

Strengthening Community Resiliency

Part Four: Mobilizing Community Action

By John Franz and Jessica Franz-Christensen

Part One of this series presented an overview of the theories of individual and family resiliency. Part Two described the newly emerging concept of community resiliency. Part Three documented three direct service models human service agencies can use to sustain or restore resiliency in a community. In our concluding article, we offer a snapshot of participative community resiliency in action.

Searching for a community-based solution

Apollina Smith and Father Bob were worried about the farm families in Kenyon County. Changing markets, economics and technology were making it difficult for small farms to survive and the pressure was causing lots of trouble. They spent a long February afternoon brainstorming options. Initially they focused on the visible effects of the problem: family disruptions, youth misbehavior, and community tensions. But as they looked at the situation in more depth, they began to realize that the lives of the farm families were deeply entwined with the circumstances of the rest of the community and that an effective response would require a proactive effort by everyone involved, and not simply an increase in social services for those suffering the most visible harm.

Finally, inspired by a visit to Margie's House of Pie, they decided to bring together a group of people representing various aspects of the community to come up with a broad-based plan to help turn things around. The only problem was that they weren't sure whom to invite. We rejoin them a few days later. Apollina is still having trouble with the list and calls Bob for advice.

"Bob, I can either think of two or three people to include, or about a hundred. I know we don't want to make this into a town hall meeting, but I can't figure out how to cut the list to a manageable number. And once we get them into the room, I'm not sure what to say to them."

"Sounds like you need to get out of the office. Why don't you come out here to Oak Bluff? We can finish up the plan in the midst of all those farms we've been talking about."

Father Bob's fireside chat

The late February cold snap was continuing, but the sky was dark blue and the road was dry. As Apollina drove out to Father Bob's parish, the snow-covered fields were smooth and gleaming white under the bright sun. She pulled into St. Stephen's gravel parking lot and pulled around back to the cottage where Father Bob lived and had his parish office.

As soon as he opened the door, Apollina started running through the list she had been thinking about on her way there. “We need farmers, of course, and maybe a grocer, because they sell produce. And someone from ag extension....”

“Hello Apollina, it’s good to see you, too. Would you like some cider? I’ve got some warming on the stove.”

Apollina thought about how abrupt his entries to her office usually were and smiled. She hung up her coat and went into the study. Sitting in one of the ancient leather armchairs that were set on either side of the fireplace, she took a yellow pad out of her battered canvas briefcase and was working on the list when Bob came back into the room with two large mugs of cider and a plate of oatmeal cookies.

“I figure I have to keep the culinary theme of this project going,” he said, and took his place in the other chair. “Who have you got so far?”

Apollina showed him the pad, where she had only scribbled a few entries.

“That’s a good start,” Bob commented kindly. “Like you said on the phone this isn’t supposed to be a convention. We need 8 or 10 people with different perspectives who care about what’s going on and would be willing to do something about it. I’d add someone from the school district, because kids are missing classes to help out in the barn and besides, anything that’s going on at home usually ends up affecting the way the kids act at school. I think we also need some local businesses. Maybe we should include restaurants or food production companies. Oh, and I’ve already got one farm family lined up for this. Believe it or not, Matt Jones is ready to pitch in. It was his son getting into trouble that got me started on all this. But even with everything else that he’s got to deal with, he still wants to help out.”

“That’s amazing,” Apollina said, shaking her head. “But it sure ought to motivate the rest of us. It’s hard to imagine anyone else saying they’re too busy if he’s chipping in.”

Bob and Apollina worked on the list until they had 10 names they thought provided a good cross section of the community. As Bob got up to put another log on the fire he said, “This seems like a good start. We should try calling them right away. But first we need to figure out where to have the meeting.”

Apollina picked up another cookie and gesturing with it said, “How about Margie’s? The restaurant is usually closed on Monday nights, but I bet she’d let us use it for a meeting .”

When they called Margie she was not only happy to let them have the meeting at her restaurant, she immediately added herself to the list of participants. “I’ve been worrying about this for a long time. I’m glad someone’s finally getting the ball rolling.”

They got similar results as they used the afternoon to work their way through the rest of the list. Even when someone couldn’t come, that person would suggest a friend who

could represent a similar point of view. But they also found that everyone they spoke with had their own take on the issues.

After the last call, Apollina put down her cell phone and looked over at Bob. “Even though they all care about what’s going on, it’s going to take some work to get them on the same page,” she said thoughtfully. “Maybe to get things started, we should send out a short worksheet for them to fill out before they come to the meeting. We could ask them to answer three questions: what would they like to see happen, what do they definitely not want to happen, and what might they be able contribute.”

“Sounds like a start,” Father Bob said as he gathered up the mugs and dishes. “But we should ask them to share not only their individual perspectives, but also how other people from the groups they represent feel about these matters.”

The stakeholder model

Traditionally, businesses and organizations tried to deal with challenges internally, only inviting those individuals with a financial or other type of direct stake in the organization to participate in problem solving. This model is called the *shareholder* model and tends not to work well for complex situations. By only including shareholders in the decision-making process, the role of the community is diminished and community members feel disenfranchised. Therefore organizations and agencies have begun looking for better ways to incorporate community members in their decision-making processes. This new approach is called the *stakeholder* model. The stakeholder model includes representative viewpoints from a variety of community groups affected by a given organization’s actions or performance.¹

Apollina and Father Bob are working on solutions to their community’s challenge using a stakeholder model. They spent a great deal of time determining the guest list because they understood that constituent groups need to be properly represented for the stakeholder model to be effective. However, the stakeholder model goes beyond determining whom to invite to the table. It also requires that meetings be structured to help the participants move toward a collaborative solution. Apollina and Father Bob understand that to use the stakeholder model they will need to create opportunities to address multiple interests and support accountability and ownership for all of the parties involved.

Two different types of stakeholder models can be used, depending on the purpose of the meeting. If the question relates primarily to the operations of the sponsoring

¹ Websites that offer useful discussions of the differences between shareholder and stakeholder models and strategies for conducting a stakeholder planning process include a power point lecture posted by Sue Konzelmann Birkbeck at <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/manop/postgrad/CGLecture%205.pdf>, and a collection of resources posted by the Walden Asset Management Group at <http://www.waldenassetmanagement.com/social/topics/97114b.html>.

organization, a *corporate-centered* stakeholder model is followed. For example if Saturn, the automobile manufacturer, were trying to decide whether to replace part of their assembly line with a new type of robot, they might hold a meeting with a representative of each of their organizational stakeholders: management, assembly line workers, consumers, and so forth, to determine whether or not this replacement would be in the best interests of the company. In this scenario, while management might be able to show that the change could help the company's immediate bottom line, the group may come to realize that the resulting loss of human capital would far outweigh that benefit.²

If the purpose of the meeting Apollina and Father Bob are sponsoring was to help Apollina's agency decide what to do, they might use the corporate-centered model. But because they want to facilitate broader based action, they will use the alternative, *community-centered* stakeholder model. In this model the organization that sponsors the process plays the role of convener and participant along with all the other attendees, but the focus is on participation and shared stewardship.³ Solutions generated using this model are likely to require the participation and interaction of everyone at the meeting. The process should help all of the stakeholders see their community as a complex and interdependent ecosystem in which each group has a role and no one has problems in isolation.

When we apply this model, we realize that the difficulties being faced by Kenyon's family farms aren't theirs alone. Instead, through its expanded perspective it becomes easier to see that the same issues also affect other groups in Kenyon County. This model exposes the bi-directional, interwoven nature of the various elements that make up a community. For example, if the dairy farmers are struggling then the yogurt company that buys their milk probably is as well, and vice versa.

Apollina and Father Bob are using the community-centered stakeholder approach to help the participants not only gain a deeper insight into the larger challenges being faced by the community but also to find ways to help Kenyon successfully adapt to the new context in which it finds itself.

The Community-Centered Stakeholder Model in Practice

The night of the meeting Wisconsin was enjoying a taste of mid-March false spring. Several days of 50 and 60 degree weather had turned the snow-covered fields to mud, but everyone was happy to pretend that the cold weather was over. Apollina and Father Bob were at Margie's arranging chairs and tables and filling up pitchers with ice water. Margie had set out trays of treats and had a big urn of coffee ready. On one wall, Margie had a large white board that she used to post each day's menu and favorite quotations. As the stakeholders began to arrive, Apollina erased most of the board to use for taking

² Kochan, Thomas, and Saul Rubenstein (2000). Toward a stakeholder theory of the firm: The Saturn partnership. *Organization Science*, 11(4), 367-386.

³ Cf. Block, Peter (1996) Stewardship: Choosing service over self-interest. San Francisco; Berrett-Koehler.

notes at the meeting. However, she left Margie's quote of the day across the top. This one was from Charles Darwin: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is the most adaptive to change."

After the stakeholders had finished chatting and taken their seats, Apollina began. "We all know that Kenyon County is being challenged by changes in our country and the world. All of us are affected, but our family farms seem to be especially hard hit. And what hurts them hurts all of us. The question is, what are we going to do about it? For starters, I would like to go around the table and allot five minutes for each person to introduce him or herself and share their group's response to those questions we sent out. I will write everyone's group, name, job title, and ways that this community challenge is affecting them up on the menu chalkboard. Let's start with you, Father Bob."⁴

As the conversation progressed, each stakeholder introduced him or herself and presented their statement. Table 1 provides some examples of the notes Apollina was taking.

⁴ There are a variety of resources with ideas for facilitating collaborative planning meetings with a range of stakeholders, including Brillhart, J., Galanes, G., & Adams, K. (2001) *Effective group Discussion: Theory and practice*. New York: McGraw Hill, and McLagan, P. & Nel, C. (1995) *The age of participation*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Table 1 – Examples of Stakeholders’ Concerns

St. Stephen’s Catholic Church	Kenyon County Human Services	Ken Copp’s Grocery Store	Kenyon County High School	Margie’s Pie Shop	Wish to Work	Kenyon Family Farmers Association	The Kenyon Food Bank	Yodel’s Yogurt
Father Bob	Apollina	Ken	Mary	Margie	Carmen	Matt Jones	David	Jamie
Pastor	Director	Owner	Principal	Owner	Director	Family Farmer	Director	President
Parishioners under a lot of stress	Resources spread thin	Less local products available	Children missing school	Can no longer get local ingredients for pie fillings and menu items	More families utilizing resources	Can’t compete with big farms	Increased demand on food supply	Can no longer get local ingredients for his products
Parish losing good families as they move away	Lack of recognition	Higher prices for local products	Children distracted	Less customers at the diner	Less financial contributions	Labor, supplies and operations expensive	Less contributions to the food bank from farmers and food stores	Higher price for the local goods that are available
Hard to meet demands for counseling	Difficulty meeting the needs of everyone who is referred for help.	Must buy cheaper lower quality products from corporate farms	Children’s grades dropping	Worried about stability of the businesses on the square	Big need for drop in volunteers	Lack of health care	Family under stress	Must buy cheaper lower quality ingredients from corporate farms
Lack of recognition and support from the diocese	Concern about the welfare of children in the community	Worried about competition from big box stores in the cities	Families under pressure	Increasing violence in the school	Tougher to find job options for clients	Fear of losing home	People needing both staples and fresh food	Fewer people able to get help from their extended families
Wants people to pay attention to the needs of struggling families	Wants people to see what a difference they can make in children’s lives	Wants his store to be unique	Wants youth to feel connected with the rest of the community	Wants everyone to know how special Kenyon is	Wants employers to realize that her clients can be valuable resources for a business	Worried about wife and children	Wants no one to go hungry in Kenyon	Wants to prove that a local business can do well in today’s market

When everyone had presented their perspectives, Apollina said, “Now that we all know each other and have a greater understanding as to where each group is coming from, let’s start trying to develop some ways to turn these challenges into opportunities.”

Developing a workable plan

Stan Deetz believes that it is important to recognize that corporations and organizations are complex sites for public and political decision-making. In order to address every stakeholder’s concern, we must avoid voting, compromising, and accommodating and instead work on developing a collaborative action plan. However, he cautions that collaborative decision-making requires a high degree of participation.⁵

While brainstorming on solutions, it is important to remember not to censor ideas. Once the free flow of ideas is complete, then the group can work on developing a campaign from one or more of the ideas. The plan should be developed by all parties involved and maximize each party’s mission. Here, for example, is one thread of the conversation that evening:

“I think that several of our members would love the opportunity to work at your farm, Mr. Jones,” Carmen, the director of the supported work project, shouted out excitedly. “In fact, if we set it up right your farm could become a training ground for our members who want to learn some valuable job skills. That way they enter the job force with better training, you get in-expensive help, and Wish to Work gets a new and different site in which to coach people.”

“I’d be happy to be a job site for you, if you can work out the liability issues, and we definitely could use the extra help. But I’m afraid that even with cheaper labor there is no way that we can compete with the big farms. I don’t think their products are as good, but they cost less,” Matt replied in a discouraged tone.

“I know that this may sound dumb but I think people might pay more for local products if they knew they were locals,” said David from the food bank.

“You know you might be on to something. There are a lot of big name yogurts out there that have a lot more advertising dollars than I do and while I do have a following it would be nice to be able to differentiate Yodel’s from other yogurts,” Jamie exclaimed.

“I can’t be sure but I think the same might be true for some of my customers. Maybe if I put up signs that say which produce is locally grown, people will buy it even if it is pricier,” Ken replied cautiously.

⁵ Cf. Deetz, S. (1992) *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany: State University of New York; and Deetz, S. (1995) *Transforming communication, transforming business: Building responsive and responsible workplaces* (The Hampton Press Communication Series).

Mary, the principal of the local high school added the next idea to the mix. “Maybe what we need is a better way to market our entire community. We should play up our small town charm in everything we do, not just local products, though those are really important, but local events and camaraderie too. For example, the FFA kids love your farm, Mr. Jones. They come back from field trips saying that’s the way a farm is supposed to look. Now if we could get more people to realize how special our farms are,” she said with rising enthusiasm.

“We could have a Kenyon Harvest party at Matt’s farm,” Margie added, picking up on Mary’s lead. With games, and booths to sell local products, and a band. Of course we would pay you a fee for letting us have the event at your place and you might even want to set up a booth to sell some of your products. I could set up a booth to sell my pies and we might even be able to get some companies to sponsor it.”

“I’d chip in to sponsor an event like that,” Jamie from Yodel’s Yogurt offered.

“Okay so let me see if I am getting everything down,” Apollina said from the white board. Carmen will be in charge of building alliances with the farmers so that they can get some supplementary labor when they need it. That will give her more training sites, and her members will have work, feel useful, and get some great skills in the process. We also want to build a team to develop a marketing campaign promoting Kenyon’s local products and town spirit. We also want to develop a committee that maybe Jamie can be in charge of that finds businesses to support these local events and campaigns. Is that right so far?” Apollina asked.⁶

“So far so good, but you are forgetting about our needs,” Father Bob reminded Apollina. “We need help too. Our resources are stretched to the breaking point and our employees and volunteers are feeling stressed out and under appreciated.”

“Well, the Harvest Party should get people’s spirits up and the campaigns should help to alleviate some of the stresses placed on our organization,” Apollina replied.

“We could give out a volunteer of the year award at the Harvest Party and do other things to recognize the people and organizations that keep this community a wonderful place to grow up and grow old. In fact, there is a woman that has been volunteering at the high school for over a decade that I would like to nominate,” Mary said.

⁶ Apollina is suggesting strategies that include public will work, social marketing and cause marketing. Resources for more information on these innovative options include the Social Marketing Institute website at www.social-marketing.org; Andreasen, A. (ed.) (2000) *Ethics in Social Marketing*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press; the website of the Metropolitan Group, a marketing firm specializing in public will work, at www.metgroup.com; and also www.comunitopiaconsulting.com.

“It might be a good place for our organization to recruit volunteers and let others in the community know what great things we do,” chimed in David, the food bank director.

“I know a lot of my parishioners are stressed because they see their neighbors and friends in need and don’t know how to help. Maybe letting them know about some of the cool volunteer opportunities will make it easier for them to get involved,” Father Bob suggested.

“Many of my student’s classes have service learning components and this Harvest Party might be a great way to introduce them to some of the great not for profits in town,” Mary added.

“So,” Apollina said, “at the Harvest Party we’ll have booths selling local products, booths promoting organizations that need volunteers, an award presentation of ‘Kenyon County Volunteer of the Year,’ and ...”

“And a whole lot of fun, games, music, and dancing,” Margie interrupted. And for once she got the last word on Apollina Smith.

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