we choose to let new leaders appear because they can express their new ideas.
6. We'll have to be as willing to accept new ideas that result from report of failure, with its concomitant honesty, as those from success.
7. We'll have to be able to stand aside and view our own behavior in the group as objectively as we can, so we won't intrude on the right of others to have the great adventure of discovery in the wonderland of human behavior.

### Footnotes

1. G. M. Beal and J. M. Bohlen, *Construct for Social Action* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1960).
2. T. D. Morse *et al.* *Report on Randolph County Rural-Urban Development Program* (St. Louis: Doane Agricultural Service, Inc., 1953).
3. R. L. Reeder, *Rural Development Field Notes* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University, 1972).
4. D. M. Sorensen and S. K. Oakleaf, *Interpretive Report of the Fifth Annual National Workshop on Community Resource Development* (Fort Collins: Colorado State University, 1971).
5. G. M. Beal, J. M. Bohlen, and J. N. Raudabaugh, *Leadership and Dynamic Group Action* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1962).