Midland Voices: Rural leadership brings people together, spurs positive results

By Dennis Berens and Phil Polakoff

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In this era of pandemics, climate changes and fear, people want leadership — at all levels and in all sectors. As Martin Luther King said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in the moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” We seem to be at one of those times today.

To meet today’s challenge, we believe people are hungry for collaborative leadership, the kind often found in rural communities.

Too often, leadership training narrowly focuses on the individual or the corporation instead of the community. Far more effective is leadership built on persistence, innovation and collaboration and fueled by trust and transparency.

Persistence will not let a good idea die, whether it is a way to revive a downtown or to provide flood protection. It has its roots in the history of community building that our nation is founded on.

Innovation focuses on how we can adapt those resources to our needs and then take positive action. If it doesn’t work, we try something else. As we said on the farm when we were kids, “If we have some pliers, some wire and a knife, we can fix almost anything.” That was before digitally driven tractors, of course.

Collaboration means we work together to address an issue: We form a co-op, we raise a barn, we develop a town. Local people, local leaders, collaborate to understand a challenge, formulate a plan — and then act on it.
Leadership today requires an expanded set of skills and values. It creates followership based on trust and transparency. It values knowledge and experience from other people and places, even other nations, inherently understanding that from diversity come ideas and skills for today and for the future. It builds networks needed to succeed. It puts the whole ahead of the individual — and benefits both.

Traveling the roads of rural Nebraska and many other rural states for 30-plus years gave us several helpful insights into leadership, both informal and formal.

In one small rural town, 100-plus people gathered to take five votes on community actions. Before each vote, we saw most of the people look to an elderly woman at the front part of the room. She never voted but would simply nod her head yes or no. Her silent “cue” usually determined how the vote went. Turns out she had been a teacher in this community for almost 50 years. These were her “kids,” and they still trusted her strong, quiet leadership and were willing to follow it.

In another town, the community gathered to brainstorm ways to save their hospital. Each table selected a leader to guide the discussion on each idea.

One particular hospital employee at the meeting collaborated with all the table leaders as the entire group identified challenges and solutions. He took those ideas and kept them moving forward for more than two years. People trusted him and followed his leadership; eventually, he was asked to become the CEO of the hospital.

For more than 10 years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recognized outstanding community health leaders. They were local people who stepped up to lead. Look for the trained and experienced leaders in your community.

Collaboration, persistence, innovation. Followership based on trust and transparency. And a renewed focus on the values needed to lead today. Those are the traits of effective leaders, the kind our community, nation and world demand. Working together, we can create a healthier rural America.

In these times, if “I” is replaced with “we,” even illness becomes wellness.