

CONNECTIONS

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2007

A Year's Review
from the Perspective
of Citizens

WHAT IF?

IMAGINE THIS

COULD IT BE THAT?

MAYBE THE QUESTION WE SHOULD BE ASKING IS...

Introducing the
READERS' FORUM
See page 33

What You Need to Know about *Connections*

With this issue of *Connections*, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change *Connections* from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering's review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation's research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering's hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

- citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
- communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
- institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing *Connections* once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation's research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you'll find throughout the following pages, this issue of *Connections* reflects the foundation's research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the "Readers' Forum." As its name implies, the new section



features reactions and comments by *Connections* readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the

foundation's hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The "Forum" is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true "Readers' Forum," the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—*Connections*. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation's Web site, www.kettering.org. On the Web site you'll find a new section devoted to this issue of *Connections* and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online "Readers' Forum" is an attempt to help readers better connect to *Connections*—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

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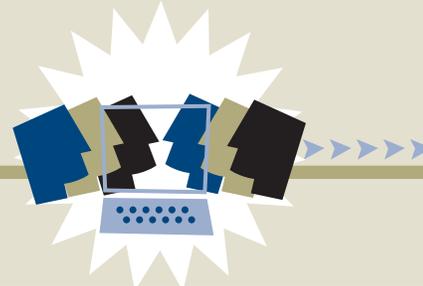
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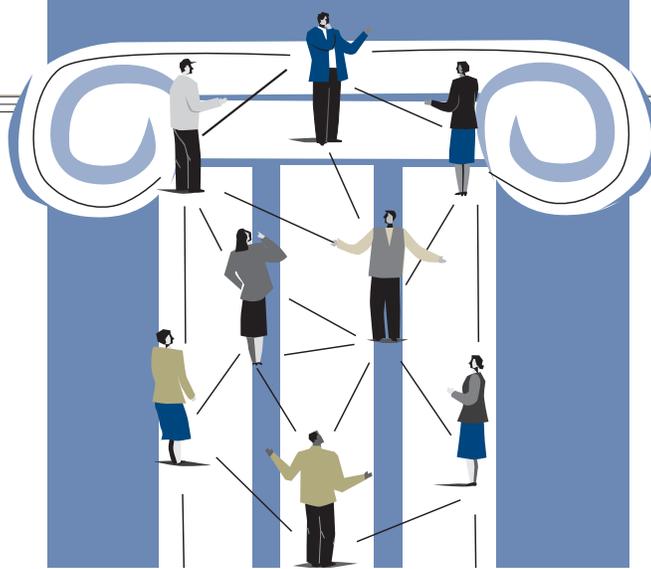
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Citizens and Bureaucratic Systems

Gaining Influence

Public Administrators and Citizens

Solving Community Problems Together

By Alice Diebel

Frustrated with the challenges of engaging the public, 16 city and county managers from across the United States met in October 2006 for a two-day conversation focused on a draft of *Public Administrators and Citizens: What Should the Relationship Be?*, a Kettering Foundation manuscript. During this meeting, these managers expressed a real desire to work with citizens and even offered strategies for how it might work. They expressed a strong interest in creating an effective and different relationship with the public. Like many professionals,

they feel responsible for meeting the demands of their leadership role, yet at the same time, they recognize that they must cede a larger role to citizens in decision making.

While wrestling with the many barriers to successful public engagement (how to do it, how to use it, and what its impact is on the community), they blamed citizens and professionals alike for engagement strategies that have failed. In their experience, they have observed problems with the way citizens behave, the way elected officials react, and their own self-created professional barriers. They also recognized the need for all three groups to work together to build communities that foster public engagement.

Working with Citizens

Public administrators, such as city and county managers, have expertise in solving the problems of a municipality. This expertise has its own language, set of actors, and level of confidence that shuts out citizens who cannot find a place for their own work among the experts. The challenge for public administrators is to find ways to invite citizens back into the public square without assuming the role of trained problem solv-

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ers who take care of everything.

This group of managers believed that public administrators should play a key role in building effective, deliberative communities that might be better able to make progress on the challenges they face. They cited professional ownership of problem solving as a barrier to connecting with citizens. They also recognized that, as leaders, they must fight their desire to always be responsible for fixing every problem.

These managers reported that the public tells them that they are efficient, but not necessarily effective. In other words, professional problem solving is not always enough when engaging with the public. To be more effective at engagement, some of the public administrators recognized that government is not the hub of the wheel, but one of the spokes. They need to get things started but also need to know when and how to back away, listen, and let the public do its work.

Changing the relationship with the public begins with changing the culture of the office, the managers reported. To change the culture, one city manager said he was going to create “free-roaming

chickens,” or people in government who aren’t shut off in a single departmental office, but rather take their laptops and cell phones and cut across departmental boundaries. Boundary-crossing work is intended to stimulate change by sharing ideas among people who traditionally work in the silos of bureaucracy.

Cross-cutting conversations can open thinking to shared issues and move the conversation away from problem-focused work. These conversations can help public administrators focus their attention on *values*, or the questions about what is important, rather than what is urgent. Several managers have used appreciative inquiry and its methods to understand a community’s

values rather than the technical kind of problem solving that typifies city and county government. In other words, building on what is good and valuable in a community and strengthening its assets turns a different lens on what is wrong in

Changing the relationship with the public begins with changing the culture of the office . . . people in government who aren’t shut off in a single departmental office, but rather cut across departmental boundaries. Boundary-crossing work is intended to stimulate change by sharing ideas among people who traditionally work in the silos of bureaucracy.

a community—as public administrators are trained to do. These managers see these measures as a step toward working with the public to create new measures of success.

Working with Elected Officials

Another barrier public administrators face in public engagement is their relationship with elected officials. In the traditional relationship, elected officials have a unique relationship with the public, building constituencies, responding to vocal special interests, and developing policies that are supported or rejected by virtue of the office. Public administrators are expected to support the elected official’s policies and avoid creating constituencies that may appear to compete with these policies. In some cases, elected officials may be partisan or polarizing to an extent that can challenge broad citizen engagement on important issues. One city manager said it is often harder to get the council to move off a position on an issue than the citizenry.

This group of managers recognized that their relationship with elected officials needed to change when it affected how they interacted with the public. Some of



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the public administrators in this workshop have found that citizen engagement has actually helped improve the relationship between elected officials and administrators. One city manager said he developed

Neighborhood organizations would appear to be the likely place for citizens to begin to relate to government. But neighborhood organizations are often small bureaucracies in themselves and not representative of citizens.

a solid relationship with the community, which provides a foundation for elected officials to build on. To maintain a relationship with elected officials, this city manager would arrange a community meeting and invite the elected official to “meet me in the neighborhood.”

Meeting the Challenges

The managers also said citizens need to take the initiative and get involved.

The loss of social capital or community was a recurring theme during the discussion. One administrator reported that citizens live in isolated enclaves where they “go home, lock the door, and turn on reality TV.” Thus there is no community for administrators to engage. One city manager complained that a citizen spent more time grumbling about a graffiti

problem than it would have taken to pick up a brush and paint over it.

Often citizens are not prepared to help in any ongoing way. Some citizens behave as though expressing an opinion one time is sufficient involvement. Getting and keeping citizens involved in a

sustained way is a difficult challenge to the managers. They said citizens are too quick to back away when the answers are not to their liking.

The managers said that citizens dislike conflict and try to avoid it, though they complained that citizens create conflicts as well. Managers face caustic attitudes and name calling from citizens who have no respect or trust in their government. It seems there is limited space for constructive conflict. Other citizens have a victim mentality. Getting them to be part of the solution is a challenge. The other side of this coin is that the public does not want to be steered. If citizens feel manipulated they will not participate.

Managers struggle to increase participation or broaden the cast of characters beyond the “usual suspects.” Yet they find that many citizens groups resist broad participation. Those groups who have had the attention of public administrators for a long time are wary of getting new people involved.

The conversation was not all about barriers. The managers had ideas about how to build a more “civil” public space, one that is constructive and facilitates broad participation. Building community was seen as a critical first step for changing the relationship between citizens and their governments and the nature of participation. They recognize that a major loss has been the lack of space for people who have different perspectives to talk to each other—while still maintaining a relationship with each other. As it is now, typical citizen conversations tend to be among people who think the same.

One way to retrieve this public space, build new organizations, and develop leaders is to take advantage of projects that people feel passionate about. With this focus on developing a community that can organize anew, managers would shift their thinking about how they define effectiveness. They said the *effective* project would be one that has developed new leaders or organizations. These new organizations form from the grass roots and often attract new faces that dilute and reenergize groups generally populated with the usual suspects.

Neighborhood organizations would appear to be the likely place for citizens

H. George Frederickson, *The Spirit of Public Administration*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, pp. 231-232.

We should manage public organizations and institutions in such a way as to enhance the prospects for change, responsiveness, and citizen involvement. . . . To whom are public administrators responsible? To the elected executive? To the Constitution and the laws? To the elected legislators or their subordinates? To professional standards and codes of ethics? The answer, of course, is that we are responsible to all of these. But the answer is contingent on the issue at hand; it is a necessary but not sufficient answer.

The broader and more serviceable answer is that public administrators are responsible to the citizens. We are responsible for weighing and balancing constitutional and legal issues with political issues and for making decisions that reduce to our best understanding of policy implementation in a democratic context. We are responsible for a kind of moral agency to the citizens.

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to begin to relate to government. But neighborhood organizations are often small bureaucracies in themselves and not representative of citizens. One manager called the actors in these organizations “neighborcrats” because of their tendency to set rules and boundaries that limit the open, transparent organization, which is more engaging. Neighborhood organizations don’t bring in passionate people needed to stimulate public acting because outsiders may offer a different viewpoint or a new way of doing things that affects the neighborcrat’s power and influence. One city manager provided an example of the resistance citizens have to joining traditional organizations in a story about a community meeting to build a recreation center. A woman asserted her rights as an unaffiliated citizen. She said, “I’m not a member of a neighborhood organization and I don’t want to be. But the city still represents me.”

Citizens can be more effective when organized within the community, yet one of the tensions in any organization is around the question of who is represented and who is excluded. To be effective, the city managers believe there needs to be a coalition of organizations working

together for citizens to remain engaged. These coalitions become networks of actors pulling in the same direction. Yet managers recognized that network governance raises issues about the relationship between government and the network in a democracy.

Brian J. Cook, *Bureaucracy and Self-Government: Reconsidering the Role of Public Administration in American Politics*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 134-135.

An increasingly vicious circle has emerged in which anxiety about control and accountability of public administration has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about the introduction of another layer of controls. . . . An expanding share of valuable political and governing resources is consumed in creating and tending this complex matrix of controls, with no noticeable improvement, in the aggregate, in the relationship between the public and public administrators, or in individual or systemic capacity for self-government. Indeed, precisely the opposite would appear to be the case.

The city managers see the role of government as one of setting expectations and auditing the democratic practices of the organizations, offering support to new organizations that encourages fair participation and protects the individual’s voice. One approach to build more effective neighborhood organizations, or community organizations of any type, is to begin discussions and get agreements on what democracy looks like. This work can only be done through building a trusting relationship, built over time in the public’s space: citizen driveways, supermarkets, coffee shops, and the like.

What the managers began to understand when they left the workshop was that citizens do not always want to be led. When the issues are seen as “public,” citizens are capable of stepping up and naming the problem and organizing themselves in a way that they are implicated in the solution. The question for these managers is, how will they build relationships with these ever emerging citizen-based organizations rather than simply cater to the needs of customers waiting to be served?

Alice Diebel is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at diebel@kettering.org.



The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research 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. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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