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ABCD – The Building Blocks that Help a Community Grow

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INTRODUCTION

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a way to look at our communities. Community development has often been viewed as something that a community is subjected to from the outside and that requires outside resources such as economic development grants to implement.

ABCD is founded on the concept that each community already has a tremendous number of assets, which, if only accessed and channeled, can provide the resources necessary for success. ABCD searches out the strengths of a community as means of sustainable development.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING THE ABCD APPROACH?

The ABCD approach entails five steps that will help a community gather the building blocks necessary for a bright new future:

1. Mapping or inventorying the assets of individuals, associations, institutions, and organizations within the community.
2. Building relationships within the community for mutually beneficial problem solving.
3. Mobilizing the community's assets to take full advantage of them for community development and information-sharing purposes.
4. Building a community vision and plan based on input from a large, broadly represented community group.
5. Identifying and accessing those resources needed from outside the community.

Step 1. Create an asset map The first step is to create an “asset map” or an “asset inventory.” This map or inventory is the opposite of the standard “needs assessment” often done by an outside entity. The citizens conduct the asset mapping in ABCD, which creates an immediate vested interest in the outcome. The map answers the question, “What resources do we have to solve this problem ourselves?”

This ongoing process seeks first to discover all the untapped talent hidden within individuals in the community, and then to release the power of collaboration and teamwork when existing community organizations band together for a shared vision.

Step 2. Build relationships The second step is to build relationships among the community's assets. This means identifying and mobilizing the gifts and capacities of all community members, the community's associations and institutions (private, public, and non-profit), the community's physical assets, and the community's leadership capacity.

When mapping resources, community leaders should ask, “How does this asset or resource fit into the overall plan? Where can it connect? Who can make the most of this resource for the community?” As a community practice the first two steps, the community becomes more confident in its ability to deal with changes internally and will rely less on external resources.

Step 3. Mobilize assets The third step focuses all resources on two important items: (1) building the

economy and (2) sharing information. Developing the local economy is a natural outgrowth of mapping assets and building relationships. As new resources are discovered or uncovered through this process, it is only natural the resources are marketed either internally or externally. Obviously, information flow is as vital to a community, if not more so, than it is to any large corporation.

It is critical that a community foster formal and informal communication in order to generate support for the ABCD process. Identification of all community communication portals, both formal (such as the media) and informal (such as the coffee shop) will be an important part of the asset mapping process. These communication portals comprise the central nervous system of the community.

Step 4. Create a shared vision Great community communication will be the foundation for the creation of a shared vision and plan, which is the fourth step. Fundamental to this process are three commitments that a community must make.

The first commitment is to always begin the process by looking internally for assets. It is imperative that the community develop a sequence for problem resolution that focuses internally first.

The second commitment is to “expand the table,” which means to involve more citizens in the process. More people bring more ideas, more talents, and more resources.

The third commitment is to keep the planning in the “reality” realm by combining planning and visioning with problem solving. Thus, the small but significant “victories” experienced in problem solving lend credibility and motivation to the long-term planning process.

Step 5. Connect with outside resources After a community has created an environment that continually identifies its assets and resources, builds relationships to utilize those resources to the maximum good of the community, has created a communication system that involves all citizens in the creation of a shared vision, and rewards that effort with small victories over everyday problems, the final step in the ABCD process is to leverage those assets with outside resources for the betterment of the community. This leveraging process is far different than seeking financial aid for a failing economy; here we seek investors who desire to participate in a community success in progress.

The ABCD process creates a new future for communities based on the questions being asked. Asset-based? Or needs-based? Where is your community’s focus?

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