



Leadership Development Training for Aquaculture Producers

Aquaculture in the United States is composed primarily of family farming businesses. Such businesses are successful due to the commitment, dedication, and long hours spent by family members to attend to all aspects of the fish farming business. Why, then, should they seek to step away from their farms and undergo leadership development training?

While there are U.S. aquaculture farms that have been in business for more than a century, aquaculture is still poorly understood in the U.S. The general public, policy makers, and regulatory agencies have little direct experience or knowledge of aquaculture. Unfortunately, there are many examples of impediments to the growth of aquaculture that have emerged as a result of either lack of understanding or misunderstanding of the realities of U.S. aquaculture farming.

Whose responsibility is it to address such issues? At the end of the day, those who are affected the most by these issues need to also be the spokespersons for their industry. Many of the obstacles to further growth of U.S. aquaculture require changes in public perceptions of aquaculture, regulatory paradigms, or legislative action. To effect these types of changes requires leadership by individual aquaculture farmers. While there are many aquaculture leaders across the U.S., more are needed to address the many issues that often occur at local or state levels.

Leadership skills are not inborn, but can be developed through interactive training sessions and workshops. Some key components of leadership training include the development of strategic thinking skills and the ability to engage others (association members and the media) to address challenges and solve problems effectively. Most leaders learn on the job, after being elected to a leadership position in an association. Most elected leaders

are passionate about aquaculture and enthusiastic to make a difference but often lack leadership skills. In states without an active state association, however, there are few opportunities for aquaculture farmers to develop leadership skills. Leadership development programs can serve as a catalyst for the development of leaders who would be positioned to help develop stronger aquaculture associations that would engage in issues that confront their industry.

Structure of a Leadership Development Program

An effective leadership development program is one that engages participants not just during workshops and scheduled meetings, but throughout the course of the program. Smaller cohorts of participants in any one given phase of leadership training are preferable. A maximum of 15 participants at any one time is desirable for creating an interactive environment throughout the program. Ideally, participants would represent various geographic regions, possess varying experience levels in aquaculture (including new entrants to the industry alongside very experienced producers offers excellent networking opportunities for both), and a variety of species and production systems. One of the long-term benefits of a well-designed leadership development program is the relationships that develop among participants that result in enhanced networking opportunities. Strong relationships among producers across various states, species, and production systems can provide useful opportunities for synergistic input, long-term partnerships, and mutual support for initiatives undertaken.

The first step to grow a leadership development program is to effectively recruit participants to the program. A transparent process by which all producers feel welcome to apply for slots in the training program is critical to avoid



accusations of favoritism or elitism. Extension specialists, aquaculture associations, and state agencies that engage with aquaculture producers can be approached for assistance to disseminate information about the training as well as the application form. The description of the leadership development program should include a schedule and timeline of meetings as well as clearly defined expectations and responsibilities of each participant so prospective applicants have a clear understanding of the expected time commitment.

Virtual, web-based meetings offer a time-saving way for busy aquaculture producers to participate in leadership development. Such meetings are useful for initial introductions, presenting basic information on expectations, and providing background information. At some point, however, in-person meetings of participants are essential to enhance opportunities for participants to develop personal relationships and to foster interactions and mutual support.

Content of an Aquaculture Producer Leadership Development Program

Of the many skills needed to be an effective leader, the ability to engage effectively with other members of the aquaculture industry and to communicate with the media and other entities outside the industry are vitally important. An individual who is focused on an issue that is important only to that one person will be viewed as having a personal agenda. Thus, learning how to listen, obtain feedback from other aquaculture farmers, and how to interact to prioritize issues is a key skill that should be a focus of any leadership development program. Similarly, learning how to communicate effectively with reporters, public agency personnel, and other entities involved with aquaculture is essential. Another important skill is that of conflict resolution to avoid irreparable schisms that can develop within an association when members have differences of opinion. The leadership of state associations should also be mindful of the long-term stability and strength of the association and be involved in mentoring and preparing future leaders. Once a basic leadership development program is underway, input from previous participants can guide the content for future programs.

Including outside resource persons in workshops can provide thought-provoking insights to participants by offering different perspectives on some of the issues faced. This is particularly so if workshops are scheduled to allow ample time for discussion among project participants, resource persons, and facilitators. Such discussion time also allows for peer feedback among participants that can sometimes be the most valuable part of a leadership development program.

The most effective leadership development programs require participants to select an initiative they work on throughout the program. For an aquaculture program, for example, each participant could be asked to seek out other producers to identify an initiative important to the aquaculture industry in their area. The process of developing plans to address the problem, identifying resources needed, and working to develop the necessary support to move forward gives participants much-needed experience and skills through practice.

Leadership development programs for aquaculture producers have potential for short-term impacts in terms of the initiatives that individuals tackle during the program and the experience and skills gained by doing so. Longer term, such leaders who have demonstrated commitment to their industry and the ability to pull people and resources together to address a common problem, are more likely to be able to effectively recruit members to strengthen aquaculture associations. Finally, stronger associations with capable leadership are more likely to be successful to resolve key obstacles for further growth and development of U.S. aquaculture.

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