



Next Gen Sector Partnerships Rural Field Guide

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Acknowledgements

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Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.



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About this Field Guide

In the spring of 2020, the Institute for Networked Communities launched a Rural Learning Network—a cohort of eight rural regions from across the country engaged in building industry-driven, Next Gen Sector Partnerships. The goal: help rural communities strengthen their industry-driven, Next Gen Sector Partnerships and understand what it takes to build strong, sustainable partnerships in a rural context. We wanted to understand the unique challenges rural communities face in building sector partnerships and sustaining them over time. We also knew that rural communities had important lessons to share that speak to the heart of what sector partnerships are all about: the importance of place, the value of investing in relationships, and the need to work across silos to maximize scarce resources.

As it turned out, the spring of 2020 was a uniquely opportune time to reflect on the importance of place, relationships, and using scarce resources wisely. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, all eight regions in the rural learning network were forced to rapidly pivot, reassess priorities, and refocus. Some sector partnerships lost traction and struggled to keep the attention of business leaders and public partners. Others sprang into action, shifting focus to securing PPE, navigating relief programs, or putting dislocated workers back to work. The pandemic both underscored the importance of working collaboratively across public and private sectors while simultaneously making it much more challenging to do so.

This presented a unique opportunity. Since the pandemic forced communities to reassess priorities in light of changed conditions, it prompted important questions about the function and value of sector partnerships.

The Rural Learning Network therefore afforded an opportunity to understand factors behind successful partnerships while also pushing for new insights on what sector partnerships represent for communities and economies.

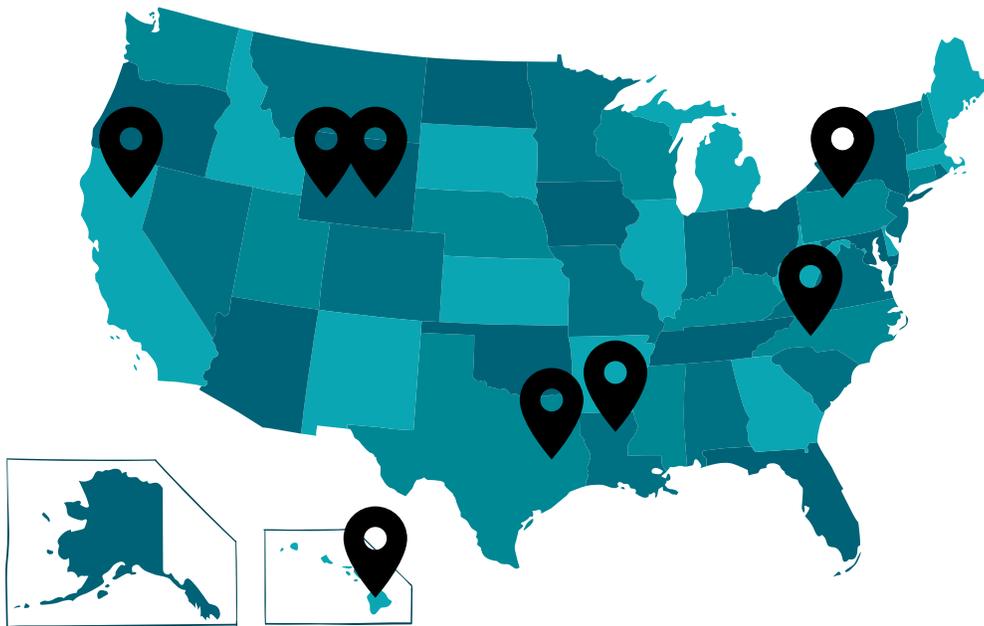
This Field Guide captures those lessons learned and insights. It includes practical tools and strategies for building successful sector partnerships based on practitioners' experiences working in rural communities. It also includes reflections on the role sector partnerships play in a post-COVID world, with new insights on their core value and purpose. It is organized in two sections:

- ***The What: Next Gen Sector Partnerships are Activated Public-Private Networks.*** This section explores the core function of successful Next Gen Partnerships and introduces a new frame for understanding what success looks like.
- ***The How: What it Takes to Build and Sustain Networks.*** This section includes top tips, strategies and tools for effective network-building.

The world has changed since the rural learning network first launched in the spring of 2020. But our reasons for coming together are more relevant now than ever: to learn what rural communities can teach us about building public-private networks and to understand what those networks mean for economic stability and resilience.

Next Gen Rural Learning Network

The Next Gen Rural Learning Network included eight rural regions from across the country, all engaged in building industry-driven Next Gen Sector Partnerships. Each team was committed to pushing the state-of-the-art in what it takes to build public-private networks that strengthen regional economies and connect people to jobs. This Field Guide is a product of their experiences and lessons learned.



- Shasta-Modoc County, California
- Southwest Wyoming
- Fremont County, Wyoming
- Hawai'i Island, Hawai'i
- East Texas
- Northeast Louisiana
- Foothills North Carolina
- North-Central Pennsylvania

Why a Rural Field Guide?

America's rural regions face some very different challenges than their more urban counterparts. Their relative isolation, sparse populations, and often declining economies create conditions that make sustained progress difficult. However, their strong personal networks, rooted businesses, and homegrown entrepreneurs can provide key ingredients for change. And, what appear to be deficits in many rural regions—disappearing legacy industries, a “thin bench” of leaders, a history of failed attempts by outsiders to “help” them—can turn out to be assets under the right conditions.

Rural regions are often misunderstood, pigeon-holed, or just written off as places that are in irreversible decline. Outsiders who do try to help—federal and state governments, philanthropic organizations—often rely on infusions of temporary grant funding, imposition of top-down solutions, isolated projects promising to transform the community, or some combination of these strategies. This prevailing playbook is discouraging for both rural regions and those who care about their progress.

The alternative is to start with rural regions themselves, supporting them in their own process of engagement, priority-setting, and action. The contributions of federal and state governments, philanthropic organizations, and others interested in lifting up rural regions don't disappear, but rather shift in important ways.

They become careful supporters of grassroots process, then natural partners in advancing regionally determined priorities. They minimize outside distractions—big start-up grants, top-down directives, and political interference—giving rural regions the space to chart their own future.

Making this shift requires both the regions and their outside partners to challenge the status quo. Rural regions have to move beyond a mindset that tends to focus on scarcity, blame outsiders for local problems, and expect too little of established and emerging leaders. Outside partners have to move beyond a reliance on transactional relationships with rural regions and instead focus on transformational partnerships that create the local conditions for sustained progress.

Rural regions in the Next Gen Sector Partnership Community of Practice are actively working to change how local leaders work together to set priorities and drive action. They are “flipping the script” on how people, inside and outside their community, view the potential for change. For example:

- The flip side of outsider mistrust can be a bootstrapping mentality which can be channeled into the equivalent of a modern-day barn-raising.
- The reality of a “thin bench” of leadership can also be seen as a small, but committed group of leaders who wear multiple hats, are well-networked, and have long personal relationships with other leaders, reservoirs of trust that can be tapped for a change process.
- Chronic resource scarcity can be used as an excuse or embraced as a catalyst for creative approaches to advancing regional priorities, including opportunistic leveraging of outside resources on the region's terms.

INTRODUCTION

- Pessimistic voices about region's prospects can often obscure the reality that many talented leaders live there by choice, sharing a love of place that can be critical in making a lasting commitment to community progress.

Ultimately, the future of rural regions rests with the people who live there. No amount of outside funding or support can make a lasting difference if local leaders are not committed to change. The good news is that this Field Guide is based on experiences and insights from rural regions that are actively pushing against the status quo, putting themselves on a path to a better future.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This Field Guide is written for practitioners in workforce development, economic development and education looking for new ways to deepen and expand partnerships with business and industry. It is targeted toward those who have a foundational understanding of the Next Gen Sector Partnership model and methodology. It serves as a companion to the [Next Gen Sector Partnership Toolkit and Training Manual](#) which outlines detailed, step-by-step guidance on the disciplined process of building and sustaining industry-driven sector partnerships. While the insights reflected in this Guide are based on lessons learned from rural communities, they are relevant for all communities seeking to activate public-private networks to build stronger regional economies.

THE WHAT

Next Gen Sector Partnerships are Activated Public-Private Networks

A successful Next Gen Sector Partnership is an activated network that spans three dimensions: among business leaders, among public partners, and between the two.



Successful Next Gen Sector Partnerships are not initiatives, programs or time-limited strategies. Instead, they are about building strong and robust networks among and between business leaders and public partners. Consider that the impact of your Next Gen Sector Partnership depends on the strength of network connections along three dimensions:

- **Among business leaders:** Connecting business leaders in a like industry to exchange best practices, solve common problems and work together to strengthen their industry and regional economy.
- **Among public partners:** Connecting education, workforce and economic development partners in a single region to align and coordinate services, reduce duplication of efforts and better target programs to support businesses and jobseekers and workers.
- **Between business leaders and public partners:** Allowing public partners to stay finely tuned to the needs of industry and helping businesses more efficiently tap into resources and support that public partners offer.

One common goal holds the network together: to strengthen the regional economy and connect people to jobs.

Signs Your Networks Aren't as Healthy as they Could Be

Whether you're in education, workforce development or economic development, you are part of an inter-connected ecosystem--your regional economy. That means that your ability to effectively support students, jobseekers or businesses depends on how well-connected you are to others. These connections aren't always easy to notice when they're working well. But they're easier to spot when they're weak. Consider these indicators that your networks might not be as strong as they could, or should, be:

- You can't get a return phone call from the Plant Manager at your region's largest manufacturing company.
- You learn that an organization in a neighboring county just received a grant for a major youth career awareness initiative—something you and four other organizations in your region are currently working on.
- You know the other public partners in your region well and meet on a regular basis to share updates on what each organization is working on. But you rarely rely on others outside your organization to get things done unless there's a grant involved.

Sound familiar? If so, it's time to focus on where, exactly, your networks need to be shored up and make a plan for strengthening them.

Network Mapping

This tool is designed to help you assess networks in your community among three dimensions:

- *Among business leaders from a single industry;*
- *Among public partners (education, workforce development and economic development), and;*
- *Between business leaders and public partners*

This tool is designed for regions with at least one active Next Gen Sector Partnership. If you have more than one active partnership, pick just one for the purposes of this exercise.

Materials Needed: A big piece of blank paper, three different colored pens or markers

1

Mapping Public Partner Networks

1. **On a separate piece of paper, spend 3 minutes writing down the names of the key leaders and organizations in your region's economic development, workforce development and education systems.** This will include (but may not be limited to) your Next Gen Partnership support team.
 - The list doesn't have to be exhaustive. Include as many names and organizations as you can think of in 3 minutes.
 - Don't forget to include yourself!
 - Include names of individuals, not just their organizations. This will require thinking about who the key decision-maker or point person is from that organization. In some cases, there may be more than one. That's ok – list all the individuals that you know need to be on board in order to work effectively with that organization.
 - You may know of some organizations but don't know who right point person is. In that case, just leave a "?" next to the organization's name.

Example

Individual(s)	Organization
Tammy, CEO	Regional Chamber of Commerce
Will, CTE Director	Springfield County K-12 CTE
Jane, CTE Director	Greenfield County K-12 CTE
President Jones; Linda, Workforce Director	Springfield Community College
President Smith; James, Manufacturing Program Director	Greenfield Community College
Debra, CEO; James, Partnership Coordinator	Happy Valley United Way
Ann, Director	Springfield Workforce Development Board
Jim, Director	Greenfield Workforce Development Board
John, Director	Manufacturing Industry Association
Randy, CEO	Happy Valley Economic Development Corporation
Anna, Director	Greenfield Hispanic Center

1

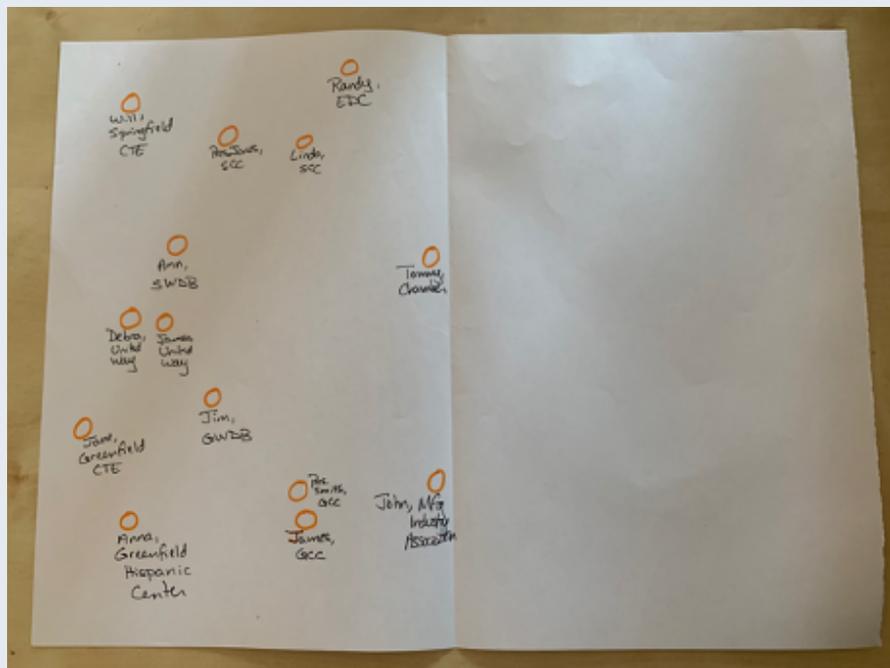
Mapping Public Partner Networks

2. Step back from your list and consider:

- Which of these partners has the most credibility with business and industry? (For example, they have strong working relationships with business leaders in the region, they have a positive reputation among business, they are perceived as a business-serving organization etc.)
- How strong are the relationships among these individuals? Who works most closely with whom?

3. Now pull out your blank piece of paper. Fold it in half to create a crease down the middle of the page. Use the left half of the page for your public partner map (we'll use the right half to map out a business network later on).

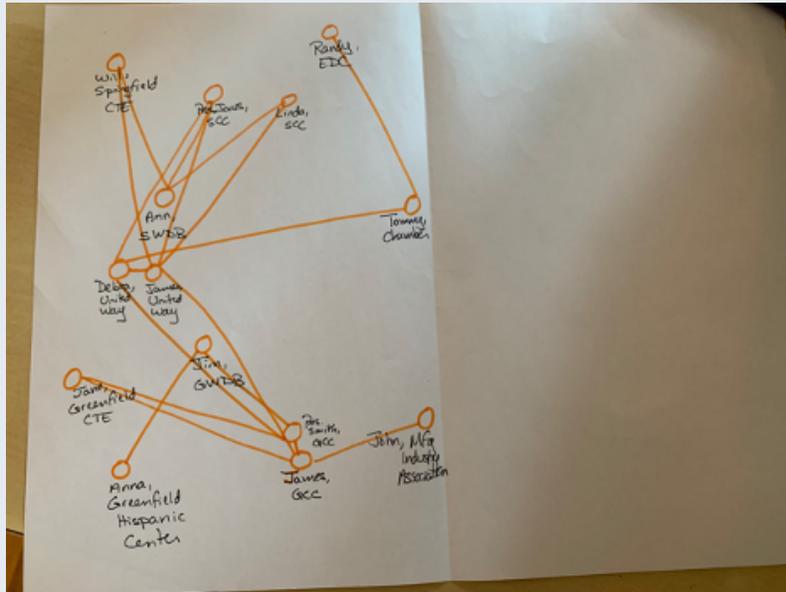
4. Draw your partner map. Using the list you created above, draw a circle for each individual partner. (In cases where you have multiple names for one organization, draw multiple circles). Draw the individuals with the strongest credibility with business and industry closest to the crease at the center line.



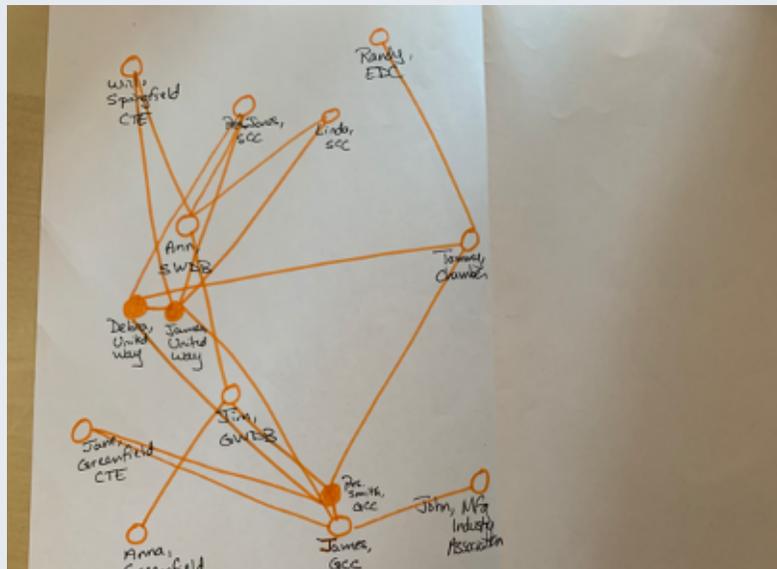
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Mapping Public Partner Networks

5. Consider the connections among these partners. Draw a line connecting partners who work closely together on a regular basis. Note: don't feel obligated to draw a line connecting every partner. Lines should only indicate strong working relationships (i.e. they collaborate regularly on projects, know each other well).



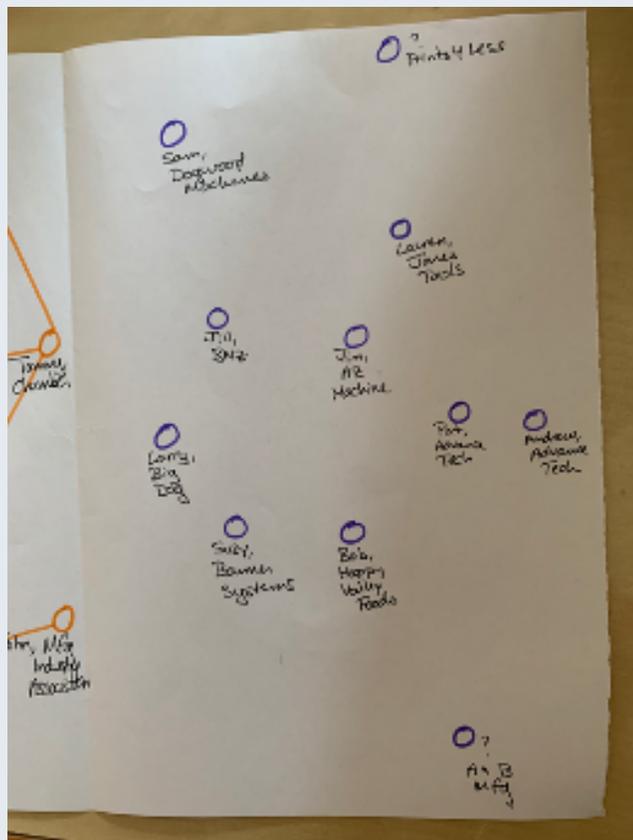
6. Identify the "connectors." Which partners on the map would you consider to be "connectors"? Connectors are organizations or people who play an active role in brokering partnerships across organizations and people. Indicate connectors by filling in their circle.



2

Mapping Business Leader Networks

1. **Now it's time to add business leaders to your map.** Using the right half of your paper and a different colored pen, draw a circle for the first 10-20 businesses leaders who come to mind from your targeted industry. These may be the most significant employers in your region (# of employees or economic impact), those who are most involved in your partnership, those who you have a strong relationship with (or wish you had a stronger relationship with!) or all of the above!
 - Include those leaders actively involved in your partnership as well as those who have not been involved.
 - Remember to draw a circle for people, not businesses. If there are more than one individuals from a single business involved in your partnership, draw more than one circle.
 - If you don't know the name of the right individual, leave a blank line but still list the company.
 - Don't worry about where to draw each circle; it doesn't matter where they're located on the map.

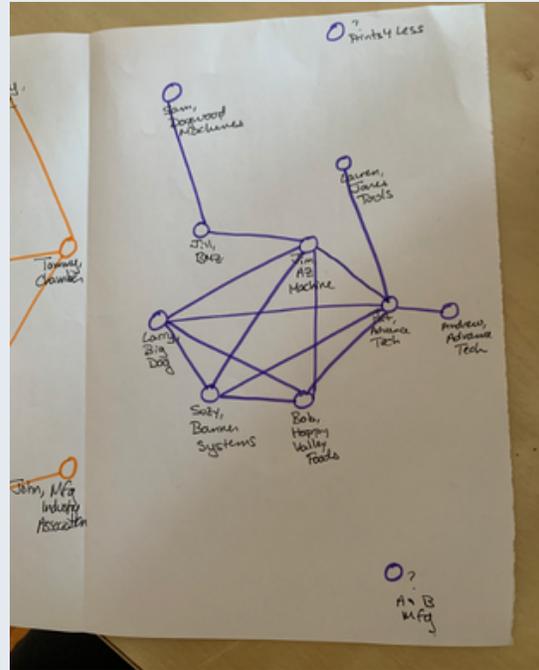


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Mapping Business Leader Networks

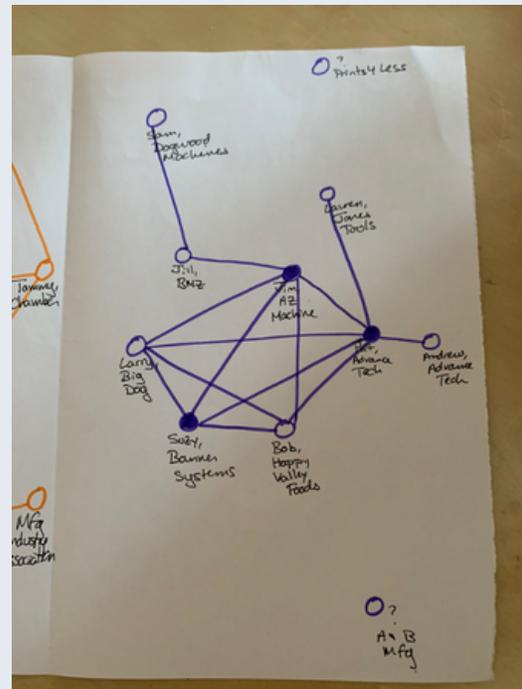
2. Now map the connections among these business leaders.

- Draw a line connecting people who have a relationship. (This doesn't need to be a very strong relationship, but they should know each other by name and have met at least once or twice).
- You may not know the extent of the relationships among these people (and they may draw the map quite differently than you). That's ok! Just give it your best guess.



3. Identify the “connectors.”

Which business leaders on the map would you consider to be “connectors”? Connectors are people who play an active role in brokering partnerships with others and bringing new business leaders into the partnership. Indicate connectors by filling in their circle.



4

Assess

At this point, your map should look pretty messy! Now it's time to step back, assess, and identify where and how the network could be strengthened.

1. How many public partners are connectors? Do these connectors broker partnerships among public partners or do they broker partnerships between businesses & public partners? Or both?

- Note: Ideally, your sector partnership convener should be a connector both for public partners and with business leaders. (An important criterion for becoming convener is having credibility both with public partners and with industry). Is this the case for you? If not, why?

2. How many of your business leaders are connectors? Do they primarily connect business leaders to one another? Or business leaders to public partners? Or both?

3. What do you notice about connections between public partners and business leaders? Do connections flow through just a few organizations? How many public partners are left out of the network? How many businesses are left out?

4. Where do you think the networks MOST need to be strengthened?

- Among public partners;
- Among business leaders, or;
- Between public partners and business leaders.

5. What would your map look like, ideally?

6. Identify 2-3 needed actions to make your community look more like your ideal map.

What it Takes to Build and Sustain Healthy Networks

Strong networks require constant care and feeding. These tips are a distillation of the most effective strategies rural teams have used to bolster public-private networks.



Actions that Strengthen Networks

Partnership- and relationship-building is priority; individual programs and grants are in service of those partnerships

Foster connections among business leaders to build peer relationships

Credit for successes is shared widely

Focus on how individual programs and grants support shared regional goals

Shared ownership of broad regional vision: a strong, inclusive economy

Actions that Weaken Networks

Individual programs and grants are top priority; partnerships are in service of those programs

Focus on one-on-one business services and outreach

Successes attributed to individual organizations only

Focus on narrow goals of individual programs and grants

Logo-based ownership of initiatives and programs

Four Essential Elements of Network-Building

We interviewed members of the Rural Learning Network what they saw as the most critical factors behind the strength and health of public-private networks in their region. Their responses fell into four categories:

1

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

- "No significant change can take place without a significant relationship."
- "I don't think that cities spend half the time that we do on relationship-building and nuanced understanding of the community. I feel like it's even twice the boulder to push [in a rural community]."

2

SHARED CREDIT

- "A platform like the Sector Partnership makes it easier to promote more collaboration amongst organizations that might have [otherwise] taken a more competitive stance [...] It's not about us, it's about the partnership."
- "The ownership doesn't go to each individual partner, it's what we're all doing together. If you always give the credit to the Alliance then it doesn't matter who did the work."

3

SHARED GOALS

- "All of us support partners are gauged on metrics that all look different. Success is defined differently for all of us. So when we're all trying to maximize our own systems, we're not really in it together."
- "It took a long time but we finally have education and business on the same team. It's not necessarily education telling business what they can and can't train. That has been a tremendous success from where we started. That, to me, is what we're here to do."

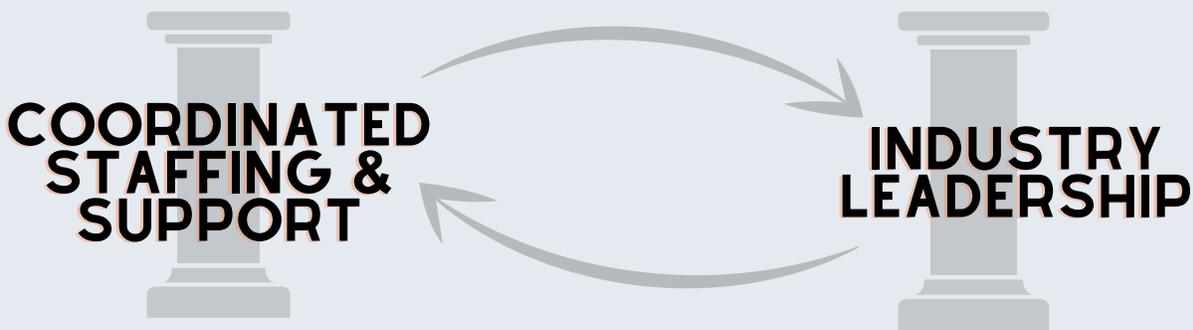
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WAYS FOR NEW VOICES & NEW LEADERS TO PLUG IN

- "We created a unified business voice that didn't exist before, and it's grassroots and grounded in this place. It shifts relationships and old power dynamics; it's contagious and can transform how this community interacts."
- "The key thing that makes a difference in looking at system-wide change is getting key actors within a system to collaborate, understand the situation they're all facing and where they fit within that system."

Pillars of Successful Next Gen Sector Partnerships

Successful Next Gen Sector Partnerships depend on two, mutually reinforcing elements: 1) coordinated staffing from the convening and public partner team, and; 2) strategic industry leadership. Either element can get out of balance. Too much staffing from public partners? Industry leaders disengage and defer. Too little follow through from public partners? Business leaders get discouraged feeling they're "going it alone." Getting the balance right means that both pillars support one another. Consistent staffing and responsiveness builds industry buy-in and commitment. Likewise, industry leadership serves as a common point of accountability, pulling partners into alignment.



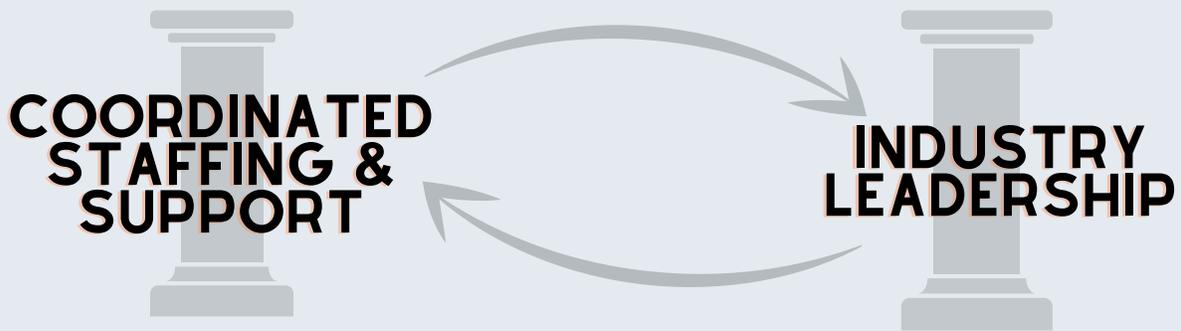
Key Question: Which pillars most need to be bolstered for our partnership to grow & sustain?

The reality: If businesses do not own their own partnership, no breakthroughs are possible.

The recipe: right people + disciplined process + relentless focus on ownership.

The question: is what you're about to do going to increase or diminish the level of ownership businesses have in their own partnership?

The payoff: they own their own problems and solutions, become curious about how you can help them, invest more when they see progress, and together you all are able to do things that would not otherwise be possible.



Top Tips for Effective Staffing & Support

- Constantly keeping a pulse on engagement and operations of the partnership. Being mindful of the daily need to take small (or big) steps to keep the partnership moving forward. There's no coasting!
- Focus on relationship-building among public partners as well. Sometimes the notion that public partners sit in the back in Next Gen meetings can be misinterpreted to mean they play a passive role. Conveners have a role to play in proactively drawing partners out and helping them "plug in where they fit in." By understanding the interests, goals and skill sets of individual public partners, conveners can more effectively delegate tasks to them.
- Top skill sets necessary to be an effective convener or partner:
 - Not necessarily more communication, but more effective communication
 - Ability to delegate
 - Workstream management
 - Strategic relationship-building
 - Personal attributes: tenacity, passion, perseverance

Top Tips for Industry Engagement

- Focus on relationship-building outside of regularly scheduled partnership meetings (ie: one-on-one calls and Zoom meetings to check-in). Remember: "there's no significant change without a significant relationship."
- Reach out to new businesses and organizations that move into the region. Value their new perspective and energy by reaching out and building a relationship.
- Leverage the power of peer-to-peer learning. Even at a basic level, peer-to-peer learning can shift mindsets and offer an avenue for sharing best practices and building relationships.
- Identify and uplift the individuals who are "wired" to do this work. Pinpoint the "doers" within your region and loop them into the partnership.
- Structure meetings to mediate the competitiveness between industry partners in highly competitive sectors. Be explicit at the outset that this is a pre-competitive forum; encourage the group to focus on action areas that have potential to benefit the industry as a whole.

Making Public-Private Networks Last

Keeping Next Gen Sector Partnerships active and health in rural communities in the midst of a pandemic called for new levels of creativity and resourcefulness. Teams in the Rural Learning Network distilled these top tips as they reflected on what it took to build and maintain momentum with their public-private networks.

» Intentionally Engaging "Periphery" Partners

- One-on-one outreach can move mountains, especially in our current virtual world. With the reality of Zoom meeting fatigue, try picking up the phone to make one-on-one calls. After building rapport with partners who may be more on the “periphery” (i.e. interested but not yet actively involved), intentionally suggest areas to “plug in”.
 - i.e.: “This is where we see you fitting in and supporting the partnership...”
- Identify individuals who express excitement about the partnership and aren’t already overtaxed. These are often people who are moving up in the industry ranks and have the capacity to support the partnership with more time and energy.

» Designing & Delivering Engaging Virtual Meetings

- Start the meeting off with a centering question. Some partners in the Hawaii Island Agriculture Partnership start their virtual meetings with an icebreaker question. Good icebreakers are easy to answer, conversational and fun (i.e. “What was your first job?” “What do you want to grow in your backyard?”) You may also want to try choosing a question that focuses on the purpose of each partner attending the meeting. i.e.: “What’s your ‘why’ for joining this meeting today?”
- Make use of the chat box. Use the chat box as a way to carry out introductions and to respond to the content and questions of the meeting. The chat box allows for more people to share their input in less amount of time.

» Engaging Industry Partners When Their Schedules are Already Full

- Switch the perspective of your outreach. Instead of listing off services or benefits of participating in the partnership, focus on listening first. The more you can get to know the industry partners you want to engage, the more likely it is that you can frame the right value proposition. Asking open-ended questions goes a long way in understanding industry’s needs and in building relationships.
- Highlight the partnership’s commitment to industry at the center. Industry partners can become overtaxed and weary of joining more partnerships and committees that don’t center around industry needs. By highlighting the partnership’s commitment to industry being at the center, trust and engagement levels rise.
- As the partnership evolves and grows in numbers, emphasize the importance of onboarding new members to the model. Use one-on-one outreach to welcome and onboard new industry members to the partnership.

»» Creating a Pipeline of Leadership to Ensure Partnership Sustainability

- Develop a structured onboarding process for new members that reverts back to the foundations of the Next Gen model. With all parties on the same level of understanding the model, it becomes easier to move forward as a group.
- Create a partnership norm in meetings where new ideas and voices are uplifted. When partnerships or committees rely too heavily on the voices of a select few, shift the culture of the meetings by asking questions like “in what ways are we open to new ideas and leadership?”.
- Ask the head of an organization to bring a deputy to the meetings with them. By bringing a deputy, this offers up an opportunity to engage a new business leader within your partnership and provides a clearer path for succession and sustainability.

»» Positioning Your Partnership as the Central Hub for Information

- Make a habit of attributing successes back to the partnership. The Northeast Louisiana Healthcare Partnership routinely attributes their wins back to the partnership, garnering credibility and attention back to the partnership while also claiming their organization’s wins.
 - ie: “Thanks to the [insert partnership name], the [insert organization name] was able to [insert a description of the win].”
- Create a central one-pager that highlights the wins of your partnership. Claiming and sharing the partnership’s wins communicates the success of the partnership, ultimately raising interest in the partnership and boosting moral.

»» Re-engaging Partners Who Have Disengaged During COVID

- Bring the network mapping exercise back to your partnership. Guide your partnership through the network mapping exercise from this field guide, allowing your partners the opportunity to visualize your region’s network. With a shared understanding from the exercise, your partnership can move forward with action items and next-step planning.
- One-on-one outreach is more valuable than ever in our current virtual world. Check in with members who have disengaged over the past few months. Use the call to get a better understanding for their organization’s current challenges and focus the call around how the partnership can best support them.



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