



# ENERGIZING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES

## *A Pathway to Prosperity*



Source: Dan Vorisek, E Communities Coach, [Rural Action](#), Ohio

## A Coach's Journey

I came to my position as a Community Coach with Rural Action with an extensive career in outdoor recreation and education in non-profit, for-profit, and higher education settings. This included many years of classroom teaching and outdoor program leadership, with team building as a core theme. My journey as a community coach is in part a reflection on what existing skills were transferable to community development, what skills were not, and what skills I lacked.

Initially, I tried to include in community organizing meetings some of the most basic activities that had served me well in my career as a facilitator. I immediately discovered that while planning and accountability structures were sorely needed, none of the communities were ready to embrace them. My main tactic switched from being the planner and guide to listening almost exclusively and reflecting back what the stakeholders were saying. This was coupled with getting really good at asking the right questions and providing insights from other communities that were struggling with the same questions. While I consider myself to be a fairly open-minded person, I needed to take that to a new level and listen closely to the themes that began to emerge in the community meetings. I knew that a Community Coach was there to assist, yet the communities were accustomed to “experts” that would tell them what to do. I was careful to communicate that Rural Action would walk with, not “do for” the communities as they formed their plans of the future they wanted to create. It became clear that the only way forward to assist entrepreneurs was to let the community lead and set aside my preconceived idea that a plan that had succeeded elsewhere would be universally adopted by our partner communities.

As the months, then the first year progressed, signs were becoming visible that the communities were responding to the coaching support. The tone of the meetings went from looking back at historical obstacles to looking forward at opportunities; several events took place that were organized by teams that began to energize more people to support local entrepreneurs. I began to hear many more words of appreciation and advocacy for Rural Actions' coaching efforts, and team members began to take on more obligations. Although the number of people that were actively engaged had declined from the launch of the project, those that remained were generally responsive to communications coming from Rural Action and launching the survey outreach work became a real possibility. After completing the first round of surveys and identifying gaps in the process, my role as the community coach continued to evolve but the fundamental approach remained the same: keep the communication channels open, and be present to the community as they created the entrepreneurial ecosystem that worked best for them.