

COME TO THE TABLE: FORMING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS

By Rebecca Battle-Bryant

Serious events, problems and sometimes even opportunities bring people together. Plant relocation announcements, into or out of a community, can galvanize organizations and people into action, such as implementing a job transition center to aid those displaced by a plant closure or creating a workforce training plan to prepare potential employees for new jobs. Sometimes the challenge is bigger than the resources of any one organization or community and begs the question of how to engage collaborations in the form of community-wide partnerships or teamwork within organizations.

I had the privilege of exploring the process of developing and sustaining partnerships/teams in a research study of six rural community partnerships and actually participated in a seventh partnership in Orangeburg County. The study was conducted through a private grant funded by The Duke Endowment to create economic development success for communities.

Lessons learned from these partnerships provided insight into some fundamental truths regarding the components of collaboration needed in any community or organization. The phrase “come to the table” or “at the table” was used more than 225 times by 26 interviewees to describe the partnerships they created, maintained, and in some cases, sustained. Those phrases evoked images of a dining experience, which can vary depending on the setting and the diners.

Business, industry and economic development professionals represented in the study asked what they could do to positively affect change through workforce development and wealth creation in their communities and organizations. The answer: Come to the table. Be willing to step up and participate on a team, whether internal or external to your organization. Communities need input and feedback from business and industry leaders, especially regarding education and workforce development.

The people who come to the table are critical. The leaders/participants who are tapped must be willing to share resources with one another, have a sincere desire to help and enable others in their communities, observe basic meeting facilitation skills and possess communication skills that allow them to communicate at all levels of social strata. Additionally, all of the partnerships need that one person who is the “glue that binds” to keep the team organized, enthusiastic and accountable.

One partnership in the study from northwestern North Carolina had a diverse group of business leaders, government officials, chambers of commerce and economic developers form a public/private partnership to promote industrial and workforce development in a three-county region. They not only worked together to recruit companies but to leverage resources by sharing workforce skills, training and educational institutions, suppliers, competitors and customers. They transformed a region once dominated by furniture manufacturers into a new advanced manufacturing cluster. They have continued to receive grants and financial support to build a stronger local economy and have improved their global competitiveness through economic change.

The director of the industry cluster initiative stated, “How I initially started the cluster and getting that relationship started... was I put them in a room and closed the door. It took me about eight months to get three county governments... just comfortable enough to be in the same room.”



A central North Carolina partnership had business, industry, chambers of commerce and economic development leaders refocus their strategic vision and revitalize their region, which they felt was headed into a decline. They addressed job-related adult education, the K-12 education system and the lack of leaders from under-represented citizens by further developing their small business center, providing training to develop the skills of the local workforce and implementing WorkKeys as a means for recruiting and upgrading workforce skills for existing and new industries. Their efforts resulted in additional grant funding and a committed group of leaders who still work together to create positive economic changes.

The president of the local economic development commission said, “The thing that I would consider a really positive outcome of this was that some [relationships] strengthened, or new partnerships were formed institutionally.”

Another partnership, formed in Orangeburg and Dorchester counties, also experienced success collaborating. The team, consisting of church members, technical colleges, adult education, local agencies, and business and industry leaders, helped find employment for almost 70 percent of approximately 400 trained graduates in pre-employment manufacturing, health care and truck driving. The partnership has continued to exist for more than seven years and has developed a local leadership program to discover and maximize leadership capacity within the community.

Senator John W. Matthews (Orangeburg) was instrumental in spearheading that grassroots effort.

“We’ve got to get out there and save ourselves. And really, when you can convince a group of people to do something to bring about change in their community, they are committed to it,” said Matthews.

One team leader asked, “Was our success serendipitous?” There is much more to partnerships than serendipity, but those interested in getting people to the table need to be aware each partnership is different and must be evaluated within the unique contexts, people and resources of local communities or business organizations.

Just like any culinary experience, the fundamentals – table, place settings, diners – are the same. What creates the difference between different dining experiences is how those components are used. The same analogy applies to partnerships. The components are universal, but it is up to each team to determine how to use them within the context of their community or organizations. There are many applications, a “menu” of partnership basics, that exist from this study to aid local economic developers, businesses and industries, and grant funders in understanding the inner-workings of effective collaborations for the purpose of creating jobs and a stronger workforce in South Carolina. Come to the table. Be engaged, be active and participate.

For more information regarding this study or a copy of the *Economic Development Partnership Menu*, please contact:

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