

# Core Organizational Competencies for Rural Development Philanthropy

***What does it take to practice Rural Development Philanthropy?*** This is probably the most frequent question of aspiring and even experienced community foundations and other organizations that want to practice rural development philanthropy (RDP). The short answer is that effective rural development philanthropy practice requires many or all of the skills and competencies required for traditional community philanthropy – and definitely quite a bit more. In this opening outline of RDP competencies, we focus on this extra piece – the competencies that go beyond those required for a well-run traditional community foundation or other community organization.

As with anything we do, we can strengthen our practice of RDP by building the competencies our organization brings to the work. If we want to take up or improve our practice of RDP, it helps to thoughtfully identify the RDP competencies we have in-house, those we can access through friends and partners, and those we may need to add or strengthen. This description of RDP competencies is organized to help think through that inventory so that we can improve our future RDP efforts.

The attention we pay to strengthening these RDP core competencies makes a big difference in the success of our RDP efforts. They pave the road, making it possible to go farther faster, while expending less energy to get there. Those who have successfully practiced RDP have found that it can require transforming their organization.

## The RDP Top Ten Competencies

By examining the practices of foundations that have engaged deeply and effectively in the practice of RDP, we have identified ten major areas or groups of competencies – ***The RDP Top Ten***.

<b><i>THE RDP TOP TEN</i></b> <b><i>Ten areas of competency that are critical to effective RDP practice</i></b>
<b>1. Learn about our community and its people.</b>
<b>2. Understand how and why things work the way they do.</b>
<b>3. Develop and maintain relationships with a wide range of people and groups.</b>
<b>4. Communicate effectively with a wide array of audiences.</b>
<b>5. Develop, attract and manage flexible assets and resources.</b>
<b>6. Build a business model that supports the RDP mission.</b>
<b>7. Build capacity in the community's organizations and people.</b>
<b>8. Facilitate participatory dialogue that yields results.</b>
<b>9. Organize for action.</b>
<b>10. Track results, measure progress and adapt as necessary.</b>

When we first look at this **RDP Top Ten** list it is natural to think: “Hey, we’re already doing all this stuff!” It’s true that every community philanthropy organization does have skills in most or all of these areas. However, within each of these ten competency categories there are lots of specific skills and abilities that we may lack. Moreover, RDP requires that we build some skills and competencies more deeply and broadly than does traditional community philanthropy.

Some RDP competencies – particularly those dealing with cultural competency and developing and maintaining relationships – really must be built internally to do this work. But ***we don’t have to have all these competencies in-house***. It can be just as effective to help build some of these competencies in our partners in the community – as long as we can access them when we need them and our institutional culture supports the work.

***Let’s be clear:*** No two RDP challenges require exactly the same mix of competencies, and there is no one way to acquire all the competencies we may need. For instance, if we take on a community healthcare challenge, we will need a different mix of knowledge and expertise than if we take on a community housing challenge. Even so, experienced RDP organizations have identified a set of ***“core competencies”*** that most organizations need – or must have on tap through their partnerships with others – to practice RDP effectively.

The order of *The RDP TEN* is both sequential and simultaneous. If our organization is starting from scratch, we may have to take on some of the things at the top of the list before we are able to do some things further down.

- The first five areas of competency lay the groundwork - without at least some measure of competency in them, it's really hard to take on the rest.
- Competency areas six through nine are the heart and soul of RDP work. They signal where the practice of RDP really begins to look different from traditional philanthropy and community development.
- The final competency – tracking results, measuring progress and adapting – is our reality check. It keeps us honest and helps us refocus our efforts to make the most long-term difference.

Once we get started, chances are that our organization will be working on strengthening many or all of the ten competencies at once. And, unlike some things, sharpening these competencies isn't a “once and done” matter. To continue to be effective, an RDP organization is constantly building and rebuilding its capacities and competencies.

Rather than develop an exhaustive list of every competency we might need, the balance of this brief will discuss each of ***The RDP Top Ten*** and how it relates to – and is different when – practicing RDP. In each area of competency, we will also provide a “short-list” of some of the most important know-how and skills useful for gaining traction with each competency while practicing RDP.

# THE RDP TOP TEN

## Ten areas of competency that are critical to effective RDP practice

### Competency Area 1 Learn about the community and its people.

Every community philanthropy organization or group spends some time and effort getting to know about the community and its people. But RDP organizations tend to go deeper – ferreting out important trends and building a deep knowledge of the community, its people and the issues and opportunities they face. The information gathered supports and drives an RDP organization’s work and helps ensure meaningful and measurable results.

#### Important Skills and Competencies

- Find or produce useful data (quantitative and qualitative)
- Analyze data to see patterns and identify important trends
- Communicate about data in an understandable and useful way

### Competency Area 2 Understand how and why things work the way they do.

A defining characteristic of RDP is that it brings the knowledge, skills and disciplines from various fields together with the tools of philanthropy to address critical community issues. This requires access to deep knowledge about relevant development fields, about public policy, and about how and why things work the way they do in communities.

#### Important Skills and Competencies

- Understand important disciplines and their tools and how they can be used together to improve results. Especially important disciplines include:
  - Economic development
  - Community development
  - Community organizing
  - Public policy
  - Philanthropy
- Understand formal and informal power structures influencing the community – including both those within the community and those outside
- Know the legislative and policy environment and how to influence it

### Competency Area 3 Develop and maintain relationships with a wide range of people and groups.

Rural Development Philanthropy is intentional about involving everyone affected by an issue in planning and/or deciding what to do about it. Experienced RDP practitioners recognize that involving those who are often ignored or excluded from community decisions for reasons of race, culture, class or ethnicity isn’t just a nice thing to do – it is an essential part of crafting community solutions that are just, work well and are sustainable over time. This requires organizations practicing RDP to get out of their comfort zone, develop new skills and engage with new groups.

#### Important Skills and Competencies

- Know and maintain trusting relationships with people with influence inside and outside our community
- Develop cultural competence
  - Understand when, where and how to meet other people on their own terms
  - Listen to learn, not to place things in our own framework
  - Be comfortable with and have the skill to talk to and work with people unlike oneself
  - Appreciate values and experiences of others without being judgmental
  - Help people from different cultures and economic classes relate to and work with each other
- Form and maintain healthy, workable partnerships to make things happen

**Competency Area 4****Communicate effectively with a wide array of audiences.**

A big part of effectively engaging all of the people in a community who are affected by an issue is knowing how to reach them – knowing how the various groups that make up our community get their information and how to tap into these formal and informal communications channels to get our messages out and bring people in. It also requires crafting our messages in a way that will be understood and accepted by widely different audiences – and will draw them into our RDP efforts. This is hard work – going far beyond ordinary communications tactics and messaging skills.

**Important Skills and Competencies**

- Understand communication vehicles favored by various community groups, expatriates and others who care about our community, and how to access them for our RDP work.
- Write and speak in the languages, vocabularies and styles that are accessible to the people affected by the issues we are addressing
- Access and be skilled in the communication technologies various audiences use.

**Competency Area 5****Develop, attract and manage flexible assets and resources.**

*An RDP-practicing organization will be doing new and different things - often driven by a different group of stakeholders than traditional philanthropy and community development. That means that effective RDP practice requires access to flexible resources - money, staff, technology and more - that can be used in new ways when they are needed. The RDP organization doesn't always have to own these resources, but it does have to be able to tap into, attract, mobilize, and direct resources to get the job done when the window for community action opens.*

**Important Skills and Competencies**

- Identify, mobilize and leverage resources from diverse sources inside and outside the community
- Write proposals, and administer grants and contracts
- Maintain excellent investment and planned giving expertise
- Be adept in a range of entrepreneurial funding and fundraising methods
- Articulate a compelling case for growing unrestricted endowment and community funds

**Competency Area 6****Build a business model that supports the RDP mission.**

*The traditional community foundation business model supports most operations by charging modest fees on the balance of the foundation's funds. This model is not well suited to fully supporting Rural Development Philanthropy. RDP activities often cost more to carry out than traditional donor and grantmaking services, are often more staff intensive, and require greater time and travel cost to cover the distance to rural people and places. As a result, each RDP organization must intentionally build its own purpose-specific business model to support its work. That often requires new ways of thinking, new ways of acting, and new ways of managing the resources we have. It requires all the business acumen of the best managed community foundations – and more!*

**Important Skills and Competencies**

- Develop – and maintain buy-in for – clearly articulated RDP vision, mission and values
- Know what programs and services cost and what revenues they produce
- Conduct financial analysis and projections
- Organize and align every resource towards mission fulfillment
- Select and use current technology to bring efficiency to and support the work

<b>Competency Area 7      Build capacity in the community's organizations and people.</b>	
<i>Because everyone affected by an issue doesn't come to the table equally prepared to participate, an organization must be intentionally inclusive to practice RDP. Nor is there any guarantee that the organizations and people within a community – including the RDP organization – possess the capacities needed to address the critical issues they face. At its best, RDP organizations show up in the community, organize ways for community knowledge to surface and be shared, and partner to identify and build the additional capacities people and organizations within a community need to take on the big issues and find their own answers.</i>	
<b>Important Skills and Competencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach, mentor, educate, listen and learn to build the community's capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ See their community in a larger context</li> <li>▪ Differentiate fact from perception</li> <li>▪ Frame challenges and opportunities in ways that people can understand them and take action</li> <li>▪ Identify existing or create new tools and methods to get things done – and share them!</li> <li>▪ Track and measure progress</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Competency Area 8      Facilitate participatory dialogue that yields results.</b>	
<i>Since RDP is all about engaging all of the affected people in a community in determining how best to address the issues, challenges and opportunities they face, the ability to facilitate purposeful and constructive participatory dialogue and action is at the heart of effective RDP practice. RDP requires a lot more than just getting people in a room to talk. It requires a special set of skills to help make sure everyone is heard, respected, affirmed and valued – and driving that conversation towards collective useful action.</i>	
<b>Important Skills and Competencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen actively</li> <li>• Motivate people to participate and act</li> <li>• Design, structure and lead productive conversation, decision-making and planning sessions</li> <li>• Mediate, negotiate and resolve conflicts</li> <li>• Exercise and consistently demonstrate humility and a constructive sense of humor – with grace</li> </ul>
<b>Competency Area 9      Organize for action.</b>	
<i>All the knowledge, facilitation, planning, relationships, capacity building or money in the world won't accomplish much if someone doesn't organize them effectively for action. RDP efforts have tons of moving pieces – people, ideas, information, resources – that have to align to get things done. Organizing this kind of effort goes many steps beyond convening a meeting, organizing a fundraising event, or operating a grant program.</i>	
<b>Important Skills and Competencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do community organizing – bring people affected by an issue to the table to take concerted action</li> <li>• Develop detailed and practical plans, strategies and tactics to get things done</li> <li>• Form and maintain healthy, workable partnerships to make things happen</li> <li>• Position initiatives to navigate within power and decision-making structures</li> <li>• Manage and govern our RDP organization to maintain our role and participation in the effort</li> </ul>
<b>Competency Area 10      Track results, measure progress and adapt as necessary.</b>	
<i>Traditional philanthropy often operates on the assumption that if we are doing good, things are getting better. RDP goes a step further. RDP is measured by the community based on outcomes. If a community isn't making progress on tough issues – if things aren't getting measurably or observably better – then an RDP-practicing organization is missing the mark. So, tracking results, measuring progress and adapting our efforts to improve our outcomes are more than just good to do – they are fundamental to practicing RDP.</i>	
<b>Important Skills and Competencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop long-term and intermediate outcome measures and benchmarks to help gauge progress along the way</li> <li>• Understand how to create, collect and use data to document starting points and measure change</li> <li>• Adapt and refine activities regularly – driven by what the data tell us about progress towards desired outcomes and goals.</li> </ul>