

A Menu for Economic Development

Come To The Table: Community Partnerships for Rural Economic Development©

What images does the phrase “come to the table” or “at the table” evoke in you? A formal, elegant dining experience complete with candelabras and champagne flutes? Or a red checkered tablecloth, mismatched tableware, and flowers plucked from shrubs as the centerpiece? The title of this study of partnerships originated from the phrases “come to the table” and “at the table” which were used over 225 times by twenty-six interviewees to describe the partnerships they created, maintained, and in some cases, sustained for the purpose of creating economic development opportunities for their rural communities.

The people and sites studied provided rich insights into the components of partnerships that need to be utilized in any community or organization for the purpose of achieving effective and lasting results. This multi-site comparative case study research was unique because this was a rare opportunity to study a group of partnerships that were formed specifically in rural communities in the Southeast and, as part of the grant requirement, had to have involvement from the local community college or university.

An interviewee asked the researcher, “Was our success serendipitous?” There is much more to partnerships than serendipity or good luck, but those interested in forming partnerships need to be aware each one is different and must be evaluated with the unique contexts, people, and resources of local communities or business organizations. What common factors have to be present to get people to the table to create positive and relevant outcomes, or “meal” for their local communities or organizations?

This study revealed there are common factors that have to be considered before attempting to partner to include the community’s history and readiness to work together; their commitment to collaborate and involve “non-traditional” leaders in the partnership; the ability to get high level leaders to represent their respective organizations, be actively involved, and organize around realistic goals and objectives; and to develop reporting and accountability systems to ensure trust can develop and results are achieved.

The people who come to the table are critical. The leaders who are tapped must be willing to share power with one another, they need to have a sincere desire to help and enable others in their communities, observe basic meeting facilitation skills, such as meetings that last an hour or less, 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” or “the hub of the wheel” who keeps the team organized, enthusiastic, and accountable to one another.

Emergent themes from this study also included the important role neutrality plays in team development, the role and compensation of the organizational driver, the role of the grant fiscal agent on the team, if the partnership is formed as a grant requirement, how coaching impacts team development, and the contribution of the non-credit functions within the community college or university, which was significant.

This study provides probing insight in the actual functioning of the teams so that patterns and commonalities are revealed for the purpose of creating economic development opportunities for rural communities. Just like any culinary experience, the components – table, place settings, diners – are the same. What creates the difference between dining experiences are 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 those components within the context of their community or organizations.

The Community Partnership Menu©

1. The Community or Organization (The Table)

Are you ready to work together or are there events forcing action whether you want to work together or not?

- **Community Context (The Condiments)** – What are the dynamics of your community or organization? This will largely determine what your operating environment is like.
 - **History of working together** – Have you worked together before? If so – that helps because you know one another. If you have not worked together, this can be really fun.
 - **Community readiness** – Is there an event, such as job losses or reduced productivity forcing you to consider new avenues to achieve results? It helps to have a “reason” to work together.
 - **Partnership maturity** – Do you have pre-existing partnerships that can segue into new directions? Do you have the right leaders at the table?

2. External Operating Environment (The Ambience)

“We decided early on, as a group, we were not taking money to take money.” – CCCM2

- **Commitment to coordinate** – How willing are you to sit down and work together? Funding can be important, but is not necessary to work together.
- **Community involvement** – Does your community or organization have a history of involving everyone in the community, not the usual suspects? If so, this can portend success.
- **Capacity building** – How can your partnership build future leaders and locate future homes for partnership projects.
- **Trust** – This is very important and takes time to build. Open, honest communications are essential here, as well as building accountability and transparency systems so team members do not suspect “hidden agendas”.
- How open are the potential members to:
 - New ideas
 - Taking risks
 - Matching opportunities
- **Accountability** – Do you have a means of creating open dialogue and implementing reporting systems so that everyone is knowledgeable about what is going on with the partnership?

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3. Process of Team Development (The Place Setting)

“You have to have an event.” – AAAM2

- **The “Event”** – A problem or opportunity prompts the need to work together. There needs to be a reason or motivation for everyone wanting to come together.
- **Leadership emerges** – Local leaders must be at the table...not their secretaries or delegates, but the key decision makers.
- **Core group formation** – This is a critical stage in development.
 - **Team administrator** – Partnerships need someone to keep them organized. This person must be identified and compensated, either by release time from a regular job or a line item in a grant or budget.
 - **Active v. advisory** – All partners must be actively engaged and participate. If a leader does not or cannot work on partnership activities and tasks, then you should not have that person at the table.
 - **Organizational structure** – The executive committee with sub-committees, aligned to partnership goals, format appears to compliment engaging leaders in an active role.
 - **Coaching** – Coaching services can provide neutrality and accountability which are important to team development. Local community colleges can provide assistance in facilitation consulting.
- **Planning and goal setting** – Each partnership should plan to spend approximately six to eight months in this stage. This is a very important step and the time must be budgeted and accepted.
- **Trust** – It is critical for internal development as a partnership. This step is on-going at all times. Again, the key here is open and honest communications.
- **Implementation of plans** – Do what you say you are going to do.
- **Performance reporting** – Accountability is essential, to one another (trust), the coach (accountable), and the community (the results).

4. People Skills/Characteristics (The Diners)

“...it was no big me or little you.” – DDDM1

- **Shared leadership** – The balance of power among community leaders is fragile and must be managed at all times. This involves stepping back and letting others participate. If the partnership is being funded by a grant – the fiscal agent should never serve as the Leader of the team.
- **“Organizational Driver”** – This is a critical role and is often viewed as the “glue” of the partnership. This is typically the Team Administrator, but it does not have to be; however, there needs to be a “point person” to manage team communications, agendas, meeting minutes, keeping people “on task”, and facilitate the meetings. Ideal characteristics for this person include:
 - Neutral
 - Organized
 - Paid/Compensated

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- **Willingness to help/enable others** – The members of the partnership need to possess a sense of compassion and willingness to serve others, especially within the community or organization they are trying to assist.
- **Meeting facilitation skills** – Keep meetings relevant and limited to one hour!
- **Communication skills** – The ability to communicate on more than one level.

5. Community College (The Sous Chef)

The community college can serve partnerships in three key areas: Economic Development, Access to Education, and Institutional Capacity

“The community college is an absolute core piece.” - BBBM1

- **Economic Development**
 - **Neutral** – Viewed as “above turf issues” by others.
 - **Networks** – Viewed as “tapped in” to broader perspectives than the community.
 - Works with all local entities.
 - Knows business/industry partners.
 - **Workforce Development training**
 - Customizable training.
 - **Promote collaborations**
 - Regional and state perspective of community.
- **Access to Education**
 - **Articulation** – High school to college and non-credit to credit articulation agreements.
 - **Workforce development training** – Quick skills training with career path options.
 - **Customized training** – Whatever the community, business, or industry needs.
 - **Become accessible to the community** – Classes in non-traditional settings/locales and ability to assist those who have never been to college previously.
- **Institutional Capacity**
 - **Role of Non-Credit** – Representatives from colleges were from non-academic areas.
 - **Community Involvement** – College is highly visible and participative in the community.

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