

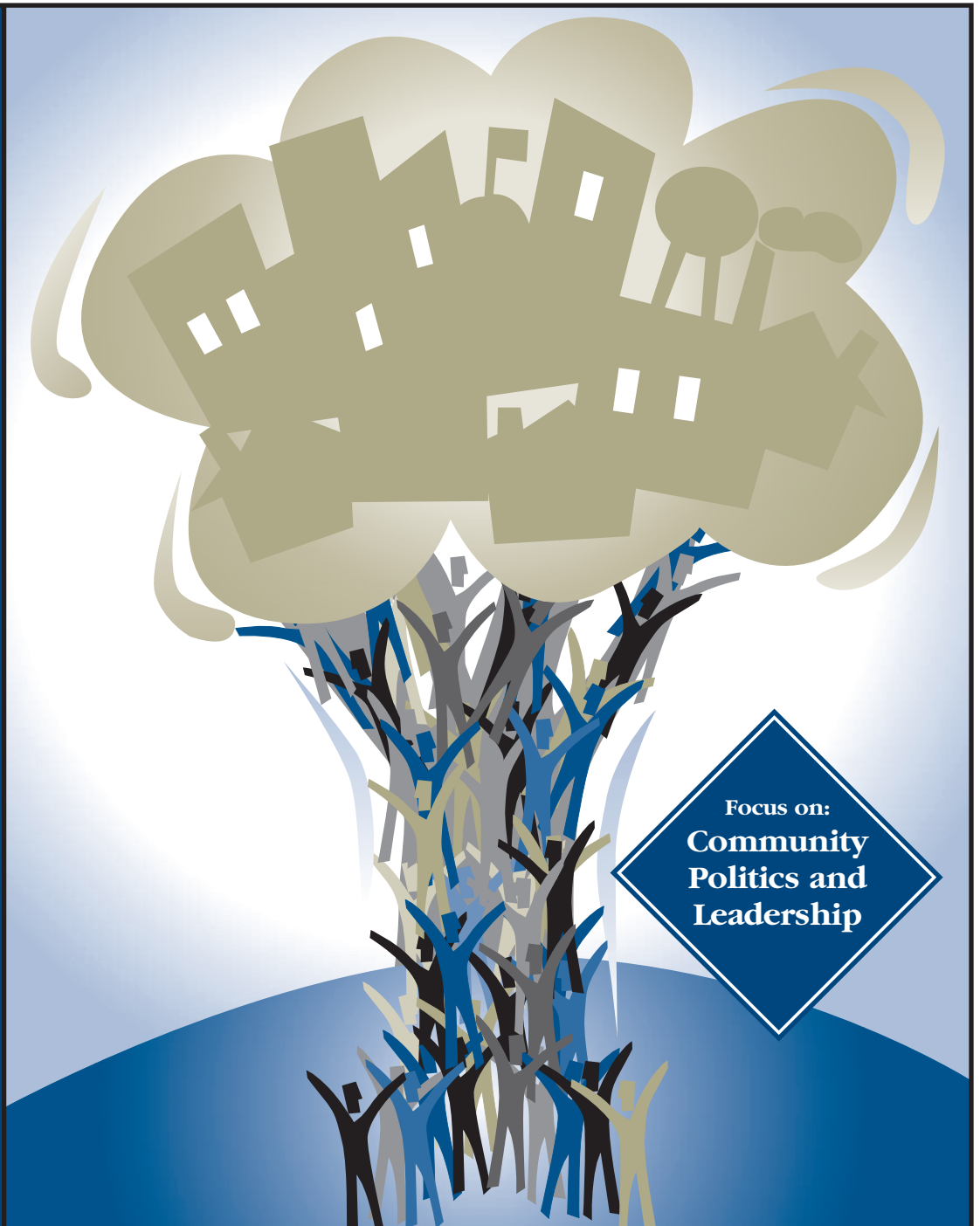
CONNECTIONS

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Reflections on the Practice of Community Politics

By Grace Severyn

Since the mid-1990s, the Kettering Foundation has been conducting workshops to share ideas about community politics with teams of people from communities in different parts of the country. Community politics is about ideas and practices that can create an engaged citizenry in a community. It's about citizens joining together to take responsibility not only for community problems, but also for the way they, as a community, go about the business of making decisions and addressing problems.

Susan Vogelsang is one of the people who have taken the leap to "get started" in this work. The leader of a team from Summit County, Ohio (Akron), Vogelsang was drawn to community politics by the desire to "change the way our community approaches our common problems and change who comes to the table to 'work through' our common concerns." Ollie White was motivated to join the Helena, Arkansas, team because she saw possibility in the process of working together to solve common problems. "I believe that if we can continue to work in our community with this process, we will eventually effect the changes that we so desperately need."

Like a number of other participants in the workshop, Ever Jean Ford, also from Helena, had to overcome some initial hesitation. "Community politics, 'deliberative democracy,' 'forums,' 'moderating' — when I first heard these terms, I began to wonder," she said. "How is this going to be different from any other town meeting or focus group?" Her work in community politics has taught her the difference. Through the work, she said, she has "reconnected with my community, and renewed my passion for working."

The Visible Ingredients for Getting Started

Those who engage in community politics consistently refer to several ingredients as essential for getting started. These "visible" ingredients include a key leader or two, a team committed to the ideas, and an organization that can provide a home for the work.

The key person, or team leader, must function as the "driving force" or the "keeper of the process." Naomi Cottons, the leader of the team from Helena, is an example of a leader who can inspire her team. She is passionately committed to community politics as a process "whereby citizens can collectively determine the path for our future and bring about change." Even when her team members expressed their reluctance to take on more work — pleading, "Naomi, we have lives, too" — Naomi could get them to give 100 percent.

Just as important as a key person is a team willing to do the work of community politics. "If you want to make changes in the way things get done, you need a team — a core of committed people who understand the effort's purposes and support the lead person," said Jodie DeLamatre, a member of the close-knit team from Summit County. "Team members and the coordinator need a commitment and understanding of the process and purpose of the journey. That understanding evolves and changes, but the act of trying to get at deliberation's essence helps the work."

Teams from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Stillwater, Oklahoma, (who just began their participation in the Community Politics Workshop series this past September) took this appreciation for the value of a team to a new level. From the outset, both organized two layers of

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participation: a team of approximately eight people to travel to the workshops and a larger, broadly based “home team” to support and extend the work of community politics within their communities.

As Ron Beer, coleader of the team from Stillwater, said:

The purpose for the larger group is to ensure a broader representation of the community and to establish “connections” with key organizations, agencies, and networks, all of which will, in our opinion, provide a better base for identifying issues of concern and engage more citizens....

The decision to create both a “travel” team and a “home” team in Tuscaloosa was motivated, in part, by the fact that so many people expressed interest in being on the team. “The high interest level at that early stage made us begin thinking about how many we could include but still have a manageable group,” said Star Bloom, coleader of the team. Establishing a home and travel team, however, has placed some additional responsibility on the travel team, according to Bloom. “We feel obligated to really share what we learned [during the workshops].”

A third ingredient that can nurture the growth of community politics is a community-based organization that provides a home for the work. According to Kathy Christie, soon after completing the workshop series, the team from Owensboro, Kentucky, invited a group of citizens to brainstorm “about the ‘look’ of our community in the future and a structure that might push along the deliberative process in our community.... The overwhelming response was to create a formal structure to nurture the process.” Community Conversations, Inc., a non-profit organization, was the eventual result. The team’s hope, said Christie, is that as the new organization’s work progresses, citizens will be eager to talk about tough issues together, and eventually won’t rely on Community Conversations, Inc. as the convening force. Citizens will see themselves as political actors in the community with a part in the resolution of community problems.

Several communities have been able to fit their work nicely within the mission of an existing organization. Greater Campbellsville United (GCU), a grass-roots organization dedicated to promoting equality, serves as the umbrella organization for the community politics team

in Campbellsville, Kentucky. The beauty of this, in the words of John Chowning, chair of GCU, is that the umbrella organization can provide the team with “independence, but connectivity to the community and other organizations [necessary] to be effective in the community politics process.”

The Invisible Ingredients

Team members, as they look back on their experiences in getting started with community politics, identify “invisible” ingredients that are also essential to their success. Two invisible ingredients that team members mention frequently are a welcoming attitude toward learning and invention and an understanding that, in the words of Renate Pore from Kanawha County, West Virginia, “it’s all about relationships.”

David Ross, a member of the team from Owensboro, Kentucky, has gradually come to appreciate the inventive nature of the work.

I have experienced a broad range of emotions: at first, the whole project seemed overwhelming.... I remember when I began to think I was catching on to some of the concepts and ideas and “overwhelmingness” often turned into frustration.... I am less concerned with “catching on” now and more concerned about observing our community catch on. The challenge of researching and participating is being able to capture what is happening as it is happening, while all the time being part of the happening.

The Summit County team’s understanding of their role in community politics has also changed. Said Susan Vogelsang:

We thought that Kettering had this all figured out and they were going to give us the tools necessary to change the way our community worked together to solve its complex problems. All we would have to do is listen, study, learn, and practice. But we didn’t get “answers” from the workshops. Instead, we learned that through continuous study, reflection, and experimentation, we would discover what [works] best to bring ... community politics to life in our community. There was no right or wrong answer, but instead, a journey of discovery and innovation.



This attitude of invention can be put to the test when teams face challenges or circumstances that invite them to reconfigure their work. When members of the Summit County team completed their participation in the workshop series, they were faced with a need to reinvent themselves and “get started” again.

In the words of Crystal Jones:

Since we are no longer governed by the workshop schedule, there is more of a challenge for us to continue to work with one another and keep the process going. We don't have the sense that we “have to do it because it's our homework or because we're going to have to present something at the next workshop.” This forces us to make the transition to make the process intrinsically ours, as opposed to Kettering's.

Finally, because community politics is all about ways of acting together to address public problems, networking — building relationships — is essential. For the team from Allendale County, South Carolina, “Community politics is working to connect the people and the

community and opening up channels of communication among community members.” Says Julie Pratt of Kanawha County:

For this kind of work to be successful, it seems there has to be at least a minimal level of networking happening. There has to be some kind of social fabric, enough going on between people, between organizations, that you can introduce [community politics]. Then, when you do, it furthers the networking. It's kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. Community politics offers great opportunities for network-building, but if there are not enough connections between people and organizations in a community,



Photos courtesy of Sue Williams



These Stillwater, Oklahoma, residents began participating in the Community Politics Workshop series last September. The team includes those who travel to workshops and a larger, more broadly based "home team" to establish connections with key organizations, agencies, and networks.



"I thought I needed to have all the answers before I'd engage the public. It's really been like an epiphany.... Now, I see that the public can and must come up with directions."

you may have to do some work building relationships before more formal and structured forums can take hold.

Networking is not about "evangelizing or recruiting others to our way of thinking," noted the Kanawha County team. Instead, it is about learning from one another "in ways that further our collective and separate work." Ultimately, they believe, networking gradually creates the social fabric in which to embed this work.

The Insights of Hindsight

As people have reflected on getting started, they have identified several insights that have become meaningful to them and to others as well. Julie Pratt calls attention to the need to "begin with the end in mind," urging people to be mindful of their ultimate goals from the outset. The team from Helena found that meeting regularly to "discuss where we were, where we were going, and how we were going to get there" helped them keep focused on their goals as they took each step.

Renate Pore, who has spent many years as an advocate for health care reform and who is presently serving on the Governor's cabinet in West Virginia, says her experience with community politics "profoundly changed" her. "I thought I needed to have all the answers before I'd engage the public," she said. "It's really been like an epiphany.... Now, I see that the public can and must come up with directions."

Keith Sanders, of Owensboro, summed up what he, Renate, and others who practice community politics — many of whom are or have been advocates or activists — have learned. "Advocacy alone will not get us where we want to go," he said. Since citizens themselves ultimately know what is best for the community, it is necessary to promote a process by which citizens assume responsibility for, and take ownership of, community problems.

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