

# Needs Assessment: Regional Community Leadership Program

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**Assessment Period:** May–August (Prior to Program Year 3)

**Program Type:** 9-Month Cohort-Based Leadership Development

**Cohort Size:** 10–12 participants annually

## The Context

The Regional Community Leadership Program is a nine-month cohort-based leadership development initiative serving civic and organizational leaders across a rural regional community. The program had completed two cohort cycles at the time of this assessment, with a third cohort scheduled to begin in September.

Program leadership initiated this assessment to determine whether the existing curriculum design was producing the intended outcomes – specifically, whether participants were leading differently because of the program, or simply completing it.

## Assessment Methodology

Data was gathered through three primary channels over a 12-week period prior to Year 3 curriculum development:

**Longitudinal program observation.** Serving as the primary assessor, I had been embedded in the program for two prior cohort cycles as a facilitator and program support, providing direct observational data on participant engagement patterns, session dynamics, and post-session transfer behavior that would not be available to an external evaluator.

**Participant and alumni interviews.** Informal structured conversations with Year 1 and Year 2 alumni examined what participants remembered from the program, what – if anything – they were doing differently as leaders, and what they wished the program had addressed or reinforced.

**Curriculum and evaluation document review.** Existing session materials, facilitator guides, and end-of-program evaluation instruments were reviewed to identify structural gaps between stated program goals and actual design decisions.

## **Key Findings**

### **Finding 1: Sessions functioning as independent events rather than a connected learning journey**

The existing curriculum delivered quality standalone sessions with capable facilitators. However, sessions were designed and sequenced without explicit connective tissue – no prior session content was carried forward, no competency framework organized the sequence, and participants had no mechanism for understanding how individual sessions built toward a larger developmental arc.

**Observed impact:** Participants consistently reported high satisfaction with individual sessions and limited ability to describe what they had learned as a coherent whole. Alumni interviews surfaced strong memories of specific speakers and experiences with weak retention of applicable frameworks or skills.

### **Finding 2: No intentional transfer infrastructure between sessions**

The program design assumed that insight produced during sessions would transfer naturally to participant behavior at work and in the community. No structured mechanism existed to bridge the two – no between-session application challenges, no accountability structures, and no explicit invitation to bring workplace experiences back into the learning environment.

**Observed impact:** Participants treated sessions as discrete professional development events rather than as a continuous practice with real-world application expectations. The learning stayed in the room.

### **Finding 3: Evaluation limited to participant satisfaction (Kirkpatrick Level 1)**

End-of-program evaluation instruments measured participant satisfaction and perceived value. No assessment infrastructure existed to measure whether participants had acquired new knowledge or skills (Level 2), whether they were applying those skills in workplace and community contexts (Level 3), or whether that application was producing organizational results (Level 4).

**Observed impact:** Program leadership had no evidence base from which to make curriculum decisions, demonstrate ROI to organizational sponsors, or make a credible claim that the program was developing leaders rather than providing a valued networking experience. Funding conversations relied on testimonials rather than outcomes data.

## **Recommended Interventions**

### **1. Redesign curriculum around a scaffolded three-phase competency architecture**

Organize the nine-month program into three sequential phases with explicit developmental logic: personal leadership foundation (self-awareness, emotional intelligence, values-based leadership) preceding workplace leadership application (influence, communication, trust-building), which precedes community leadership impact (systems thinking, strategic storytelling, legacy). Each phase builds directly on the competencies developed in the prior phase.

**Rationale:** Scaffolded architecture converts a collection of sessions into a learning journey. Competencies developed early become tools applied later, producing the integration that isolated sessions cannot.

### **2. Build intentional transfer infrastructure between sessions**

Introduce structured between-session application challenges that connect session content to participants' actual leadership contexts. Design session openings to explicitly retrieve and build on prior session content and between-session experiences.

**Rationale:** What happens between sessions is as important as what happens in them. Transfer requires intentional design, not optimism.

### **3. Implement Kirkpatrick Level 3 evaluation from program launch**

Design quarterly impact assessments that document how participants are applying leadership competencies in workplace and community contexts. Build evaluation infrastructure before the program begins – measurement bolted on after the fact cannot capture behavioral change that has already occurred.

**Rationale:** If the program cannot demonstrate behavior change, it cannot demonstrate value. Evaluation designed in from the start produces evidence; evaluation designed after the fact produces testimony.

## Summary

The Regional Community Leadership Program had genuine strengths – engaged participants, authentic facilitators, and real community connection. The gaps identified in this assessment were not failures of content or facilitation. They were structural: a design that had not yet been built to produce the outcomes it was implicitly promising.

The recommended interventions address those structural gaps directly. They do not require new content, new facilitators, or significant additional resources. They require intentional redesign of how existing content is sequenced, connected, and measured.

A program built on these principles does not just develop participants who attended. It develops participants who lead differently because of how it was designed.

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