

Interview with Dale Arendt, Paper and Forestry Product Cluster chair

Why or how do you think working on the paper cluster will make a difference in the 'industry,' the 'economy' and in our 'community?'

In working within this cluster, we've come to realize that we indeed have the capability to create some new opportunities within the community that can take advantage of our strengths in the paper and forest products arenas. If businesses have done it in the Fox River Valley, we know that we can do it here as well. Our visionary team is beginning to connect strategic "players" in the community within different business sectors. Our objectives for impact within the community are both short-term and long-term.

In what ways do the members 'come together' to create the objectives?

Many of our meetings have a period of time allocated to brain-storming on a specific item or determining next steps that the cluster needs to take. In addition, team members walk away from our meetings with "To Do" items that will be completed and reported on at the next meeting. Some of the action items take months to complete; others can be completed with a simple phone call or "power coffee" with a resource person.

How will they get implemented?

Once our cluster determines an action step, a team member will then be assigned a responsibility to complete it by a specified date, and then report back to the cluster on the action and the results. Mutual accountability is our greatest tool in getting things done. The commitment of the team members to the process has been wonderful.

What have you learned from the process so far?

There are two wonderful "take-aways" so far in this process.

--One, we have a lot of work to do to become more collaborative as a community. Many businesses view one another as competitors rather than colleagues, and as a result are reluctant to share information with one another for fear that someone may get a business advantage.

--Second, we know very little of what each other is doing. There is a lot of business that goes to vendors outside our immediate area, and we can work together in finding local businesses to resource local business needs.

What would others gain from 'joining' in with your cluster?

Joining a cluster is one of the most viable ways to build our community. I believe firmly in "giver's gain." That as we give of ourselves to a process, such as the Cluster groups, benefits will come our way as a by-product of our involvement. It is an excellent opportunity to become connected with key business people in our community. It also is a great environment to have your business become recognized as a resource provider in certain areas.

What kind of skills/help do you still require to make your objectives as a cluster succeed?

I do not believe that we have enough key community business leaders in our cluster group. We need additional members who are the business decision-makers within

their company or industry. We will only be as strong as the collective strength of the individuals who sit together at our meetings.