

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

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Working with Community Leaders

Background

Identifying and working with community leaders can be extremely beneficial when promoting conservation through locally-led and watershed planning activities. It is even more crucial when working with underserved communities that have not previously worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The advantage of working with a community leader is that you will be working with someone who has already earned the community's trust. Gaining the community's trust will be a major hurdle for you to overcome. In some instances, it can take a period of months if not years for you to earn a community's trust. Identifying the right person/leader to work with you can help decrease the length of time it takes to accomplish your goals. The danger of not working closely with a community leader is he/she can easily hamper your efforts.

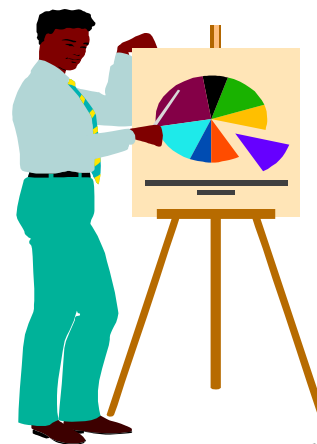
Leaders tend to stand out from other community members. Remember, the public is only marginally involved in most issues. Only about 5 percent of community members are directly involved in decision making and not even all of these people are community leaders.

Indicators based on research suggest that leaders might possess some, but certainly not all, of the following characteristics: good at giving instructions, empathetic, talkative, persistent, self-confident, popular, and original/creative.

Methods of Identification

The first step in identifying a community leader is to consult with agencies and organizations who have successfully worked with the community. These organizations may include small farmer cooperatives, churches, county Extension Service, other USDA agencies, and land-grant universities. The Conservation District and Resource Conservation and Development board members are typically leaders themselves and they can be a source of information. They also can lead you to community leaders or to people who can help you determine who the leaders are in the community.

There are four traditional methods to identify a community leader. The methods are position, reputation, event analysis, and social participation. While the methods of identification are the same for traditional and non-traditional communities, the examples have been customized for small underserved communities.



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In the **position method**, you identify people in authority. In small communities the local government officials may be mayors, sheriffs, or school board representatives. Keep in mind that all leaders do not have to be in positions of authority and this method fails to identify informal leaders such as respected elderly community members, parents, coaches, and athletes.

In the **reputation method**, you are looking for those members of the community who are the most respected. Different racial and cultural groups more than likely will identify someone from their group as a leader. It is unwise to ask someone from a majority group to identify a minority leader. Simply ask about five community members who they feel are “the three most respected people in the community.” When you begin to hear the same names repeated you will know that these people are the leaders in this particular community.

In the **event analysis method**, leaders are those persons who most actively influence specific community decisions. Some people more consistently influence decisions by actively pursuing decisions they consider to positively influence the community.

The **social participation** method entails finding those persons who occupy positions of authority in the greatest number of organizations such as heads of community-based organizations. One example would be a person who is all of the following: District Supervisor, Rotary club officer, treasurer in the Veterans of Foreign Wars, church deacon, local president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and a member of the local school board.

For more information about the Social Sciences Institute, contact:

Frank Clearfield, Director
Social Sciences Institute
North Carolina A&T State University
Charles H. Moore Building, A-35
Greensboro, NC 27411
(336) 334-7058
clearf@ncat.edu

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The Importance of the Community Leader

You want to identify a leader with outstanding community leadership traits. He/she should want to work toward positive change in the community. He/she should be able to work with other people, encourage others, plan work, conduct meetings, bring forth new ideas, find resources, speak out for the community, seek information, listen attentively, and most importantly, persistently work on behalf of the community.

Once you have identified the leader(s) which you want to move forward with, the very crucial next step is to develop a strategy to help that person(s) understand and support natural resource management issues. Be prepared when you meet with the leader to educate the individual about how NRCS can provide services and resources that can improve the community's quality of life. Ultimately, you want that leader to serve as a spokesperson, a catalyst for change, and a bridge for you to establish a positive and productive working relationship with the whole community.

What Do You Want the Leader To Do?

1. Ensure that the leader buys into your plan by being available to answer questions, visiting successful farms, and establishing trust (refer to Gaining Trust with Small Farmers fact sheet)
2. Persuade him/her to adopt conservation practices and systems
3. Encourage the leader to host demonstrations, take farmers to farms with conservation plans, and share visual information such as pictures and videos
4. Sponsor group meetings
5. Be available to speak at official and unofficial community gatherings
6. Provide testimonials
7. Introduce you to other community leaders
8. Participate in locally-led and area-wide activities
9. Become acquainted with the Conservation District and Resource Conservation and Development board members
10. Provide you with feedback on your activities