

## **RETAINING JOBS (Preventing Job Losses)**

### **Business Visitation/Mentoring**

#### ***Description***

Owners of small ventures might make use of help with business problems but (a) not be quite aware of a significant need or problem, or (b) not know exactly where to go for help with what he/she already recognizes as a need. The kind of need can vary widely, from finding employees with the necessary skills to increased markets, to friendly suppliers, to an improved accounting system. A business visitation and mentoring program can be the answer to strengthen and even save some local businesses. A visitation program is closely related to an **Early Warning System** by which the most serious threats of imminent closure, re-location, or major downsizing are detected. A Midland, South Dakota, village of 230 population decided to make a survey of local firms and fortuitously discovered that three of them were about to close down due to the pending retirement of the owners. By scouting around, the town found local people to buy the businesses. It turned out to be as simple as that, and for a town so small, it was especially important.

The program need not be very elaborate; it simply has to have the local standing or credibility to approach a firm to offer the friendly interest that will allow access. In northwest Colorado, five counties got together to send community leaders visiting all the businesses to see what their needs might be. The practical recommendations that the leaders ended up making varied from stimulating the development of affordable housing for new employees to creating a small business ombudsman as a trouble-shooter and liaison between the county governments and the firms.

A CEDO's long-standing concern with a good local economy can offer, at least initially, the kind of credibility needed. Naturally, the CEDO must have someone with the requisite skill to relate appropriately to an owner so as to ascertain any problems and either help with them or know where to refer the owner.

#### ***Benefits***

A visitation program offers the chance for a community to head off hidden problems in its local firms early on, before they become too serious and endanger the viability of a business and threaten the loss of jobs and the products or services provided. It can also enhance the CEDO's reputation as being genuinely interested in the needs of local firms. And, sometimes,

a visitation program can actually build information and insight into general issues that ought to be shaping the CEDO's development strategy for the community.

***Major challenges***

It is not enough to merely put a sign out, "Business Assistance Available Here." It is necessary to proactively search out opportunities to be helpful. But of course owners feel intensely the ownership of their businesses, and so it is natural that they do not easily allow access to the state of their affairs. A major issue then is how to create a meaningful approach that, for example, offers some initial assistance without suggesting any criticism and which, certainly, offers confidentiality.

Perhaps a survey can be used that provides the owner with an opportunity to get some useful advertising or put out news about the business, such as advance plans for new products or services that the community will be interested in. Whatever the approach, the CEDO will need to recognize the sensitivity that anyone may experience about revealing certain problems. At the same time, some kinds of problems are easier to talk about, and they can be an entry to being useful to the business and to the community, building a strong relationship in order to address more difficult tasks.

***Some practical steps***

1. Recruit the right kind of person to work with local small businesses.
2. Give that person the mandate to carry out a survey that will provide him with a natural opportunity to talk with a selection of firms (or even all of them) and concurrently assemble for the CEDO useful information on the local economy.
3. Provide the mentor with the necessary support and monitoring to help her/him be effective.
4. Whenever appropriate for the firm, publicize the sort of assistance offered and taken, so that others will seek it out.

***Resource organizations & contacts***

BCHydro has a "BusinessCare" program that offers a wide range of technical support for groups that want to establish business assistance projects. Any B.C. community can take advantage of this program. The Community Economic Development Manager for BC Hydro is Melinda Entwistle. Write her at BC Hydro, 6911 Southpoint Drive, Burnaby, BC V3N 4X8 or use her website ([melinda.entwistle@bchydro.com](mailto:melinda.entwistle@bchydro.com)).

***Publications***

- BC Hydro has many materials (see above).

## *Tools & Techniques*

- In Ontario, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food & Rural Affairs has materials. Business Retention and Expansion, 1 Stone Road, West, Guelph, ON N1G 4Y2. Website: [www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/rural/BRandE/brochure.htm](http://www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/rural/BRandE/brochure.htm).