

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



CONNECTIONS

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statement. “Civil investing cannot be a phenomenon, it cannot be a program, it cannot be something that you just invent or adopt for six months to see if it works,” said Ruth Shack, president of the Dade Community Foundation. Anna Faith Jones, president emeritus of the Boston Foundation, concurred. “It has to be grounded in the mission,” she observed. The best hope of bringing trustees, program staff, and grantees into alignment is to structure an organization’s work around a set of clear and concise principles.

Examples of successful civil-investing efforts show that, while funding is an essential ingredient, it is only one of many factors that contribute to effective grant-making. The community leaders in the group spoke of a wide range of benefits conferred by foundations that go beyond financial support. These include ideas and information, technical and administrative assistance, training and capacity-building, networking and access, and even public-relations know-how.

But most important, foundations and grantees committed to civil investing ought to design their programs so they build and strengthen essential democratic practices. Civil investing, at its best, promotes the habits of public participation; nurtures a capacity for dialogue and deliberation; encourages the process of identifying challenges and laying out potential ways of meeting them; and, not least, helps people take matters into their own hands and engage in public work.

Through a combination of these kinds of efforts, grantmakers can foster an organizational culture that encourages authentic dialogue with communities, fosters relationships based on trust and reciprocity, cultivates intentional learning and development, and ultimately nurtures vibrant and self-sustaining democratic practices.

Scott London, a California-based journalist, has authored reports on a range of important public issues, including the social responsibilities of higher education, the state of American journalism, and the political implications of new communications technologies. He can be reached by e-mail at london@west.net.

This publication can be ordered through E.C. Ruffolo, e-mail: ecruffolo@ec-ruffolo.com, call: 1-800-600-4060, or FAX: 1-937-435-7367.



Institutional Administrators and Deliberative Democracy: The Tittabawassee Case

By Alice Diebel

Public administrators in environmental protection are often charged with convening the public, sometimes an angry public at that. Thus, they play an important role in the practice of democracy. Recent research by the Michigan State University (MSU) Department of Resource Development casts light on the use of public deliberation as a means for public administrators to better engage the public in seeking solutions to controversial, environmental public-policy issues.

MSU approached the problem of a toxic-waste cleanup in a large Midwest watershed, the Tittabawassee River, from three perspectives. First, the research assessed public administrators’ experience with, and attitudes toward, public engagement. The second approach gathered citizen perceptions about involvement in public issues. Finally, the research

brought citizens affected by the toxic waste together in deliberative forums to work through possible solutions. Public administrators and citizens both expressed frustration with the status quo of public-engagement practice. The research suggested that public forums might be useful in addressing technical issues, such as toxic-waste cleanups.

MSU interviews with the public administrators involved in the toxic-waste problem illuminate the barriers between public administrators and the citizens they serve. Public administrators revealed frustration in their efforts to find ways to meaningfully engage the public in important community issues. Our research showed the citizens feel similarly constrained. Public meeting rooms are largely empty unless an issue is “hot” and raises an outcry. The traditional mechanism for citizens to engage in civic life—the public hearing—has limited benefit and, many say, is ineffective.

While public administrators may be stymied by the “how to” of successful public participation, they do see it as a basic right and important to democracy. But these

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highly educated, experienced professionals can feel like failures if the public meetings they convene don't produce positive results. They follow the rules for holding public meetings; however, they find little value for their efforts. These experiences have led public administrators to view the public at its best as uninformed, and at its worst, as outraged, unreasonable, and obstructionist.

When the public is uninformed, public administrators spend their time educating those present, often presenting information only about the technical issues. In the Tittabawassee case, public administrators presented the technical details of the problem with the expectation that the information would influence public opinion to support the direction administrators were crafting for the cleanup. Instead, many citizens responded with anger directed toward the administrators. Educating an uninformed public or hearing opinions from the most outraged public is "one-way talking in two directions." Scarce meeting time could be spent building understanding about the community's shared values that would influence the direction of the cleanup.

The citizens interviewed for this study also saw little value in traditional public participation efforts. To examine the citizen perceptions, MSU focused on a specific subset of citizens, those *affected* by the hazardous waste, but *unaffiliated* with any of the already-established citizen groups that developed in response to the Tittabawassee issue. People affiliated with government or the responsible industry were also excluded.

These "unaffiliated citizens" saw the public-meeting format as dominated by the "usual suspects": the polarized voices affiliated with interest groups that don't necessarily represent their own views. They see the process as one designed for articulate elites or special interests and don't believe they will be heard if they do participate. They also find the focus on technical issues to be intimidating. It is hard for them to know how to argue about scientific evidence. They lack trust in the credibility of data presented, believing it can be manipulated to support either side of the argument. As a result, they don't participate at all.

Alternatively, public administrators can

broaden the conversation by bringing the unaffiliated public together to talk about the issue in their own terms through the use of deliberative forums. The approach to public deliberation used in the MSU research was based on the National Issue Forums (NIF) process. An NIF-style issue guide provided background information on the toxic-waste problem and offered several choices and their tradeoffs to begin redressing it.

Local groups of unaffiliated citizens were convened to participate in the forums. By working through the choices outlined, the groups sought to better understand each other's perspectives and find common ground. Establishing common ground helped to reveal how they saw the problem and its impact on themselves and others in their community. Further, common ground can help identify an approach that is most likely to serve the public good rather than a single interest, as forum participants begin to see the issue from the perspectives of others.

Interviews after the forums indicated that the deliberation was a very positive experience for participants, a stark contrast to the public hearing typically used in environmental controversies. The participants preferred deliberative processes in which they could talk together, learn from each other, and begin to understand the issue in their own terms without concern for the technical details. They felt the discussion was respectful and gave them hope that a large, complex problem could be solved. Participants connected the issue to their broader vision for the community.

The research may bring hope to public administrators who believe in the right of the public to participate but see the effort as a waste of time. How then, might the deliberation benefit the public administrators dealing with a controversial environmental issue? Without significant experience in deliberative democracy techniques, it is the rare public administrator who would consider turning to the public for help. This research, however, demonstrated several ways deliberative issue forums might be useful to public administrators dealing with such problems.

First, public administrators who are frustrated about an absent public or a very vocal public may change their approach to engagement so that deliberation can occur. Rather than citizens being asked to offer the best technical solution to the problem, they are invited to connect the issue broadly to their lives; they just need the space for real deliberation in their own language. A deliberative approach will yield a more thoughtful result.

Second, public administrators would benefit from recognizing that the public has something *different* to offer than the technical fix for the problems facing their communities. Understanding how citizens engage in decision making of the kind used in issue forums will help public administrators understand how the public

Educating an uninformed public or hearing opinions from the most outraged public is "one-way talking in two directions."

thinks about a given problem. Understanding what is important to citizens can guide crafting the eventual policy choice so it is consistent with public values and presented in public language. Daniel Yankelovich describes this understanding as finding "the boundaries of the politically permissible."

Finally, this research reflects the power of the voice of the unaffiliated citizen. By seeking a different public, one that is not part of an interest group, public administrators can gain greater legitimacy to act. The authority a deliberative public provides public administrators shifts their accountability toward the public good rather than special interests. Deliberative democracy helps public administrators serve a more effective role within the political system so they are not hamstrung by the culture of polarized, interest-group politics.

Alice Diebel is a scholar-in-residence at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached by e-mail at diebel@kettering.org.

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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Editors

David S. Frech
John Dedrick

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Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Copy Editor

Lisa Boone-Berry

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200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016

Kettering Foundation
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459-2799

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