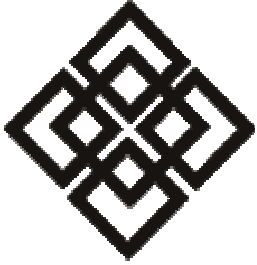


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Entrepreneurial Facilitation: Approaches for Boosting Entrepreneurship in Local Economic Development

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Communities across the nation are struggling to find viable economic development opportunities and have long relied on industrial recruitment to create businesses and jobs. This traditional community economic development strategy is becoming an increasingly difficult approach, given the exodus of manufacturing companies from the United States. Business retention and expansion is another strategy which fosters businesses and industries that are already located within a community to encourage them to stay and expand. Another promising approach is developing local entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial facilitation, the focus of this article, is a community-based method of addressing the needs and barriers facing local entrepreneurs. The objective of entrepreneurial facilitation is to encourage and retain a diverse and robust local entrepreneurial economy that leads to more opportunities for local residents. The purpose of this article is, first, to introduce readers to the concept of entrepreneurial facilitation, and second, to provide some guidelines on the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of entrepreneurial facilitation, namely Enterprise Facilitation[©] and Entrepreneurial Coaching.

Entrepreneurial facilitation is the process of providing direct, customized one-on-one assistance to an aspiring or active entrepreneur. The most popular model of entrepreneurial facilitation is 'Enterprise Facilitation'[©], a program developed by Ernesto Sirolli. The Sirolli model has gained wide spread prominence; it has been applied in communities across Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. To date, however, there have only been limited evaluations of the long-term outcomes of the program. Nevertheless, some known benefits and drawbacks of the Sirolli method as well as a modification to the approach will be discussed.

Some communities may be more likely to turn toward an emerging form of entrepreneurial facilitation called entrepreneurial coaching. The prospects and limitations of the entrepreneurial coaching approach are also discussed in this article.

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This article also proposes an initial framework for communities that are choosing among different approaches to entrepreneurial facilitation. Often, community economic development policy makers do not have the luxury to wait for an extensive evaluation of new programs, which may take years to complete. While better evaluation data will become available in time, it is nonetheless important to provide an initial tool for community developers who are implementing entrepreneurship programming.

Benefits of Entrepreneurship as a Development Strategy

In contrast to the industrial recruitment model, whereby communities try to attract firms from outside the area to locate in their communities, entrepreneurship relies on local resources for job creation and economic activity. Jobs created under this development method, although usually fewer in number, are typically more skilled than employment opportunities in large firms (Sharp et al., 2002). Tolbert et al. (2002) found that local communities are enhanced by small, locally owned businesses. Because they are embedded within the community, small businesses and community institutions improve socioeconomic well-being (higher income levels, and lower levels of income inequality, poverty and unemployment). Further, entrepreneurship engages a greater diversity of local leadership that frequently participates in local civic organizations (Sharp et al., 2002).

Thus, an entrepreneurial strategy has greater potential to build civil society and community sustainability. Entrepreneurship is particularly gaining popularity in rural America, as the loss of both traditional manufacturing and farming jobs is forcing many rural residents to either commute long distances for employment opportunities or to relocate to (sub)urban areas.

Supporting Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurship

Traditional entrepreneurship support, including technical and management assistance, is driven by top-down programs, primarily through the U.S. Small Business Administration, including Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), and Small Business Institutes (SBI). These programs were initiated over three decades ago due to the recognized lack of, and need for, technical assistance services for small business owners. Technical assistance, or one-on-one counseling, is provided at the SBDC's and SCORE chapters. Counselors work with clients, guiding them through the process of developing a business plan with the focus being on the business idea or concept. While these programs involve local residents, they are restricted and driven by the nature of the federal funding.

It is increasingly recognized, particularly in rural communities, that there is a gap in support services to entrepreneurs that is not filled by technical assistance providers. Typically, because SBDCs must serve a large number of communities, they are unable to provide long term customized assistance to any individual entrepreneur or business owner. The long distances associated with traveling to SBDC offices and unfamiliarity with their procedures has limited their use by many entrepreneurs, particularly those in rural areas. Further, SCORE chapters are typically located in urban regions where there is a supply of retired and active business managers.

A growing body of research has identified the elements necessary for rural communities to support entrepreneurship. The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship has developed a typology of community support for entrepreneurship: Basic, Advanced, and High Performing Support (Macke, 2003). Having quality physical infrastructure, reasonable tax levels and community awareness of entrepreneurs are elements of communities with *basic* entrepreneurship support. In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, communities with *advanced* support provide entrepreneurial training classes, technical assistance, youth entrepreneurship programs and access to financial capital. Communities with *high* performing entrepreneurship support provide customized, one-on-one assistance to individual entrepreneurs in a community, or entrepreneurial facilitation (Macke,2003). Based on this framework, entrepreneurial facilitation, coupled with the other support features of the basic and advanced levels, represents the most advanced level of support for new businesses and business ideas in a community.

Unlike the federal programs, entrepreneurial facilitation programs are driven by community involvement in the planning and implementation process. External groups and agencies may provide funding, but play only an ancillary role in operating entrepreneurial facilitation programs. Under entrepreneurial facilitation, community leaders strive to create an entrepreneurial culture and assist entrepreneurs. A major difference between entrepreneurial facilitation and technical assistance, such as provided by the Small Business Development Centers, is that the focus is on the person rather than on the business idea. Facilitators are concerned with ensuring an appropriate person-business fit and assessing personal characteristics versus simply developing a business plan. Another important difference is the focus of facilitators on the development of a culture of entrepreneurship versus simply providing individual business assistance.

While these differences are important to recognize, it is also critical that entrepreneurial facilitators are aware of the complementarities between the two approaches. Technical assistance providers, such as Small Business Development Centers, can provide resources that facilitators cannot. This assistance might include technical knowledge of a specific industry, financial analysis tools, or templates for specific types of business plans. Entrepreneurial facilitators should take advantage of building a working relationship with other support providers and refer clients when appropriate for such services.

What is Entrepreneurial Facilitation?

Entrepreneurial facilitation recognizes that the person, rather than the business idea, is of first and foremost importance. Thus, a facilitator focuses on the goals and dreams of the interested person, and not simply on the details of developing the business plan. They engage clients in a peer relationship, rather than an expert one, as they attempt to assist a person in starting and running a business. James Flaherty (1999), a well-known coaching consultant, emphasizes the importance of the relationship between a facilitator and the client. It must be based upon mutual respect and trust, and both the facilitator and the client should feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Furthermore, facilitators are embedded in local communities and often seek to improve the entrepreneurial culture through such activities as youth entrepreneurship programs. These types of activities, while not unknown, are far less common among the traditional federally supported programs. There is not, however, one specific model of entrepreneurial facilitation. The Sirolli approach of enterprise facilitation is probably the most well-known and frequently implemented model. A modified version of Enterprise Facilitation© and entrepreneurial coaching, an emerging type of facilitation are discussed later in the article. The differences between models are important to consider when deciding which facilitation model is best for a given community.

Entrepreneurial Facilitation in Action

Enterprise Facilitation©

Ernesto Sirolli, the founder of the Sirolli Institute, developed Enterprise Facilitation©, which, as previously mentioned, has been employed in locations throughout the world. Enterprise Facilitators© provide free support to entrepreneurs within a client community. The facilitators are employed full-time within a community, which ideally has a population between 15 and 40 thousand (Sirolli 1999). The Enterprise Facilitator© is available to all people in a community on a confidential basis to help them sort through their dreams and proposals for creating their business. The facilitator's goal is to nurture that person by helping them build the experiences and skills necessary to be a successful entrepreneur.

This facilitation approach starts from the assumption that there are many people who dream of being their own boss and starting their own business (Sirolli, 1999). However, many of these same people do not feel comfortable approaching or using the existing government offices and support system that currently prevail.

Under Enterprise Facilitation©, a 'Community Board' is critical to the success of a Sirolli project. The Board is composed of residents of the local community, selected by the Sirolli Institute via an interview process, who are passionate about improving the economic viability of their community. The Sirolli Institute trains both the board members and the Enterprise Facilitator© on how to implement the program.

The Community Board helps establish credibility of the facilitation program within the community. The board is responsible for hiring the Enterprise Facilitator©, who is typically a member of the local community. The board guides and supports the facilitator throughout their employment. Each community board member agrees to introduce the facilitator to at least ten people in the community, which helps the facilitator establish a strong rapport with the community.

Enterprise Facilitation© is based upon a principle of passive involvement. Entrepreneurs must be self-motivated and passionate about their proposed business idea. If they are not, it is unlikely, according to the philosophy behind this approach, that they will be successful. Enterprise Facilitators©, therefore, do not aggressively seek out potential entrepreneurs. Rather, the enterprise facilitator makes sure that he or she is readily visible to the aspiring entrepreneurs within a community. According to Sirolli, by employing this passive involvement method, the traditional power relationship between an

'expert' and 'client' no longer exists; community members will feel comfortable approaching the facilitator (Sirolli, 1999).

Assessing Enterprise Facilitation©

The primary advantage of the Sirolli approach is that it works on a local level and insists on treating entrepreneurs as partners and people first rather than dealing with the business details only. Another strength of the system is that it has been tested in several different countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States) and has a successful track record in many communities. For example, Lincoln County Enterprise Development Corporation (LCEDC) in Minnesota started in 1999, claims that approximately 250 new or improved businesses to-date are prospering in the county, employing 500 residents, which is almost 17 percent of the county's work force as a result of the Sirolli approach. Since the Sirolli program began in Lyon County, Minnesota, in 1991, 190 new jobs and 55 new businesses have been created, and there have been 60 business expansions (Webb, 2001). In Baker County, Oregon, which started the Sirolli program in July 2000, 42 new jobs have been created, 14 new businesses, and four business expansions (Webb, 2001).

The major drawback of the Sirolli approach is its expense. A large, upfront monetary commitment is required to become an official member of the Sirolli system (several hundred thousand dollars over three years). Many communities have struggled to raise this type of capital, although in some cases, states have raised part of the money and challenged local communities to raise matching funds. Nevertheless, for some smaller, rural communities, sustaining a full-time Enterprise Facilitator© may be a challenge. Finally, although there is a well documented training system for aspiring Enterprise Facilitators©, the information and training programs are not in the public domain.

A Modified-Sirolli Approach: Planning Adams County Tomorrow (P.A.C.T.)

Adams County, located on the Ohio River in southeast Ohio, is the site of a community program that is drawing on the Sirolli approach, but is much less costly. Brenda Emery is the local entrepreneurial facilitator in Manchester and director of *Planning Adams County Tomorrow (P.A.C.T.)*. Inspired by the Sirolli approach, Brenda works to stimulate new business development and ensure that existing entrepreneurs stay in business. She believes that good entrepreneurial facilitators must be "willing to work long hours, meet with clients at their homes or farms, and keep all information confidential" (personal interview, October 2003).

Under the Adams County model, the entrepreneurial facilitator's work is accomplished in coordination with a local network of sponsors and supporters. These supporters range from accountants and lawyers to local government officials, retirees and other community members who willingly give their time by sharing both information and advice with aspiring entrepreneurs. Each network member is expected to provide services to clients, which include pro bono legal and accounting work, marketing and graphic arts assistance, business plan development, or financial planning.

One key challenge, according to Brenda, is to avoid overloading any network member with too

much work. Although many of the network volunteers do the work in a community minded spirit, they also expect that if client-entrepreneurs establish viable businesses, they will then pay for the same services in the future. Brenda says that “the makeup of the committee is critical; you need a diverse set of community members, including gender, occupation and long time residents versus newcomers” (personal interview October 2003).

Currently, the group meets once a month to decide which clients they will work with. Brenda uses a screening process to decide who is serious about becoming an entrepreneur, which includes formal interviewing as well as personal intuition. Once clients have passed through this screening process, they are able to access the expertise and skills of the network members.

The Adams County, Ohio model differs slightly from the Sirolli Enterprise Facilitation© method. The Ohio model still employs a full-time facilitator, but avoids some of the startup costs associated with the Sirolli approach. The downside is that Adams County was not able to participate in the Sirolli training curriculum. This gap was filled by relying on local and regional resources through the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in Athens, Ohio. ACEnet is a business incubator and economic network organization that is focused on building and sustaining economic development efforts in southeastern Ohio. With the program in Adams County, ACEnet’s objective was to expand its direct outreach beyond Athens County.

Given the high level of poverty in Adams County (which is twice the state average) and its desire to support the community, Planning Adams County Tomorrow (P.A.C.T.) is impacting the county. The expense of P.A.C.T. is less than that of trying to recruit a large company to enter into Adams County, and the jobs created are more likely to be sustainable. While an entrepreneurial facilitator may cost the community \$50,000, according to Larry Fisher of the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet), the organization that sponsors Brenda’s work, if the facilitator helps to create five new businesses in a year, each business only costs \$10,000. This is inexpensive compared to the cost of jobs acquired through a business recruiting approach. Additionally, this approach directly benefits the community as a whole, since businesses are likely to hire community members which generates more income and local tax revenues. Given this information, “this seems like a small investment with a significant payoff for many rural communities” states Fisher (personal interview, October 2003).

Entrepreneurial Coaching

Entrepreneurial coaching is an emerging approach to entrepreneurial facilitation. Coaching, or ‘mentoring, has been around for ages, whereby a client is ‘coached’ on the necessary skills by an expert. Entrepreneurial coaches provide (1) assistance and support to local entrepreneurs and (2) stimulate the entrepreneurial culture of local communities. The entrepreneurial coaching model was developed in response to some of the disadvantages of the Enterprise Facilitation© method; specifically, the very large up front cost that each community must incur and the potential lack of resources or demand to support a professional, full-time position.

Like other types of entrepreneurial facilitation, the objective of entrepreneurial coaching is to

assist a person to achieve their objectives of starting and running a successful business. Unlike technical assistance providers, coaches are not experts in industry trends, market or financial analysis. Although some coaches may have these skills due to their occupation or educational background, when they used those skills they acted as service providers, not coaches.

Since an entrepreneurial coach comes into contact with many different people and businesses, they can serve as a hub for connecting business owners who may benefit from knowing each other. Therefore, coaches play an important role in building networks for aspiring entrepreneurs with existing business service providers, financial resource providers, business suppliers and potential customers. While networking is always an important asset for businesses, this is especially true for new businesses that often struggle through their first few years.

In contrast to the Sirolli system, whereby the facilitator is a full-time paid profession, coaches work only part-time, providing assistance as part of their existing job or on a voluntary basis. Entrepreneurial coaches are residents of the community and may include teachers, counselors, chamber of commerce directors, extension agents, local government officials, bankers, accountants, lawyers, or other interested citizens. Another key difference between Entrepreneurial coaches and Enterprise Facilitators[©] is that the former are proactive; they seek out aspiring and would-be entrepreneurs. The coaching program comes from a viewpoint that there are many valuable, yet less assertive would-be entrepreneurs that the Sirolli philosophy of 'wait and see' overlooks.

Additionally, coaches are involved in engaging the broader community in which they reside to support and encourage an 'entrepreneurial spirit.' The entrepreneurial coach acts to change and direct the mindset of business owners, potential business owners, local politicians, and community residents from one which is often weary of entrepreneurship to one which accepts it as vital for community sustainability. Encouraging this type of 'entrepreneurial culture'-- a shared set of attitudes, beliefs, and values about organizing and managing entrepreneurship within a community -- is a long term process. However, coaches are crucial to establishing such a culture, as they guide citizens to think about business ownership in a positive light that will benefit both individual entrepreneurs and the community at large. The following example illustrates how Entrepreneurial coaching is being applied in rural Kentucky.

Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaching Institute

This program is based in a 19 county region in Northeastern Kentucky, which has long been dependent on tobacco farming as a core part of its economic base. Both the recent tobacco policy changes and the loss of manufacturing jobs, however, are forcing the region to search for new economic alternatives. Given much of the region's geographic isolation and the lack of traditional employment opportunities, entrepreneurship is a key economic development strategy for the future. The 19 county Agriculture Councils and state Agricultural Development Board invested significant resources into training Entrepreneurial coaches, which began in fall, 2004. The Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaching Institute (KECI) is in the early stages and outcome measures are not expected until sometime after the first year

of training has been completed in early 2006.

Under the KECI, up to three volunteer entrepreneurial coaches from each county are being trained to serve as entrepreneurial facilitators in their communities. Coaches were recruited through a marketing campaign and candidates went through an application and interview process. Coaches include teachers, retired business people, bankers, farmers or other individuals committed to the long-term sustainability of their community. Rather than acting as experts in production, marketing, or finance, coaches ask questions and work with clients as they think through alternatives to traditional types of livelihood. Additionally, coaches from across the region work with one another, creating networking opportunities for their clients.

Coaches are a resource for all community members on a confidential basis, although because of the loss of income from traditional tobacco farming, farm families are particularly encouraged to use the coaches. The KECI focuses on stimulating both on-farm diversification and off-farm enterprise development.

Although KECI is a new program, some anecdotal evidence exists on the success of the program. Even during the training phase, entrepreneurial coaches have begun to work with local entrepreneurs in areas such as value-added agriculture, golf club manufacturing, and youth entrepreneurship camps. Legislators and local leaders have been very enthusiastic about the program and have attended training events and called for KECI program leaders to testify before a State House Committee. Although these are very preliminary results, they may signal the potential staying power of a volunteer-based entrepreneurial facilitation approach.

Assessing Entrepreneurial Coaching

One major strength of the coaching approach, particularly when compared with the Sirolli method, is that it is a low-cost per facilitator system. The cost of the program is the training time and materials required. The Entrepreneurial coaching training material is in the public domain, therefore the cost of training a coach(es) in a community should not run more than \$10,000 per person depending on the structure of the training modules and the length of the training period.

A simple example will help illustrate the potential cost and coverage of an entrepreneurial coaching program. This cost calculation assumes a group of 25 coaches attending a one year training program which meets roughly eight times (2-3 days per meeting). This cost figure would vary depending on the type of speakers or educators who were hired for the training and the cost of lodging, meals and other incidentals during the training period. For an average size program (25 coaches at \$10,000 per coach), the total cost would run approximately \$250,000. This total cost is less than the Sirolli approach and far less on a cost per facilitator basis.

An obvious question is: How many coaches should be trained? Current evidence and practice from the Kentucky program suggests that two coaches per county provide adequate coverage assuming county size of approximately 15,000 to 40,000 people. Thus, 25 coaches could cover an area roughly equal to 12-13 counties. Thus, entrepreneurial coaching may be a feasible strategy to engage an eco-

conomic development program on a regional basis. Larger population concentrations may require more coaches. The per person costs figures cited above (\$10,000) assumes a group of 20-30 coaches. Fewer numbers of coaches would be more expensive per person due to fixed costs such as speakers and other economies of scale factors.

Entrepreneurial coaching is easily integrated into communities, as some individuals already undertake this type of activity on an informal basis. Yet, under the coaching approach, a rigorous training curriculum ensures that coaches have the tools to effectively assist entrepreneurs.

While the volunteer basis of the coaching approach is considered a strength, as it shows that the coach is committed to their community, it may also be a potential weakness of the program. In order to sustain coaching, community members must be willing to give their time to assist nascent entrepreneurs. This commitment may fade over time without the necessary community support and desired resources. Some communities may utilize entrepreneurial coaching as a step towards Enterprise Facilitation© or some modified approach with a full-time facilitator, such as that used in Adams County, Ohio.

Confidentiality may be difficult in small communities, yet is crucial for entrepreneurial facilitation to work appropriately. Entrepreneurs and business people will not discuss the intricacies of their business unless they are completely confident that others, including competitors, will not learn this information. Finally, although the curriculum and training materials from the KECI will eventually be in the public domain and accessible by any community or economic development professional for free, the coaching program is the early stages of development and this information is not yet available. The KECI is currently undergoing a thorough process and outcome evaluation that should shed light on its potential to be replicated.

Which Type of Entrepreneurial Facilitation is Right for Your Community?

Community economic developers must ask not only whether a community should have a facilitator, but if so, which type of facilitator is best for their situation. Each form of entrepreneurial facilitation discussed above, Enterprise Facilitation©, the modified Sirolli approach, and entrepreneurial coaching, has advantages and disadvantages. Some important considerations to keep in mind when deciding which entrepreneurial approach is right for your community are:

Size and Location of Your Community

Where is your community located? Urban, suburban, or larger rural communities may have sufficient volume of entrepreneurial activity and financial resources to adopt either the original or modified version of Enterprise Facilitation©. Small rural communities may simply not have enough volume to justify more than a part-time facilitator. It is more apt for a community of this size to train several volunteer entrepreneurial coaches.

Available Monetary Budget for Project

How much is your community able to contribute for an entrepreneurial facilitator? If your community has the funding, Enterprise Facilitation© is an attractive option. However, if your community does not have the resources to support Enterprise Facilitation©, a volunteer approach is more easily adopted, at least initially. Also, a community may consider partnering with nearby communities in order to pool scarce resources.

Existing Entrepreneurship Support System

What is the state of entrepreneurship support in the community? It is necessary to review the existing entrepreneurial support mechanisms within your community. Is there a SBDC or community college that provides technical assistance to entrepreneurs? Perhaps, a staff member could be dedicated, at least half-time, to enterprise facilitation. The coaching volunteer approach might complement existing resource providers. For example, SCORE counselors could be trained to act as entrepreneurial coaches, providing a new orientation to their services. In turn, this might provide more clients for the SBDC once entrepreneurs are coached to the point where they are ready to write a business plan.

Local Culture

Does your community have a history of innovation, local entrepreneurship, and risk taking? If so, the community may be able to convince an existing or retired entrepreneur to serve as a facilitator. However, if the community does not have a history of entrepreneurship or it has depended upon one large industry, individuals from the local community may need to be trained as entrepreneurial facilitators or a full-time facilitator may need to be hired from outside the community. What is the supply of potential volunteer coaches in the community? If the community has an active volunteer component, the coaching approach is likely to work well. If not, a community may need to pursue the full-time facilitator approach.

Table 1 depicts some of the major differences among the entrepreneurial facilitation approaches. Categories for comparison include upfront and operating costs, staffing and training curriculum. The facilitator row describes whether a full-time or volunteer approach is utilized. The upfront cost row depicts the potential investment needed from community and/or external sources to get the program started. Operating costs are the ongoing expenses needed to cover the training and sustainable engagement of facilitators. The training curriculum describes whether the materials needed to engage facilitators is in the public or private domain and has a direct impact on upfront costs. Finally, regional scope is the general area that each of the facilitator type models should attempt to serve to maximize effectiveness. This table may assist community decision makers in determining which approach will be right for their region.

Table 1: Differences between Enterprise Facilitation© (Sirolli Approach), Modified-Sirolli Approach, Entrepreneurial Coaching

	Enterprise Facilitation© (Sirolli Approach)	Modified Sirolli Approach	Entrepreneurial Coaching
Facilitator	Full-Time	Full-time	Part-Time (Volunteer)
Upfront Cost	High	Moderate-Low	Moderate-Low
Operating Cost	Moderate-High	Moderate	Low
Training Curriculum	Proprietary	Semi-Proprietary	Public Domain
Entrepreneur relationship	Passive	Active	Active
Regional Scope	County or multi-county	County or multi-county	County or smaller division

Conclusion

Entrepreneurial facilitation has emerged as a potentially important method for stimulating new business ventures. Entrepreneurial facilitation is the process of nurturing aspiring and existing entrepreneurs in local communities. There are several types of entrepreneurial facilitation. In the Enterprise Facilitators© approach, pioneered by Ernesto Sirolli, full-time facilitators seek to assist local entrepreneurs build successful business ventures. Entrepreneurial coaches, while similar to Enterprise Facilitators©, work on a part-time, volunteer basis in a limited geographic area. Coaches also play an active role in stimulating the entrepreneurial culture or climate of their community. However, as shown by *Planning Adams County Tomorrow*, entrepreneurial facilitation can be modified to fit a given community. The size of the community, the human and monetary resources currently available, the local culture and the current entrepreneurship support system are all important criteria for a community to consider if exploring an entrepreneurial facilitation approach.

Additional Sources of Information

For an excellent overview of entrepreneurship at the rural community level, visit the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship (<http://www.ruraleship.org/>) For more information on enterprise facilitation, visit the Sirolli Foundation www.sirolli.org, or read Sirolli’s book *Ripples from the Zambezi: Passion, Entrepreneurship and the Rebirth of Local Economies* (complete citation below). For additional information on entrepreneurial coaching, visit the website for the Kentucky Entrepreneurship Coaches Institute at www.uky.edu/ag/keci.

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