

Key No. 5 – Sustained Effort

Growing Entrepreneurial Communities

Background & Introduction

This month's Thought Paper focuses on the topic of sustained effort and its role in the process of growing entrepreneurial communities. This is part of our 2013 series addressing the [keys to local economic development success](#). Each month, we will address one of these keys in a Thought Paper. As is always the case, we want to hear from you. Please send us your insights, questions and push back by emailing me at don@e2mail.org

Top 10 Keys

- Key 1 – [Local Responsibility](#)
- Key 2 – [Smart Game Plan](#)
- Key 3 – [Robust Investment](#)
- Key 4 – [Entrepreneurial Development Systems](#)
- Key 5 – Sustained Effort
- Key 6 – Growth Entrepreneurs
- Key 7 – Attributes of an Entrepreneurial Community
- Key 8 – Immigrants & New Residents
- Key 9 – Real Regional Collaboration
- Key 10 – Civic & Social Entrepreneurs

For More Information

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Sustained Effort – Why does this matter?

This should make intuitive sense, but in reality, we find communities working hard for a while, and then pulling back and not really sustaining development efforts at a level that can make a difference. Let me share two of the more compelling reasons why sustaining effort should be a priority within your community's development plan.

1. **The unwillingness or inability to sustain development efforts is a primary cause of community economic development failing to achieve its goals.**
2. **Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours rule.**

The international economy and society we are a part of never rests. Every day across the globe, in thousands of communities and hundreds of countries, there are billions of people who wake up every hour of every day to compete with us. Bottom line, there are no sick days, vacations or retirements in community economic development. Failure to sustain effort is why so many strategies come up short.

Remember Malcolm Gladwell of "Tipping Point" fame? He illustrates in his book "Outliers", the 10,000 hour rule initially proposed by neurologist Daniel Levin (according to Richard O'Brien). While the 10,000 hour rule applies to individuals and their pursuit of competence in everything from tennis to accounting, we can apply this rule to development efforts by communities. Successful and impactful development game plans take time, practice and refinement to really work. Execution of the game plan is a key and that is tied to those making it happen from staff to board members.

Communities that do not work their plans long enough never really get as good at executing it, undermining the potential for desired and meaningful outcomes.

Gladwell's Rule

Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours quote actually comes from neurologist Daniel Levin.

"The emerging picture from such studies is that 10,000 hours of practice is required to achieve the level of master associated with being a world-class expert in anything. In study after study of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals and what have you, the number comes up again and again. Of course, this doesn't address why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others do, but no one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery."

Keys to Sustaining Development Efforts

Based on our field experience, I would offer five primary keys to sustaining development efforts over long periods of time:

1. **A Generational Vision**
2. **An Investment Philosophy**
3. **Renewing Champions**
4. **3 to 5 Year Action Plans**
5. **Continuous Learning.**

Let's explore each of these five keys to sustaining effort in a bit more detail now.

A Generational Vision. Milan Wall and the Heartland Center for Leadership Development (www.heartlandcenter.info) often talks about vision. What Milan argues is that communities that have a long-term vision of where they want to go and what they want to be, tend to do better with development efforts. The U.S. Census Bureau defines a human generation as about 25 years. This is a great time frame for visioning. It is long enough to stretch us, but short enough to require action accountability.

An Investment Philosophy. Development strategies and programs in a community are paid for by stakeholders and often referred to as investors. This is not casual language. Development investors have a vested interest in seeing a community develop in certain intentional ways. They are willing to continue writing checks as long as there is some documentation of return on their investment. Communities with clear goals and accountability around achievement of goals are better at keeping investors writing checks for a strategic and focused development program.

Renewing Champions. Just as in business and government, turnover can be both good and bad, but too often there is inconsistency in both local development program governance and staffing. This unplanned turnover creates instability of effort. There can also be too much change shifting from one

Joe Ferguson



Joe Ferguson is one of the Center's heroes. He has been a mainstay leader in Norfolk and Northeast Nebraska development for decades. Joe has a history of bringing folks together and getting progress realized. The question is who will fill Joe's shoes in the coming decades as he retires?

priority to the next before any strategy can actually prove up. Communities that are strong at renewing champions (both staff and leadership) are better at sustaining successful programs.

3 to 5 Year Action Plan. Any good entrepreneurial coach will counsel FOCUS, FOCUS and more FOCUS. Successful communities focus on those development actions that have the greatest potential for

**FOCUS, FOCUS
and more FOCUS**

achieving goals. What we have found is in successful communities, they employ 3 to 5 year cycles of planning, capitalizing the program, focusing the strategy and program execution. We recommend this routine as one way to sustain efforts while intentionally renewing people, programs and funding.

Continuous Learning. A key attribute of a successful entrepreneur is their ability to adapt when opportunities and challenges emerge. The same is true for successful development programs. These programs are constantly tracking progress and changes. They have the ability to make small adjustments within their 3 to 5 year plans and major changes with new plans. Part of the merit in the 10,000 hour rule is there is continuous learning occurring. With each gig John Lennon and Paul McCartney did, they tried new ideas capturing what worked and discarding what did not work.

Just as with entrepreneurs, while the advice on what to do is helpful, oftentimes the advice on where we may fail is even more helpful. Next, let's explore what we call the Traps that Undermine Sustained Efforts.

Traps that Undermine Sustained Efforts

Our work across North America suggests there are three primary traps to avoid if your community is committed to sustaining your development efforts:

1. **Hopelessness**
2. **Prosperity**
3. **Failure with the Other Keys**

Hopelessness. Communities that have suffered from chronic and severe economic decline (e.g., industrialization of agriculture and population loss) or experience catastrophic crisis (e.g., a major employer closes down) often have a hopelessness about them. Simply put they lack a hope that

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anything can be done that will change the bad reality for the better. Hopelessness can lead to an inability to act. Because we believe there is nothing we can do – we do nothing and we get nothing in return.

Prosperity. We have all witnessed hopeless communities, but the prosperity trap may be less obvious. Actually, the prosperity trap has been widely researched over decades in what is often called Dutch Disease. The best illustrations are countries with massive natural resource wealth like oil. Too much wealth too soon and too easily gotten makes countries, people and communities lazy. If times are good (at least for the ruling class), why bother to develop the economy? While this is an oversimplification, the prosperity trap occurs in more subtle ways in communities all the time. For example, a community that lost an important employer mobilizes and works hard to regain success, but once things return to “normal” investment is reduced and efforts erode.

Other Keys. The 10 keys to economic success are not optional. A community must embrace each of them to create a sophisticated and comprehensive approach that results in development and ultimately sustained prosperity. Keys like local commitment, robust investment and a smart game plan are musts. For example, a weak game plan that is generating weak results demands either change or disinvestment by stakeholders. Failure to work all the keys is our third trap undermining sustained effort.

Conclusion

One way or another, I have been in some kind of venture for most of my life. My parents and extended family all had businesses. By and large, we have had our share of success, but in today’s world there is this somewhat scary idea that people we do not know are driven to take our prosperity away. By design, a free market capitalistic economy works that way. In this environment, you either wake up each day ready to compete or face eventual failure. The same is true with communities. Sustaining effort is mandatory for generational success. In our next paper, we will focus on Key No. 6 or Growth Entrepreneurs.

Questions & More Information

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The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship's vision for rural America is one of vibrant communities and regions that embrace entrepreneurship, that find new sources of competitive advantage in their inherent assets, and that invest in a new more sustainable future for both present and future generations. The Center's mission is to help our local, regional and state partners achieve this future by connecting economic development practitioners and policy makers to the resources needed to energize entrepreneurs and implement entrepreneurship as a core economic development strategy.

To learn more about the Center's history and program areas, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org.

The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) provided founding support to create the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in 2001. RUPRI's mission is to provide independent analysis and information on the challenges, needs, and opportunities facing rural people and places. The work of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, along with other centers and collaborations, helps RUPRI achieve this mission. To learn more about RUPRI, visit www.rupri.org.