

Building a Culture of Confidence in Rural and Small Town Canada

David Bruce
Enterprise Miramichi AGM
June 8, 2006

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about this very important topic. Most, if not all of you, are concerned about the future of rural NB and the future of this region more specifically. There is no doubt that we are in a very long run period of economic change and restructuring in our North American society, and this has created a lot of uncertainty and fear about the future.

My message to you today is that if we embrace this change and look for the hidden opportunities that lie beneath the surface, then a prosperous future is possible. In order to do that, we have to start by changing our collective outlook on the future - and develop a sense of confidence and a can-do attitude.

I want to start by briefly exploring some of the changes and conditions that have been influencing some of the economic conditions we face today. But I won't spend much time on this - I want to move quickly to some ideas about moving forward with confidence. I also have a short video clip from the US that I want to share with you. And then I'll wrapup with a couple of key points.

In the simplistic of terms, rural communities encounter two kinds of problems:

- One kind is a crisis from outside, swift and dramatic; maybe a flood, or the abrupt closure of a major employer;
- The second kind of problem is a slow, gradual, bleeding, without a clear external cause or threat.

Many rural communities face both kinds of problems. How do communities respond? With the first kind of problem, a community can respond with one voice and with common actions. There's nothing like a short term, immediate, visible crisis to bring out the best in people in rural communities.

Just think about all the media reports and coverage of natural disasters such as floods in our country in the past decade - part of the reporting has always included stories about how the community has pitched in to help those in need. We see the same thing when there are stories of shutdowns and closures of major employers - people rallying together, standing up for their beliefs, working to find "some kind of solution". The energy and the passion is there.

But with the second of kind of problem, the slow seeping-away, the community may not act as

one; they may debate the problem, they may debate whether or not there is even a problem. But it is difficult to find a solution because the problem itself is elusive and “non-descript”. It’s so frustrating because there is no bad guy, no bogeyman, no bully..... for some, it has been like death by a thousand pricks. It eats away at you, nawing at you... but you can’t quite put your finger on it. It’s difficult. In many cases, the changes and the impacts have been slow, nebulus, fuzzy, and difficult to pinpoint.

And we’ve kind of picked away at the problem by suggesting a bunch of things that we should try:

- more immigrants
- keep our youth
- more tax cuts
- more subsidies
- and so on.

Community leaders, elected representatives, and others, have been searching for solutions to this for some time now. There are no magic bullets, no simplistic solutions. If we had these, well, I probably would not be here right now talking about this. And there is no point in me or anyone else telling you that “everything will be all right, just be patient”. No, quite the opposite. This long period of change or restructuring has been driven by many things that are beyond our control, including:

- aging of the population
- changes in government priorities and spending
- gloablization of the economy
- improved transportation corridors
- the movement of people (youth and families)
- and much more

These changes have wrought untold pain and uncertainty for many individuals, households, small businesses, and large corporations. What we need to find are local solutions and strategies that are appropriate for the local circumstances. And that is not easy to do.... doable, but not easy.

Change has always been with us... it just seems that in the past few years the changes have been coming more quickly and they seem to be more widespread. For example, the increasing “chain store” nature of our retail sector and the improved transportation connections seem at first glance to have drained the life and challenged the survival of small independent retailers... or has it? Just a quick question - how many new independent retail operations have opened in this area in past 10 years?

But enough about the problems, the current situation..... Let me turn now to the main theme or message of my presentation - we need in rural and small town Canada, a willingness to step back, take stock of what is happening and where the bigger picture is headed, and then direct our energies so that we can ride the opportunities that present themselves rather than fight against the tides of change.

It's not easy, but it requires developing a culture of confidence, a willingness to look for opportunities where others see problems, and a willingness to invest our time, energy, and resources in doing the right things that will help rural citizens and entrepreneurs succeed in these changing times.

First, what do we mean by culture? I use this term to describe the general mindset and prevailing thinking of a society or of a community.

- Culture of defeat
- culture of opportunity
- culture of never giving up
- how would you describe the culture here?

Second, what do we mean by confidence? I use this term to describe a sense of being in control of one's own destiny, of being assured of one's own ability..... When we feel we are in control of our own destiny, that we have a sense of self-determination, we are often able to think more clearly and more positively about the future. We can more easily identify opportunities.

At the Rural and Small Town Programme we, and many others, have for many years now been talking about the concept of entrepreneurial communities and entrepreneurial leaders..... communities and leaders who have an optimistic view of the future, of the possibilities, who take calculated risks and who make a real difference. Entrepreneurship is in many ways about confidence - in one's own ability, and in one's own community.

What do we need to be confident about?

- The future
- ourselves
- our neighbours
- our leaders

We need to have a sense that we are all on the same page, that we all have a shared interest and sense of optimism about the future. That's not to say that we can't disagree, that we can't have differences of opinion about what's most important and about where we are headed..... but surely we can develop common values and a shared sense that the future does hold some opportunities for success.

And that's where community leaders and community media become so important. If we hear the bad news often enough, and if we are told that "there is no future" often enough, we will believe it and we will act accordingly - we take our money, our families, and our abilities elsewhere. Community leaders and community media have a responsibility to nurture the positive in our communities, to tell the good news stories, and to be champions of the community.

Who needs to be confident?

- residents
- businesses

- visitors
- potential investors
- local leaders

We all have a stake in the future of rural communities. And to do so, we need to be confident in one another, and be supportive of one another. We can't begrudge the success of an individual or business or of a neighbouring community. We need to take pride in, and be supportive and appreciative of, those in our midst who are successful.

We have a terrible habit, I think, in our society, of undermining those who have been successful because we somehow feel cheated, or jealous, or in some way feel that there must be something wrong with someone making a successful living or a profit from their business - right here in our own communities. Instead, we should be thinking about - how can I do that too? How can I learn from that success? What can I do to build on that?

And this leads me to my next point. We need to celebrate success - in all of its shapes and sizes. We do it in bits and pieces - for example, during small business week, or during some awards ceremonies for recognizing "business of the year" at an AGM like this one or for some other group. But I'm talking about a larger scale approach. We all hear about the big success stories, the ones where we open a new branch plant that will create 100 jobs..... these are the easy ones, and everyone wants to get in on the picture.

But when was the last time each of you took part in a celebration to mark the opening of a 2-person retail outlet in your community, or the expansion of a small company that added 2 more jobs? How many of these very real "successes" go unnoticed by the general community? These successes are real life examples of people reaping the benefits of hard work, determination and their confidence in the community.

So, what are some of the tools we can use or some of the things we should do, to build this sense of confidence and to create a positive outlook on the future. What I'm about to suggest are a series of possibilities or ideas.... I won't go into detail on each of them because each deserve their own specific discussion. Some of these you may already be doing.....

- create and circulate economic outlook sheets - accentuate the positive
- create success profiles - focusing on examples of business starts, expansions, retentions, new products, and also on what our youth are up to, get them into the media and into the schools
- establish mentorship clubs - formal and informal - where youth and new entrepreneurs can be teamed up with successful businesspeople to learn from each other
- celebrate youth - both in business and in general - make them feel like they are a valued part of the community, they are the future, afterall

- establish, support, or expand entrepreneurship curriculum in schools and create entrepreneurship opportunities for youth
- setup a community ambassador program - businesses, volunteer groups, travelers, sports clubs - the can take promotional and business opportunity materials with them when they travel
- start social economy enterprises - to fill the gaps where private sector and government cannot or will not provide the services we need - this could be done by enterprise agencies, churches, NGOs, municipalities - these groups can start and run businesses too
- make sure the community is neat and clean - sends a positive message to ourselves and others that we take pride in who we are and where we live
- have a positive welcome sign for visitors entering the community
- develop a positive motto, slogan, or sound byte - examples from some of the RDAs in NS include:
 - where business moves
 - connect with our energy
 - inspiring communities
 - we are Pictou county (with diverse photos of successful people)
- manage the message - get positive news stories into the media

What I'm getting at behind this list is the idea of confidence, of self-determination, of being in control, and accentuating the positive and the possible. And it is about investing in the future. There is no doubt that positive community change originates from within. The people in this room, your neighbours, your friends, and your colleagues are the best experts on what is possible, and how to get there.

There has been a lot of interest and work in recent years on the idea of asset-based planning as an anti-thesis for strategic planning. The idea is to focus first and almost exclusively on "what do we have here that we can work with" - and more importantly - "how can we turn them into opportunities". This is important - although I still think there is room for strategic planning, because in addition to knowing your assets and strengths, you also need to know what's lacking or what's preventing you from getting the job done - because I think communities need to start thinking from positions of strength. What do we have, what's good about it, what else can we do with it. These are important discussions. When you focus on the resources, capacities and aspirations of a community and its residents, instead of dwelling on their needs, problems and deficiencies, there is a greater sense of confidence and hope, and a greater chance that people will buy in and take action.

There is a program in the US very similar to ours, called the Heartland Centre for Community

Leadership, based in Nebraska. About 15 to 20 years ago, the staff at the program developed a summary of what they saw as common features or characteristics of successful communities. They call it 20 Clues to Rural Community Survival - and they still use this list in their community work when they are invited to facilitate a community planning exercise. I won't go through all of these with you, but there are at least 3-4 that directly support or speak to what I am touching on today:

- Evidence of Community Pride: Successful communities are often showplaces of care, attention, history and heritage. Think for just a minute - what is that you do, here in your communities, to show community pride? Is it enough?
- Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities: Successful communities have learned how to build on strengths and minimize weaknesses. I'm reminded of an exercise that was completed down on the Acadian shore of NS about 5-6 years ago. The entrepreneurship program at Universite de Sainte Anne, in partnership with the business community, completed an inventory of all of the products and services that were imported into the community. Then they did a realistic assessment of which ones could be provided locally. They created a preliminary business plan or business case for about 15 or so such opportunities. Within a year of doing this, about half were taken up and started by local entrepreneurs.
- Sophisticated Use of Information Resources: Leaders access information that is beyond the knowledge base available in the community. Let me ask you this - what kind of connections do each of you have with businesses and community leaders outside of the Miramichi region? Do you take full advantage of their knowledge and expertise? I'm not suggesting that you steal ideas from others, but keeping a pulse on the opportunity horizon is very important.
- Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself: Thriving rural communities believe their destiny is in their own hands. Making their communities good places is a pro-active assignment, and they willingly accept it. Here's a question for you - do you think you are "owed something" by the government or by someone else? Or do you think you "owe it to yourselves" to do something?

Each of these "clues" - and the others in their list, more or less speak to the broader idea of confidence and self-determination. You've got to take the bull by the horns and take charge.

I want to show you a short video clip produced by the Heartland Centre. It reinforces some of the points I have been trying to drive home today..... <http://www.necommfound.org/HTC.htm>

So, let's wrap this up. A lot of what I have been saying, and what the video clip suggests, is that it all begins with youth and with communities themselves:

- Build the skills of a diverse entrepreneurial leadership pool;
- Identify and provide training and support to current and potential entrepreneurs;
- Engage youth in leadership roles and entrepreneurship education and ventures;
- Start a program such as a community foundation or a community investment fund, to capture

at least five percent of the area's estimated wealth transfer for reinvestment in entrepreneurship support services, education and quality of life.

To conclude, I want to return to some of my opening points. We face constant changes in our rural communities, small towns and rural regions. And we are likely to see more changes rather than fewer. We need to develop our ability to think positively and confidently in our own abilities to control the future. We can't always control the forces that create change, but we can control how we react and respond to changing times.

Mark Twain once said - 'There's no sadder sight than a young pessimist'. Our future is now, and it begins with our youth. It begins with providing the opportunities and conditions for them to experience and know that they have a future in this area, that they can be their own bosses, and that they can be in control.

Resistance to change is one of the greatest challenges we face in our society today. There is an old saying - 'Resisting change is like holding your breath - you may succeed, but eventually you will die'. It's not easy - I recognize that and don't want to sugarcoat anything that I've suggested here..... there are no magic bullets. If we build a culture that is fearful, resentful, and vengeful, then we will certainly have no control over the future. There is a Chinese Proverb that says 'People who say it can't be done should not interrupt people doing it'.

If we speak and act with confidence, if we seek opportunities where most would see problems, and if we invest in and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit of our youth, our prospects for a more positive future are much. Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today.

David Bruce
Director, Rural and Small Town Programme
Mount Allison University
506-364-2395
dwb Bruce@mta.ca