

Leadership and Engagement: *Tools for Natural Resource Organizations*

Natural resource organizations include county forestry associations, wildlife organizations, prescribed burn associations, garden clubs, “Friends of” organizations, and many other groups interested in Mississippi’s environmental landscape. Many have strong leadership and participation; however, like other volunteer groups across the nation, some struggle to remain viable and are in need of assistance in organizational development.

Encouraging participation is often a challenge regardless of the factors involved. Still, there may be a silver lining according to recent research. Participation in voluntary organizations has tended to be greater in small communities, for people who feel they are empowered to affect change, and for people who are asked to be active in an organization (Smith, 1994). Participation depends on whether or not individuals perceive they are making a difference, and if they are gaining an educational experience, staying active, and fellowshiping (Ryan et al., 2001).

As an aspect of participation, leadership development is based on the perspective of “bottom-up transformation fueled by shared power and community building” (Sandmann and Vandenberg, 1995). This perspective emphasizes development of leadership in community. As such, individuals are empowered to take leadership roles by thinking about local assets, building partnerships, and taking actions toward addressing issues not only that affect a particular interest group, but that impact local society (Wilkinson, 1991). We call this *community development*.

Natural resource organizations must remember that leadership is an ongoing process that is a part of community development. As such, leadership and organizational activities should be addressed at regular intervals, say once or twice per year. This can take place during the meeting to plan the program. These regular meetings help define and focus the group’s activities and purpose. Here, we provide several points to remember when addressing leadership in your organization. For more detailed information, you and your organization can access the references cited with each activity.

Identify and prioritize the issues: Issue-based leadership and community development are important tools when seeking to encourage member engagement. This is important because in order for community development to become sustainable, it must foster the building of relationships and the strengthening of community. A leadership meeting should facilitate discussion among participants about the situations they would most want to improve or change. The issues should be ranked in order of importance to the group. Leaders need to consider the group’s capacity for addressing the issues and maintaining engagement when ranking and prioritizing issues (Garkovich, 2009).

Identify assets and resources: Meeting participants must learn to look at the resources that are available in their local community or region. An asset identification process lets participants know where to look for resources and how to gain a different perspective on local human, natural, built, and institutional resources (Beaulieu, 2002). For example, participants can identify a local lawyer or accountant who may provide information, or seek alternative spaces to hold programmatic events.

Build capacity through partnerships: Partnerships between community organizations can strengthen both the communities and the individual organizations. Each organization in the community brings unique skills and experiences to the table. Natural resource leaders should consider partnerships with media, schools, churches, and other local organizations (Theodori, 2009).

Engage local leaders: Organizations can develop a communication strategy to engage local elected leaders. Leaders and organization members should identify possible partners, resources, and strategies for building these relationships. Participants need to determine which organizations and individuals might have shared interest in selected issues and invite these potential supporters to the meetings. Regardless of whether or not they attend, local elected leaders should be on the mail list and invited to each general meeting (Theodori, 2009).



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Resolve conflict: Natural resource organizations should have conflict resolution plans in place, such as ground rules, consensus building strategies, and weighted voting processes. This is important for conflicts that emerge within the group as well as outside of the group. It is important to note that conflict is not necessarily bad; in fact, it is vital to the functioning of a group. However, the ways of handling conflict are often where group relations are either strengthened or weakened (Hustedde, 1995).

Create an action plan: Depending on the issues discussed in the leadership development meeting, the issues, assets, partners, and strategies should be incorporated into an annual or semiannual action plan. The action plan can include topics for scheduling regular meetings, educational events, and other activities. In addition, the action plan should include the organization's purpose and mission, goals, and objectives. A clear discussion about the organization's values is critical in developing the action plan. Individual responsibilities should be clearly defined and deadlines should be determined for each activity (Theodori, 2009).

Evaluate: An evaluation should be made to assess successes and challenges associated with each activity outlined in the action plan. An open discussion is important for adequately dissecting the activities and determining accountability. The evaluation process is often overlooked when implementing group work or community development efforts. However, it is vital to the continued engagement and success of an organization because it allows groups to determine progress and adjust strategies as needed. Groups should develop performance measures when developing an action plan (Theodori, 2009).

Conclusion

Resident-led natural resource organizations are critical to the sustainable use and management of Mississippi's natural resources. The leadership of these organizations must continuously be enriched and developed to maintain their strength and vigor.

Toward this end, we propose a community-building approach whereby leaders can institute several techniques within their organizations to better accomplish goals and objectives. Please contact an MSU Extension leadership specialist for further assistance in improving your organizational and leadership development.

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