

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

CONNECTIONS

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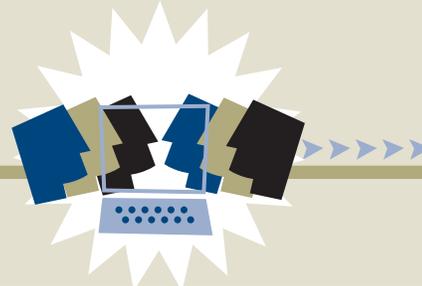
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Public Agencies and Citizen Engagement

Getting Beyond the Customer-Service Model

By Phillip Lurie

How do government agencies and administrators go about their daily work in a way that invites citizens into the decision-making process? It's an important question. It doesn't mean administrators reinvent their positions or add additional tasks to their already heavy workload. Instead, they approach their current work differently; it is *not doing something different*, but *doing what you do differently*. In most cases, this is a mental hurdle that is difficult to overcome, but there is some evidence that such a transformation is possible.

In 2005, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation looked at governmental agencies in various states and found that they were struggling with what it means to engage citizens in a meaningful way. The Clark County, Nevada, Department of Parks and Community Services realized that in order to be more effective it needed to change the way it worked with citizens. This department had historically worked under the rubric that citizens were customers, and as such, responses

toward citizen problems required a customer-service attitude. This mind-set was ingrained into the staff through banners in the halls and with stickers, pens, and so on, all with the inscription "Celebrate the Customer." It was an initiative that failed and ended when a new county manager took office, and became the "champion" the department needed to move it in another direction.

It was noted in the Summer 2006 issue of *Connections* that a *champion* is a staff person in a leadership position who can incorporate democratic practices into the work of an organization and lead successful examples of citizen engagement that feature a new relationship between the agency and the public. In this case, the new relationship was one of shared responsibilities. Instead of the "complain-react" relationship that characterizes a customer-service attitude, there is a two-way conversation in which both the agency and citizens must take responsibility for action. Thus the questions have changed from what can we do for you? to what can we do together?

Changing the conversation with citizens about services was not the only aspect that needed changing. Staff members had to learn to communicate differently with each other as well. By increasing collaboration among staff with respect to public engagement practices, ideas and knowledge could be disseminated in various programs and neighborhoods. This could also bring about changes in how citizens view and work with the department.

However, while the conversations have changed, the structures remain the same. Clark County staff has not changed the means through which they engage the citizenry, which includes town advisory boards, citizen advisory councils, focus groups, and community forums. They continue to work through established systems, but now when citizens engage, they see themselves as potential actors.

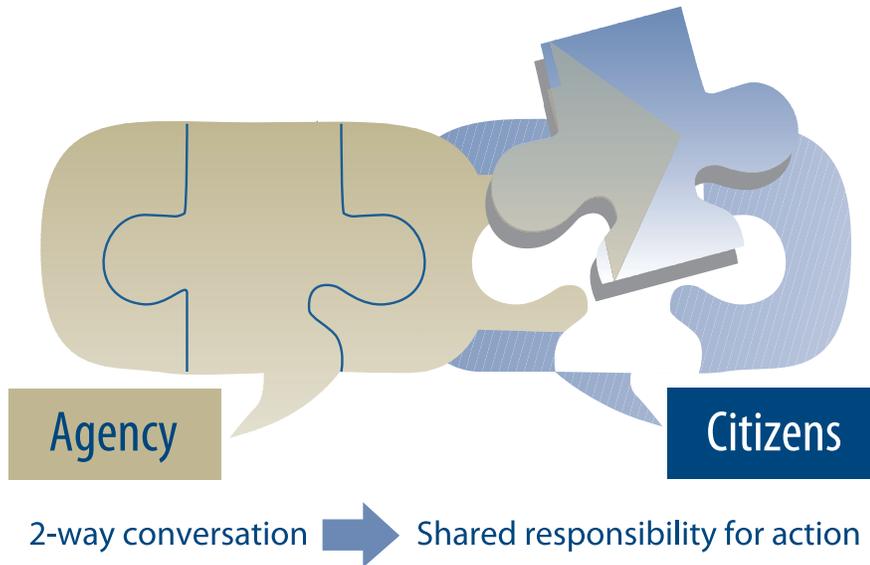
This paradigm shift did not happen overnight or without provocation. Department staff went through training in mediation and public-servant orientation. They are now evaluated according to the

Staff members had to learn to communicate differently with each other as well. By increasing collaboration among staff with respect to public engagement practices, ideas and knowledge could be disseminated in various programs and neighborhoods. This could also bring about changes in how citizens view and work with the department.

principles of public engagement through performance review and incentive programs. Of course, changes take time, and the new philosophy of the Clark County Department of Parks and Community Services is by no means a finished product.

The San Jose Department of Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement is another example of a government agency that is struggling with its identity as a provider

Citizens and Bureaucratic Systems



of customer service. This agency has realized that while customer service is the appropriate response for an information desk or for fixing potholes, it does not adequately address larger community issues dealing with growth and planning. As such, they have developed outreach programs that seek to engage not just the vocal minority, but the silent majority as well.

One of these programs works with community-based citizen groups, each comprised of approximately 25 people from local businesses, faith communities, schools, and neighborhood residents. These advisory committees work with department employees in planning meetings and community workshops to discuss large-scale planning and development. Whereas before, department staff would engage in public relations and simply provide information on what was to occur, now they work hard to get citizen perspectives and incorporate them into their plans.

Like Clark County, the staff in San Jose has undergone training in facilitation and moderation and is learning to communicate with each other to share knowledge and incorporate what they are learning into their daily work. In addition, their performance reviews also take into account their initiatives in engaging the public. All of this has helped to change the mind-set of the employees. Now they can make long-term commitments toward these practices.

Commitment, however, cannot come solely from the department. It must also come from the citizens. A key challenge is getting beyond the vocal majority and reaching those citizens who do not normally attend community meetings. This cuts across socioeconomic, racial, and gen-

der lines, making it especially difficult. In addition, citizens who are involved often do so for their own pet projects or for the short-term. So keeping them involved is difficult as well. However, these challenges have not stopped the San Jose Department of Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement from continuing to dedicate its time and resources to involving citizens in meaningful ways.

Many governmental agencies are slowly realizing a customer-service orientation is no longer adequate. In order to solve complex community problems, citizens must be involved as active participants in the decision-making process. This does not necessarily require a reorganization or the addition of several new tasks. It can be accomplished through the existing structures with some additional training. Thus, the paradigm can shift, and by engaging citizens from the beginning, administrators are realizing that they can succeed in their goals more easily and efficiently.

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Carmen Sirianni, "Can a Federal Regulator Become a Civic Enabler? Watersheds at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency," *National Civic Review*, Fall 2006, p. 33.

In recent years, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, EPA's Office of Water (and especially its Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds) has become innovative and effective in helping to build the capacity of civic organizations to share in the enormously complex work of protecting and restoring our nation's watershed commonwealths. However imperfect and incomplete its efforts to date, EPA has developed critical design components—funding, training, network catalyst, technical assistance, data systems, management models, regulatory alignment—that make it increasingly possible for citizens to step up to the plate, not just as advocates and protesters but as skilled and effective coproducers of public goods and usable knowledge. The agency has been engaged in reinventing itself along many fronts in order to fulfill its core regulatory mission of "protecting human health and the environment," but perhaps it has also been discovering, as it were, its "civic mission" to help build the capacity of citizens, communities, and diverse stakeholders to engage in active stewardship and collaboration toward these ends.

The Persistence of **POWER** Changing the System When the System Won't Listen

By *Kenneth A. Brown*

In 1994, South Africa's first truly free elections brought Nelson Mandela and his African National Congress to power. It marked an end to apartheid rule and the end of decades of political discrimination and social injustice brought on by the country's longstanding policy of strict racial segregation. The economic inequalities created by apartheid rule, however, have proved harder to tackle. Five years after the end of apartheid, with an unemployment rate of more than 30 percent and a murder rate six times as high as that of the United States, as many as one-out-of-five black South Africans were telling pollsters they were better off under apartheid rule.

No one, of course, is seriously advocating a return to apartheid rule—but the poll numbers suggest, at least at the surface, how deep the public's sense of frustration runs. "What people say is that we have the crown but not the jewelry," said Mpho Putu with the Institute for Democracy in South Africa and a former Kettering fellow. What they mean, he explained, is that while democracy is flourishing, the country's economy is still struggling. "The question is," he said, "how do you merge the two?"

Beyond Politics: Democracy and Economics

The problematic relationship between democracy and economics issues is a recurring theme among those in Kettering's informal international network whether one is talking about the unpredictable political and economic world of post-Communist Eastern Europe or the struggling economies of Africa and Latin America. Meaningful citizen engagement in political affairs, as many in the network term it, is a revolutionary idea—but the idea of meaningfully engaging citizens on major economic questions is an even more radical one. Many, however, suggest

that it is impossible to have one without the other. The question, as Putu suggests, is how to go about it.

Critical economic decisions today are typically made by professionals—the economic and financial elite—with little or no public input. At issue are not only the actions and policies of international groups like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, but also major corporations and private financial institutions. As one representative from Ghana termed it, "I believe there will be no democracy in Ghana until there is democracy all around the world." Economic decisions, like political decisions, they suggest, will be significantly better if they truly engage citizens. Democracy, they say, needs to reach beyond simply political issues into the all-important question of economic development. Power, however, is persistent and this notion will undoubtedly need time to take root and find its way into practice.

Changing the System and Engaging Institutions

Citizen engagement then is not enough on its own if it is not coupled with institutional engagement—if institutions are not ready and willing to recognize the capabilities of citizens for action. That hard lesson has been clearly demonstrated in Latin American countries like Brazil. While the country has a number of innovative aspects of its constitution to encourage citizen involvement and many cities have provisions for direct citizen involvement, there is a growing sense that there is a larger, more powerful, and yet indefinable system in place that makes real public action impossible.

When the current Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, first took office in 2003, he was not only the first left-leaning candidate to win office in nearly half a century—he had also grown up

poor himself, leaving school at age 12 and working as a shoeshine boy and street vendor to help support his family. Hopes were high, not only because he had made addressing Brazil's extreme gap between rich and poor a cornerstone of his campaign, but also because he understood the plight of the disadvantaged so clearly. Once in office, however, his ambitious plans proved hard to implement, and Lula himself was soon forced to make compromises with the Brazilian congress and international banks.

"After a few years we're seeing that it's not that easy," said Telma Gimenez, a former Kettering fellow who teaches at Brazil's University of Londrino. The inability to change the system, in turn has created a lot of frustration—with not just Lula, but with the possibilities of politics and democracy as it currently exists. "The question is, how can we—with a diverse country like ours, with this enormous gap between the rich and the poor—make a conciliation of our different conflicting interests?" Recent events have taught people that "it's not just a question of replacing one group with another," she explained. "It is more complicated. We have learned that politics is not just black and white." But this is not entirely a bad thing, she said.

I think it helps our understanding of democracy—because we may start thinking in terms of our own engagement instead of just looking for a savior, for someone who's going to do everything for us—because we know that's not going to happen.

The question is, however, will people be able to change the system if the system is not willing to listen?

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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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