

Annual Results**EW01-016**

Growing our own: Communities that sustain entrepreneurs

Location:

Helena, Montana
Clarkston, Washington
Portland, Oregon
Baker, Oregon

Funding Period:

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Grant Award:

\$52,483

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SUMMARY

The project employed the Sirolli Enterprise Facilitation method, designed to engender community support for entrepreneurs, to train 60 participants in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. Participants included an agricultural producer with an idea for a new business or an expansion/diversification; professional agriculture advisors; and several community leaders.

Three training sessions were held during winter 2001-02 in Helena, Mont., Clarkston, Wash., and Portland, Ore. A follow-up conference, attended by 19 participants, was held in Baker, Ore., in October 2002. Although aspects of the training had yet to be implemented as of this report, the project coordinator says the training has had a major influence on the beliefs and behaviors of participants, and several have taken steps toward community commitments.

INTRODUCTION

Sirolli Enterprise Facilitation Training is a bottom-up, person-centered, community-implemented method of entrepreneurial development. It has helped thousands of entrepreneurs, including farmers and ranchers, make better decisions. Edward Sirolli pioneered enterprise facilitation 15 years ago in rural Western Australia. It is a social or community technology that “engages the hearts, minds and resources of whole communities to support local entrepreneurs.” Around 200 communities worldwide, including a dozen or so in the United States, mostly in rural areas, are practicing enterprise facilitation. Sirolli’s work is based on an understanding of “development” as the nurturing and unfolding of what is already present rather than the mere introduction of new projects or technologies.

The local practice, as in the case of this SARE-funded project, consists of a trained fulltime facilitator, available free and in confidence, who serves as an advocate or coach for anyone in a community who wants to start or expand a business. A local board, comprising people who know the community and its needs, supports the facilitator.

OBJECTIVES

The project lists four objectives:

1. Demonstrate and introduce a proven, simple, ethical, person-centered, grassroots philosophy and practice of fostering and nurturing entrepreneurs to professional agricultural advisors, entrepreneurial producers and community leaders
2. Build positive, collaborative and synergistic relationships among professional agricultural advisors, civic leaders and producers committed to enhancing environmental quality and stewardship as well as economic and social vitality and resiliency of their communities
3. Build the capacity of rural communities to create sound, profitable and viable businesses in all sectors of agriculture and to take responsibility for the future of their own local economies
4. Promote rural community stability and self-sufficiency by increasing income, diversification, quality of life and employment opportunities

METHODS

The project used training sessions to accomplish its goals. The first two days of each session covered the philosophy and background of the Sirolli methods and the behaviors of the enterprise facilitator. The third and fourth days were devoted to the practice of facilitation using real entrepreneurs. That fifth day was devoted to debriefing and review. A follow-up conference included alumni of the earlier conferences.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

The training had a major influence on the beliefs and behaviors of the participants regarding entrepreneurship, management and the role communities play in creating a favorable environment in which business can succeed. At the follow-up workshop, advice was provided on implementing community projects. A handout was included in the conference, and most participants joined an electronic listserv.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As a result of the Sirolli training sessions, three facilitation groups have been organized, one in Montana and two in other states. Each has hired facilitators for community involvement for 30 months, in accordance with the Sirolli plan.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO AG PROFESSION AND PRODUCER UNDERSTANDING

The potential exists, says the project report, for bottom-up economic development opportunities that can build relationships in communities that promote stability and self-sufficiency by increasing income, diversification, quality of life and employment opportunities.

PUBLICATIONS/OUTREACH

Although no publications were produced from this project, the report says that a strong potential exists for community outreach and economic development in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends these actions for any future projects of similar scope:

1. Teams should arrive at the training session with a project identified for their community; after the training, they can apply the principles in assisting entrepreneurs
2. After receiving training, teams should provide follow-up reports on the effectiveness of each training segment, such as acceptance by and involvement with the community, and the actual outcomes or impacts
3. The training session should include a section on the social action process that takes place within communities as new ideas or concepts are introduced
4. An independent evaluator for any facilitation group should assess the impacts of any concepts and practices applied 30 months after the training