

STRUCTURED PROCESS IMPROVEMENT IS NEEDED IN THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROFESSION

In the development arena, too few institutions exist with the capacity and the responsibility to generate new ideas and initiatives to address economic development opportunities and transfer those initiatives to communities and community-based organizations. This unique role of applying resources to build the capacity of groups of communities – addressing the common needs of several organizations – is often termed a ‘wholesale’ approach. This can be contrasted to individualized or customized approaches to process improvement that serve one community at a time.

For those institutions interested in the improvement of the practices of economic development, the task requires resources dedicated to nine sequential tasks. Those tasks to identifying, planning, implementing, evaluating and transferring best practices – and possible yardsticks for measuring progress – are listed below and are summarized in the table on page three.

A hallmark of this kind of continuous improvement is that it results in the creation of a tangible product or service on best practices and "how to" materials about what works in local and regional development. Such products address any stage of conceptualization, resource mobilization, implementation, evaluation and transference on basic or advanced topics of importance to economic development organizations, professionals or volunteers.

#1 Increase the Knowledge Base: The category of efforts involves analysis and reduction of empirical data to information, identification of significant patterns, construction of a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal and publication and dissemination of the work. Often times this requires conducting surveys, examining published materials, or studying related works resulting in the preparation of references such as *subject oriented research reports, concept papers or similar studies*.

#2 Inventory and Compile Development Related Information: Projects under this category involve collection cataloging and dissemination of information of demonstrated use to economic developers in their day-to-day work. Examples of the kinds of products produced from this type of project are: *case studies, program information clearinghouses (list services, publication fulfillment, web-portals) resources directories, organizational directories, and so on*.

#3 Analyze Development Polices: This group of projects involves clarifying a policy area, formative evaluations to reveal best practices in terms of alternative solutions, analysis to uncover the cause and effect variations of the several alternative solutions considered, identification of significant models for describing the patterns, and construction of a framework for resolving the policy issue. Examples of the kinds of products produced from this type of project are: *peer reviewed and published articles, briefing papers, program descriptions, feasibility studies, plan documents and so on*.

#4 Document Innovative Practices and Techniques: Projects under this category will focus on identification of methods and procedures and documentation and dissemination of standard or best practice operating procedures, techniques, programs and incentives. Materials developed should describe workable solutions to the development opportunities and challenges faced by regions and regional development organizations. Tangible materials produced can *include guidebooks (technical publications, how-to handbooks, case studies); documents (sample forms or reports, model legislation, etc.) sample statutory or legislative language and so on* which assist individuals in gaining relevant skills in specific areas and securing information essential to solving specific issues

#5: Direct Resources to Implementation: Projects under this category will be directed to securing positive decisions regarding allocation, reallocation or adjustment of new and existing resources -- of regional, state or federal organizations – to the furtherance of regional development strategies. Typical products include: *financial packaging, grants writing, securing volunteer or pro-bono services, or advocacy to shape institutional commitments to demonstrate a pilot project.*

These projects should apply new cutting-edge problem solving strategies, technologies, and institutional models in community settings, simultaneously building the capacity of the community to sustain the initiative.

#6 Deliver Technical Assistance: Projects under this category are time-specific tasks focusing on a specific content issue, conducted by experienced consultants, often brought into the region for a specific activity. Projects include *technical assistance, which is typically product-oriented and facilitation, which is typically process-oriented.*

#7 Evaluate Programs Successes: Projects under this category include any of the common evaluative methods designed to provide information on systems assessment, program planning, program implementation, program improvement or program certification. Typical products include *decision-making tools such as computer applications or worksheet based evaluation tools.*

#8 Promote Standard, Professional Development Initiatives: Projects under this category will focus on the identification of skill set deficiencies; materials development or curricula preparation; and delivery or dissemination of the materials. Examples of projects include: *education (workshops, conferences), or product/publication fulfillment* where participants increase their awareness and understanding of the causes of particular issues, are exposed to alternative solutions to a particular problem, and learn about strategies to mobilize the resources necessary to implement a successful project.

#9: Transfer and Shape Institutional Structure: Projects under this category are designed to build stronger community-based organizations at the local level that are more successful in applying best practice approaches to addressing regional concerns. This type of capacity building can be process-oriented, for example building *connectivity, collaboration, and communications*, as well as product-oriented, and often results in improved organizational structures, increased citizen participation, greater community/organizational self-reliance, improved leadership abilities, and in general, new institutional arrangements that are capable of addressing specific community needs over an extended period of time.

STRUCTURED PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

For a community, process improvement (also called strategic planning or process reengineering) is the systemic series of steps, dedicated to identifying, planning, implementing, evaluating and transferring best practices, used to generate new ideas to address development opportunities in ways that makes communities more self-sufficient. The major steps and the typical products are:

KEY PROCESS STEPS (WITH POSSIBLE MEASURES)

TYPICAL PRODUCTS

FOCUS

- 1) Identify the customers (practitioners); aggregate their common needs; and convert user needs/interests into a *process improvement opportunity* or request.

SURVEYS, RESEARCH REPORTS

- 2) Inventory and clarify current conventions (responses) related to the request and collect a *body of knowledge* on a subject and the system of which is a part.

CASE STUDIES, DIRECTORIES, CLEARINGHOUSES, TEXTS, EDUCATION

PLANNING

- 3) *Policy analyses* of the subject to uncover the cause and effect variations; to convert the opportunity into requirements; and the requirements into specifications.

ARTICLES, PAPERS, CRITIQUES, ANALYSES, PLANS

- 4) Document and publish system-oriented responses to the opportunity/request, resulting in conversion of specifications into '*tested modules*' or '*codified procedures*'

LEGISLATION, PRIMERS, HOW TO GUIDEBOOKS, TRAINING

IMPLEMENT A SOLUTION

- 5) As a change (transformation) agent, combine appropriate modules/procedures and gather and convert available resources into an *operational (installed) initiative*.

GRANT/ FINANCE PACKAGING, PILOT PROJECTS

- 6) Make *adjustments in the initiative* (the installed program or system) to meet specific circumstances of the region.

FACILITATION, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

CONFIRM THAT THE SOLUTION WORKS

- 7) Evaluate the ability of the initiative, the installed program, to *meet customer needs*, and to *serve public interests* of community and/or economic development.

EVALUATION, CERTIFICATION

ACTION – STANDARDIZE THE SOLUTIONS

- 8) Inform additional practitioners of the installed systems, to transfer the successful effort to new communities and to *improve development organization effectiveness*.

NETWORKING, DISSEMINATION, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- 9) Information and advocacy necessary to encourage stakeholder collaboration to engage in regional or multi-community economic development.

CONSENSUS BUILDING

This Commentary on Development was prepared by Eric L. Rinehart and was originally published by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs (09/02). This document may be freely cited with an appropriate referral to this source. Comments may be directed to the author at rinehart@e-d-solutions.com

ERIC RINEHART, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS, INC. JANUARY 13, 2003