Moving From Talk to Action

GETTING STARTED

Issues in communities are complex and long-term solutions are difficult to craft. A wide range of people need to be involved in identifying the problem and developing the solution, but it can be hard for folks to decide what to do first. When a group doesn't seem able to move forward and "do something," people become frustrated, energy dissipates, and nothing is accomplished. Many groups need to know how to "get off the dime" and act. People get tired of all talk and no action.

On the other hand, some efforts to meet urgent challenges tend to leap into action without adequate planning. Original enthusiasm can give way to confusion and conflict resulting from unanticipated circumstances. Therefore it is also important for people to be able to agree on the problem, unifying vision, and a strategy for action that enables them to revise their plans mid-course to respond to unanticipated events and tensions.

HOW TO "DO SOMETHING"

Module Seven is designed to give participants the tools to confront both these dilemmas: planning without action and action without planning. Figuring out what to do and where to start are key leadership skills. This module equips participants with techniques a group can use to undertake meaningful work to address a community issue.

Solutions to complex problems are not developed and implemented in a single day. Leaders learn to keep one eye on the far horizon and another on the sidewalk in front of them. To make significant progress addressing a community issue, leaders need to understand three phases of moving from planning to action:

❶ Finding a Starting Point
❷ Mapping the Journey
❸ Revising the Course En Route

> The content in Module Seven is based on the work of MDC, Inc., a private, nonprofit economic and workforce research organization based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

FINDING THE STARTING POINT

The most important things to pack on a journey are the things that point you in the right direction and help you find your way back home if you become lost. In a journey of community change, the values underlying your efforts and the vision of how your community can and ought to be are what will help you sustain the journey. The skills that the participants have been developing in the *LeadershipPlenty Training Program*—understanding group dynamics, managing conflict, making decisions, and creating partnerships—will stand them in good stead as they start planning specific efforts to improve their communities.

Defining the values that they share is an important first step for any group taking action together. Shared values are the basic assumptions that guide the work the group is doing. For example, a collaborative that is trying to support working families identifies the following shared values:

❶ All children need safe places to learn and grow.

❷ Parents of all income levels should have access to quality childcare.

❸ A community that invests in children and family is strengthening its social and economic future.

Articulating shared values helps the group focus on what matters most in its community and its change efforts. Once citizens have clarified their common purpose, they must agree on where to start. For example, the effort to support working families collects information about juvenile arrests and substance abuse. The group learns that the late afternoons when youth are out of school are the times when most juvenile crimes are committed and also when young people are most likely to engage in risky behavior such as sexual activity and experimentation with alcohol and drug use. The group decides that making after-school programs available to every parent in the community would be a crucial part of a solution to help working families.

MAPPING THE JOURNEY

Starting affordable after-school programs in every school in the community is not the work of a single day. The next thing that the group needs to do is to identify mile markers to chart its progress in achieving what it wants to achieve. Identifying mile markers involves setting specific goals, developing strategies to meet these goals, and including the people that need to be included to ensure that the strategy will be effective.

For example, the group sets the goal that within a year it will design and implement pilot after-school programs in two neighborhoods where working families are most in need

of this service. Group members will gather information about designing after-school programs and seek support and input of key stakeholders such as parents, the school system administrators, youth-service providers, law enforcement, and the students themselves.

Mapping the journey allows leaders to monitor realistic progress toward their goals. After a year of concentrated efforts to help working families, this group may feel that providing accessible and affordable after-school activities remains a serious challenge. However, it can point to its mile markers to clarify what it is accomplishing and that progress is being made. The group can celebrate the opening of its first two after-school programs and develop strategies to expand the service to more neighborhoods.

REVISING THE COURSE EN ROUTE

Community change efforts are complex and involve diverse constituencies, shifting funding sources, and volatile political climates. Most plans need some revision once they move from the conference room to the real world. Moving from planning to action demands flexibility.

For example, the group starting the after-school program had initially planned to focus on recreational and arts activities, rather than academic programs. The group had developed a partnership with the Parks and Recreation Department and several arts organizations to provide a wide range of enrichment activities that did not relate directly to the school curriculum.

However, in the same year that the collaborative was planning the pilot programs, the schools in the community came under pressure to improve student test scores because of statewide performance mandates. Once the after-school programs had started in two schools, the school system became very interested in the programs as a strategy to provide remedial instruction to students that were most at-risk of not performing well on standardized tests. In light of this new development, the collaborative then needed to re-evaluate its strategy to decide how to respond to new challenges and opportunities.

The above example illustrates the challenge that faces leaders. Their implementation plans must be specific—and here's the catch—provisional. There are no quick fixes and easy answers. Moving from talk to action demands flexibility and inventiveness. However, as a group revises its plans, it does so with the knowledge that it is still moving in the direction laid out by its shared values and common purpose.

Module Seven equips participants with tools to chart their course from talk to action by articulating shared values, establishing mile markers, and remaining flexible once the journey is underway.