

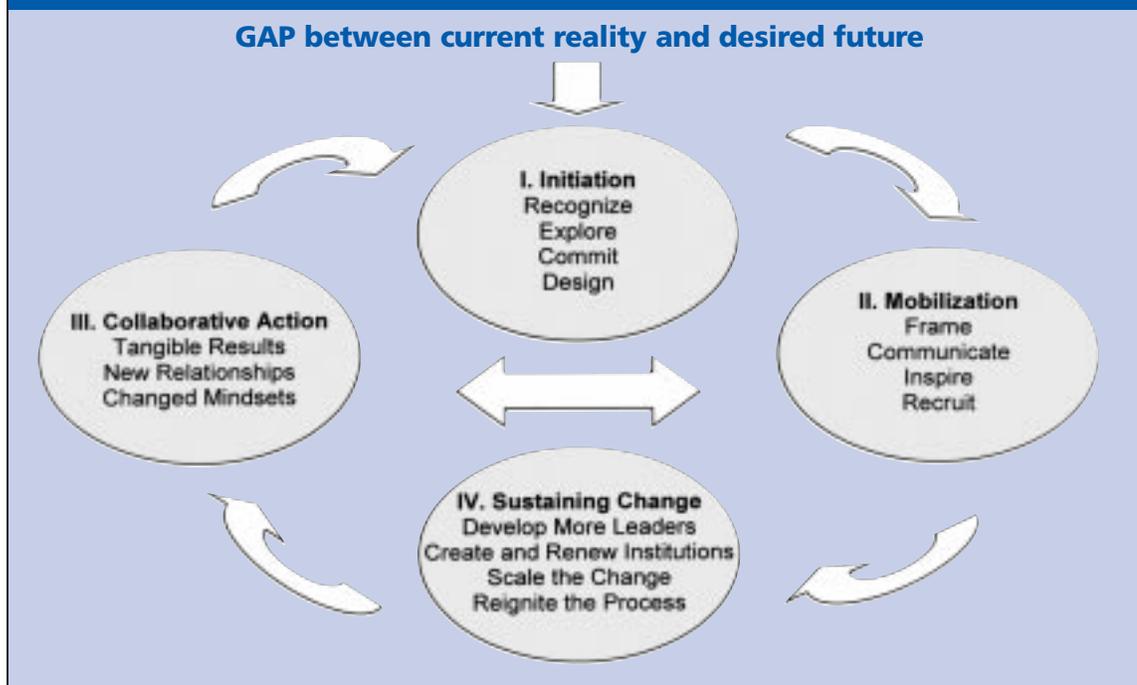
# The Practice of Stewardship

## DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP FOR REGIONAL ACTION

### Alliance for Regional Stewardship

We hear a lot about regionalism, but how does an area actually go about creating a regional identity complete with regional leadership, regional initiatives, and regional institutions? Is it possible for us to all pull together in the same direction? The Alliance for Regional Stewardship studied 25 regions and came up with some answers.

Figure 1: Regional Action Builds Stewardship Capacity



## Introduction

As regional challenges become more complex, the need to develop regional leaders is an increasingly pressing concern. But how does a region develop broad leadership when current developments — devolution of authority, globalization of companies, mobile and disconnected populations — threaten to create an “anonymity of leadership”?

This article describes how a new type of leader — regional stewards — is creating opportunities for regions. Many communities can identify at least several individuals who provide this type of leadership for their region. These people act on a sense of responsibility for the long-term future of their region and are effective agents of change.

Regional stewardship is different from traditional leadership that focuses on organizations. Leading successfully in a single organization or sector is not sufficient for regional stewardship. Today’s regional challenges require a new level of problem-solving capability and the ability to work across political, sectoral, and institutional boundaries.

Regional stewardship is both an individual trait and a regional capacity. Discussions about regional stewardship often focus on individuals who are “leading” the region. But we also see that some regions continually demonstrate the capacity to innovate and outperform others, even as individual leaders come and go. They seem to have the ability to sustain change over time. This capacity goes beyond individuals —

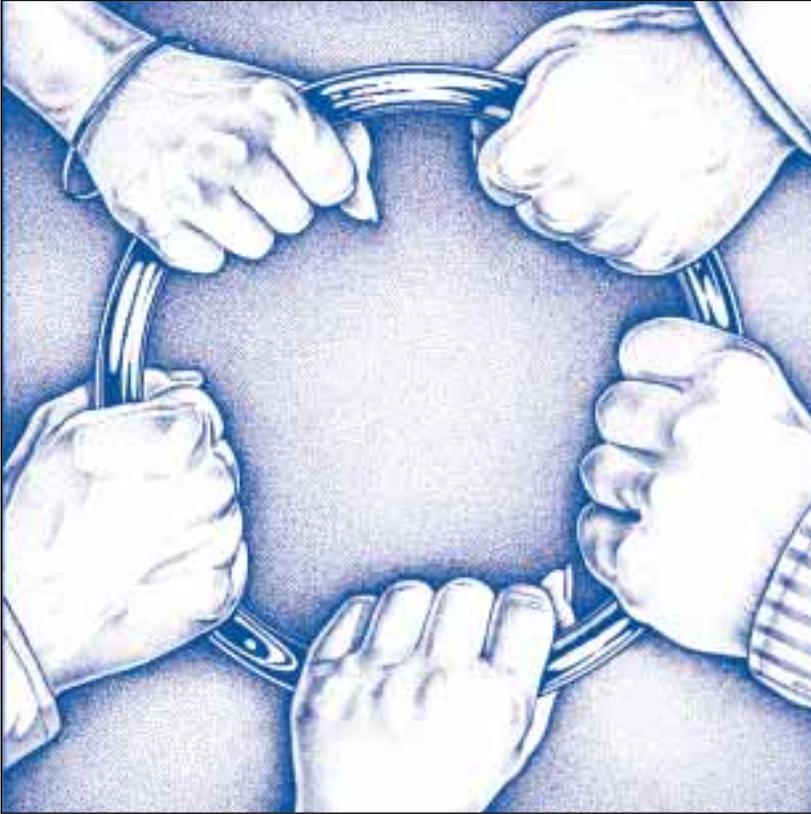
it lives in the collective spirit and practices of the region’s people and organizations, in its culture and connections. Thus a key finding of this article is that regional stewardship has both personal and institutional dimensions.

This article shares the success strategies that regions have used to build both individual and institutional capacity for regional stewardship.

## Common Stages of Regional Change

Though many models and approaches exist, regions that have succeeded at building leadership capacity also seem to excel at leading regional change. The change process shares some common stages, even as the nature and amount of time spent in each stage, as well as the sequencing of them, varies.

We use the change process in Figure 1 as a framework for understanding how innovative regions have recruited, mobilized, and supported leaders, thereby creating a fertile training ground for the development of regional stewards and regional stewardship capacity. Usually, as the diagram indicates, the catalyst for regional action is a widening gap between current conditions and the region’s desired future. The current reality can be deteriorating, or a community’s aspirations for its future may be changing. As shown, the change process can follow different paths, but there are four main stages of regional action.



### Initiation

In the initiation stage, a core group of leaders lays the groundwork for collaborative action by identifying the regional opportunity and committing to action. The initiation stage typically includes some common elements.

- *Recognize* — a core group of leaders recognizes a gap between the region's current reality and desired future and that change is required.
- *Explore* — the leaders explore their common interests and possibilities and how they might learn and work together.
- *Commit* — they commit personally to work for civic change and to take a risk.
- *Design* — they design what should happen next, including what specifically they will do and how they will mobilize others.

### Mobilization

The key challenge of the mobilization stage is to engage the broader public in discussion about the region's future and build commitment to act. The mobilization stage typically includes some common elements:

- *Frame* — frame critical issues and opportunities, focusing attention on what needs to be done and why.

- *Communicate* — communicate key information and messages widely, to stimulate learning and discussion among opinion leaders and residents.
- *Inspire* — rally and motivate others to join the regional cause.
- *Recruit* — recruit a broader set of people to take part in what happens next, connecting diverse networks in often nontraditional ways.

### Collaborative Action

This stage is about creating platforms for people to work together on the business of regional change. It is about moving from recruiting people to supporting their work, from discussing to doing. The collaborative action stage, when successful, typically results in some common elements:

- *Tangible results* — evidence indicates that collaborative action can effectively address common problems.
- *New relationships* — new networks are created as boundary-crossing relationships develop between participants.
- *Changed mindsets* — a new way of thinking creatively about regional problem solving emerges.

### Sustaining Change

The key challenge is to keep stakeholders at the table, broaden and deepen leadership, and renew the mission. To help sustain the change process, regions start to address the following key challenges:

- *Develop more leaders* — institutionalize the of regional leaders.
- *Create and renew institutions* — create and renew regional civic institutions and institutional alliances as individuals and issues change.
- *Scale the change* — work toward systemic change by increasing and institutionalizing successful initiatives.
- *Reignite the process* — refocus and regroup around new challenges and opportunities as they emerge over time.

As a region moves through each of these stages, leaders surface, become engaged, and develop. Over time, regional collaboration becomes common practice because people recognize that it is effective. Individual leadership translates into a regional stewardship capacity as a critical mass of people come together to influence others and change the way they approach regional opportunities and problems.

## Tools for Regional Change and Fostering Regional Stewardship

The remainder of this article describes what regions have learned at each stage of the regional change process by describing the challenges and tools used by regional leaders at each stage of the process.

### Getting Started — Initiation Stage

Many regions report that getting started is the hardest part of regional change. Often, it is difficult to figure out who should come together in the first place and the compelling reason why. Leaders must overcome their community's natural cultural barriers — protecting the status quo, a lack of urgency, an unwillingness to take risks — in order to initiate change.

Regions that make progress through this stage point to a precipitating event that ultimately coalesced a core group of leaders to commit to act regionally. The precipitating event transformed how the leaders saw their region and their role in it; it helped clarify the gap between their region's current reality and the desired or possible future. It ignited their passion. The precipitating event can be, but does not have to be, a crisis. In fact, regions that have experienced a crisis report that, though the crisis spurs initial action, it is the opportunity that leadership forms throughout the crisis that galvanizes commitment and action over the long term.

The following tools and techniques have helped lay the groundwork for identifying potential leaders and initiating regional change after a precipitating event has occurred:

**Convene Leaders.** Bringing an informal working group of “early adopters” together can be a way to kick-start the process. Typically, these people see a compelling issue that requires regional attention or an opportunity that they must seize immediately. Sometimes the early adopters are established community leaders; other times, new leaders with fresh perspectives emerge. The convener is usually a neutral party who has credibility and influence in the community. Whether an organization or an individual, the convener must create a safe public space for dialogue.

**Learn from Other Regions.** Trips to other regions and interactions with their leaders can provide an important catalyst for conversation about a region's aspirations and possibilities. Participants report that these visits allow them to build relationships with each other and facilitate further collaborative

action. These site visits can also play to competitive instincts. Interaction with leaders in other places provides an opportunity to hear how others in a community talk about what they did and why they did it. In a variation on this process, conveners can bring outsiders into a region to bring knowledge of what leading regions are doing nationally. Both options can inspire and motivate leaders to take action.

**Provide Financial Incentives.** States and foundations have used financial incentives to encourage leaders to come together in a region and explore their mutual interests. This capital helps support the learning and dialogue that needs to take place among an initial core group of leaders to understand shared concerns and potential approaches to working together. Though financial incentives can serve as a type of precipitating event, on their own they are seldom sufficient: a leadership team must truly coalesce and commit in the initiation stage or the initiative induced by financial incentive will not prove sustainable.

### Lighting a More Public Spark — Mobilization

The key challenge of the mobilization stage is to engage the broader public in a discussion about the region's future. Once a core group of leaders commits to advance the region, it typically works to attract more visible attention, create some shared excitement about the need to work regionally, and recruit others to action. A region that can successfully mobilize its population toward a common goal is growing its regional stewardship capacity.

Regions have used the following tools and techniques to mobilize broad leadership for a regional initiative:

**Share Catalytic Publications.** Fact-based reports such as benchmarking studies, diagnostic reports, and future scenarios frame the region's current reality and its potential for a better future. If they present compelling information or tell a compelling story about the state of the community or its potential, they can serve as an effective call to action.

**Use Media to Communicate the Message.** Some regions have found that media can be a valuable partner in disseminating key messages to the broad public. This task can include distributing catalytic publications as newspaper inserts, influencing editorial writings, or developing special television programming.

**Holdings Public Events.** Public events can stimulate discussion and inspire others to join the cause. The region invites broad participation from community members in forums, symposia, or speaker series. These events can serve as platforms for dramatic release of catalytic publications, as well as for powerful testimonials by credible leaders about their personal commitment to regional change.

**Recruit Leaders from New Sources.** Some regions make a special attempt to reach out and mobilize leaders from nontraditional sources of leadership. These leaders include people from entrepreneurial companies and disadvantaged communities, as well as people of color, women, youth, and seniors.

### **Doing the Hard Work of Change — Collaborative Action**

The key challenge of the collaborative action stage is to create the appropriate platforms for people to work together for change. It is about moving from recruiting people to supporting their work, from discussing to doing.

The hard work of regional change begins with clear purpose. Actors must agree on their roles and responsibilities and begin to take ownership of the process. Some regions start with small wins to demonstrate success and win over skeptics. They set measurable goals and demand accountability toward those goals. It is in the collaborative action stage that leaders often discover true common ground and deepen their commitment to regional stewardship.

Regions have used the following tools and techniques to work in creating collaborative action:

**Develop a Regional Strategy.** Leaders can bring people together to develop a strategy for moving their region toward the desired future. Regional strategy sometimes follows the creation of a vision or the articulation of shared values and aspirations. Other times, strategy is implemented de facto, as people and organizations launch individual initiatives and then connect the pieces into a coherent strategy.

**Form Action Teams.** Collaborative action teams create and implement new initiatives to achieve a specific result. Typically, these teams focus on implementing a focused part of a regional strategy. They have a strong orientation toward action and results, and they are often a coalition of organizations working toward the same end.

**Create Advocacy Coalitions.** Unlikely coalitions can influence decisions that affect multiple stakeholders in the region. Regional coalitions have been successful at both influencing regional decisions and bringing regional perspective to decisions that take place at the neighborhood/organizational level.

**Engage in Civic Dialogue.** Leaders create opportunities for productive public conversations about the issues confronting the region. Typically, this task involves framing issues, sharing individual perspectives, understanding diverse perspectives, learning about facts, and a disciplined process of evaluating and deciding on options for going forward. Bridging differences and building trusting relationships are important by-products for long-term leadership capacity.

### **Ensuring Continued Success — Sustaining Change**

The key challenge for many regions is to sustain the change process and to bring it to scale. Regional change is an ongoing, continuous process. In the beginning, a core group of leaders initiates a new way of working together and of seeing the region and its future. They mobilize others to join the group, and create platforms for people to work together to gain new results through new methods. At some point the group celebrates success and starts to think about how to sustain the change over time.

Another challenge that regions face in trying to sustain change is in integrating newcomers into regional efforts as the prior generation of leaders steps back. Leaders who are new to the area have little historic and institutional memory of the successes and challenges of the community. Engaging them requires both an educational component and a mentoring component.

Regions have used the following tools and techniques to sustain change and institutionalize the regional stewardship capacity:

**Prepare Business and Civic Leaders to Be Regional Stewards.** Though practical experience is a powerful teacher, a common concern is that the current preparation of leaders is insufficient to meet today's complex regional challenges. For example, leaders who are used to directly controlling resources in organizations can get frustrated by messy civic change processes to succeed in the regional civic space, leaders need new frameworks and skills, new mentors and best practices. And they may actually need to unlearn some things and change some perspectives.

Some regions have begun to sponsor leadership programs to equip business leaders, neighborhood leaders, and politicians with the collaborative skills and cross-sector networks to become regional stewards. Typically, these programs provide leaders with some combination of skill development, regional awareness, team building, and opportunities to reflect on what they have learned from their experiences.

**Measure Regional Progress.** Communities develop indicators to measure how their region is progressing toward its desired future or how it is doing relative to other regions. Indicators help leaders and citizens determine if their region is moving in the right direction. They use indicators as a basis for celebrating success and rallying around deficiency.

**Celebrate Success and Capture Lessons.** Leaders know how important it is to recognize and celebrate success. As important as it is to celebrate, it is also important to capture the lessons of why the success occurred and to share those lessons with other leaders in the region as well as other regions nationally. This task is particularly valuable for educating new leadership about the region's past success and challenges.

**Build and Renew Regional Civic Institutions and Alliances.** Leaders create new regional civic organizations and alliances to help institutionalize

new practices. These institutions play a key role in ongoing accountability; civic institutions with a responsible portfolio command more consistent behavior from people, including elected officials. They give cover for leaders to do things that otherwise might be too risky personally or politically. And they are the strategic scanners and conscience that prod leaders when they are too passive or tuned out to act.

### Going Forward: Preparing Regional Stewards

An important finding of this article is that today regional stewardship develops primarily in the context of action. Working as a team, individual leaders catalyze regional change. In the process, they build individual and institutional leadership capacity to sustain change over time.

Our challenge going forward from here is to take seriously the need for more regional stewards from all walks of life and to develop mechanisms to accelerate the development of leaders who can address the challenges facing regions today.

This article is a reprint of a March 2002 monograph of the same title published by the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, and is printed here with their permission. For more information about the Alliance, visit [www.regionalstewardship.org](http://www.regionalstewardship.org).

