

Request for Support: A Tool for Strengthening Network Capacity

Abstract

A request for support (RFS) is a tool that is used to strengthen network capacity by prioritizing needs and optimizing learning opportunities. Within University of Minnesota Extension, we implemented an RFS process through an online survey designed to help leaders of food networks identify and rank learning and capacity-building needs and indicate their preferred methods for partnering with us to meet those needs. The tool was effective in enabling us to systematize teaching and engagement and tailor efforts to the needs and assets identified through the survey. Other Extension professionals can adapt the tool to guide their work with networks.

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Introduction

Networks are better equipped to address the complex challenges of today than single organizations (Plastrik, Taylor, & McElfresh, 2014). Extension professionals have embraced networks (including coalitions, alliances, learning communities, and place-based initiatives) as key partners in work that is increasingly community-centric (Bartholomay, Chazdon, Marczak, & Walker, 2011; Scarce, n.d.; Strong, Rowntree, Thurlow, & Raven, 2015). Our team is part of one of the University of Minnesota (UM) Extension units that engages with approximately 70 Minnesota food networks, defined as community-based, cross-sector groups of people working together to solve complex challenges of the food system. The aim of our work with food networks is to build their collective capacity to implement the Minnesota Food Charter (<http://mnfoodcharter.com/>).

Request for Support Tool

In 2016, we launched the Food Networks in Minnesota Request for Support (RFS) tool, an online survey, to systematically gather information about the needs of food networks and their preferred methods for partnering to meet those needs. The RFS comprises 14 questions distributed across four sections: Network Information, Network Partners, Network Priorities, and Learning and Engagement Needs. The full RFS tool can be viewed at <http://z.umn.edu/mfcnrequest>.

We implemented the RFS through the Qualtrics online survey platform. The tool was introduced through a

recorded webinar about the system of support available for food networks, which includes Extension and other organizations involved in the Minnesota Food Charter Network (MFCN) (mnfoodcharter.com/the-network).

The RFS was completed by representatives of 19 food networks ranging in membership size from five to 200 individuals. We analyzed the data and then distributed the data to core partners within the MFCN to inform and influence their work with food networks. Two questions in particular (shown in Figure 1) were the most useful in guiding our work to meet the specific needs of the networks.

Figure 1.

Food Network Request for Support Questions for Ranking Capacity-Building Needs and Methods of Engaging to Meet Those Needs

Q12 Please rank the following indicators by level of importance in terms of the learning and capacity building needs of the food network (1 - most important)

1. Influencing Policy - at the local, regional, statewide or national scales
 2. Building Effective Networks – organizational structure, setting a common agenda, engaging the "right" people, etc.
 3. Supporting New Leaders – tools for building leadership skills among partners, especially people across race, ethnicity, gender and economic status.
 4. Communications – to improve value of network, influence decision makers, broaden membership/engagement, etc.
 5. Outreach - authentic ways to engage new voices and perspectives, especially people across race, ethnicity, gender and economic status.
 6. Evaluation – to understand why key elements are working/not working, to be accountable to funders, supervisors.
 7. Resource Development – staffing the network, diversify funding, creative fundraising, how to ask for funds, thinking beyond funding to sustain work, etc.
 8. Incorporating Equity – building accountability measures to ensure equitable engagement and participation, walking the walk, not just talking the talk.
 9. Maintaining Action Orientation – staying focused on results while maintaining strong relationships and good processes.
 10. Other: --- _____
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Q13 Please move the following indicators to rank them by level of interest regarding how your network would prefer to engage in capacity building efforts (1 - most important)

1. Interactive online learning opportunities (i.e. webinar)

2. Regular online meetings with food network leaders across the state (i.e. video call)
 3. Regular conference calls with food network leaders across the state
 4. Mentorship program between food network leaders across the state
 5. Regional in-person meetings with food network leaders
 6. Statewide in-person conference of food network leaders
 7. Individualized in-person support
 8. Other: _____
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Note: For both questions, respondents used a drag-and-drop function to reorder the items according to their perceived value.

Implementation of Results

The RFS results informed our teaching and engagement strategies in 2016 and 2017. On the basis of the aggregated results from question 12, we focused our efforts on the learning and capacity-building topics of leadership, development of effective networks, communication, outreach, and resource development. We used the aggregated results from question 13 to guide our selection of delivery methods, leading us to provide a statewide convening, regional in-person meetings, regular online meetings, and individualized in-person support. More information regarding University of Minnesota Extension's work with food networks is available at <http://z.umn.edu/mnfoodnetworks>.

The statewide convening we presented in 2016 was attended by 72 food network leaders. By structuring the content of the convening around the results of the RFS, our team was able to ensure that the teaching was relevant and timely and optimally met the needs of participants. In an online survey completed by 38 of the convening attendees, 100% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the convening benefited them or their network and that the information learned at the convening was useful. Additionally, as a result of data-driven planning, we leveraged more than \$40,000 in funding for the convening.

Lessons Learned

The RFS tool has effectively guided our teaching and engagement priorities with food networks in Minnesota. The assessment provided by use of the tool helped us prioritize topics for food network learning and capacity building, and the results were leveraged to implement innovative strategies for filling the gaps revealed by the tool. An area of improvement would be to have more food networks complete the survey so that a more robust understanding of the needs of all food networks in the state can be gained. Additionally, one survey participant suggested that the title of the tool was off-putting and should have been more broadly framed as an "invitation to engage." Another lesson learned is the importance of having network leaders weigh in about the development of such a tool, for example, by vetting the list of strategies and methods described in Figure 1. Overall, however, the systematic approach described here demonstrates the value Extension professionals can create through community- and network-centric programming.

References

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