

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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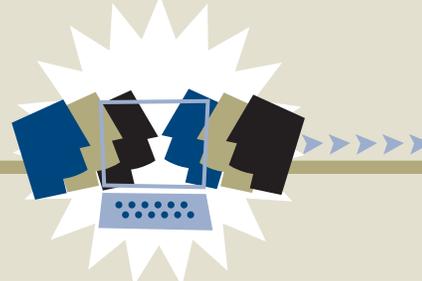
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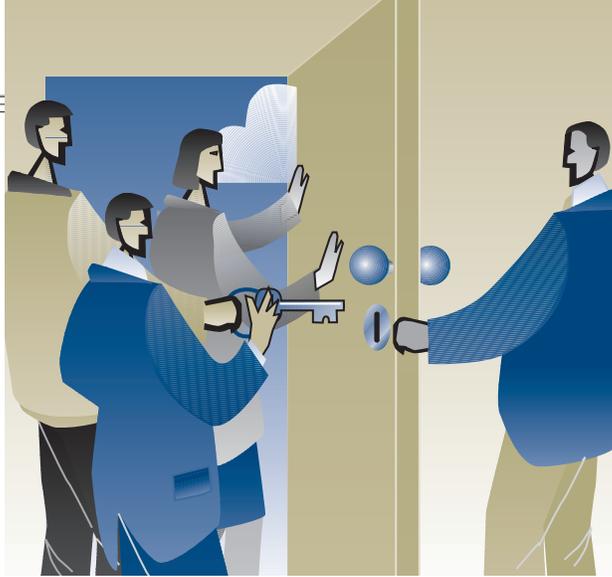
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Citizens and Local Boards

Opening Doors

Citizen Boards When Local Isn't Enough

By Paloma Dallas

The situation is familiar: a concerned citizen shows up for a meeting of the municipal board, the local transit board, the school board. She is given three minutes to voice her concerns. When she finishes, she is asked to sit down. No one responds. The next person stands up and expresses his concerns. Then the next. Still, no one responds. The meeting moves on to the next agenda item. For many citizens, it is a very unsatisfying experience. It hardly seems an exercise in self-rule.

But it is. Or at least it is supposed to be. Local citizen boards, such as these, are meant to be some of the primary entry-

ways for people to engage in politics. It is through these boards that people are supposed to be able to weigh in on the problems that affect their lives. Scholars say that these boards are some of the mediating institutions that link our individual, private sphere with our shared, public sphere. As such, these boards, as well as the boards of local nonprofit organizations and foundations, should provide a means of civic ownership of the organizations and institutions that they oversee, a way for citizens to help shape their communities.

Part of the reason these boards ought to be so accessible to citizens is that they are local. In theory, citizens rub shoulders every day with the people serving on them, or at least they have a better chance of running into these board members at the grocery store than they do their representatives in Congress, or even their representatives in the state legislature. And ideally, being part of the same local community makes for some common concerns, which can be addressed on a workable scale.

And yet Kettering research has found that citizens often feel as shut out from these boards as they do from the institu-

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tions of state and national government. Many people feel “alienated from politics and community affairs—and powerless to do much about them,” reported Doble

recognize that citizens are often personally, and profoundly, affected by the decisions being made about their communities, so they understand why emotions may run high. Still, in order for boards to run effective and efficient meetings and just plain get things done, many argue, there must be a mechanism for moving things forward and keeping things civil.

The problem, however, goes deeper than the protocol of meetings. The real problem

has to do with the role that citizens play. It has to do with what is meant by public accountability. Even if people are civil and meetings run smoothly, the role available to the public is usually minimal. Citizen participation is usually limited to listening to experts and airing grievances. The hard work of making decisions and weighing the trade-offs among the possible solutions is left for board members to do in private—and usually so is the work of setting the agenda to begin with.

In the case of the boards of not-for-profit organizations and foundations, the

problem is even more complex because their obligations to the public are less straightforward. While these boards are not legally required to hold public meetings, they are beholden to the public in a more indirect way—as not-for-profit organizations, they purport to serve the public’s interest. That is why they are given tax-exempt status. And many boards argue that their obligation to democracy is to ensure these funds are put to good use. Their job is to guarantee investments are productive and projects effective, as well as to secure funding for the future. But should they do more? Is that the extent of their accountability to the public? Is it even the *kind* of accountability that the public expects?

Part of the trouble with talking about accountability is that it has developed into this rather narrow, legalistic, even financial notion. What Kettering research has found is that citizens want something else. They want a *relationship* with institutions, a sense that what they say and think counts. What they would like is an account of why officials or board members make the decisions that they make. They want to feel that the individuals who serve on boards are responsive to their concerns.

Kettering research has found that citizens often feel as shut out from these boards as they do from institutions of state and national government.

Research Associates in their November 2006 report on the “Democracy’s Challenge” forums. And although that report and others have also found that citizens, at least sometimes, feel that they can make a difference in their communities, boards are seldom, if ever, heralded as the vehicles for making that difference.

It has been argued that boards have become too focused on their fiscal and legal responsibilities and have lost sight of their role in providing an entryway into politics for citizens. Yet board members might respond that meetings that are open to the public *are* a means for providing an entryway into politics. And indisputably, the sunshine laws that established these meetings in the 1970s were designed to improve transparency and public accountability for government agencies. And if practices such as setting time limits and not responding directly to citizens’ concerns are viewed as limiting citizen participation, the intent is not malicious.

Board members complain that few citizens attend public meetings until the situation is dire. And when they finally show up at meetings, citizens can be disruptive and even abusive, sometimes launching into tirades that can exacerbate problems. A recent article from the *Detroit Free Press* describes a school board meeting in which audience members showed their frustration by humming, shouting, and throwing grapes. Security guards were brought in to establish order.

This is an extreme case, but the emotions are not unfamiliar. Board members



Why Are Expectations So Different?

The narrow notion of public accountability that has developed may be part of a general trend to professionalize politics and exclude ordinary citizens from the political realm. In her book, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Theda Skocpol documents how beginning in the 1960s, many local, chapter-based civic organizations found it more cost effective to hire a professional staff and move to Washington to lobby the federal government than to continue to work with volunteers in local chapters.

Although citizen membership in associations and organizations still exists, the role of citizens is generally reduced to paying dues and, if given any say at all in the priorities of the organization, it is through surveys in which members rank their priorities among a fixed set of pre-established options. This strategy may have increased organizations' effectiveness at making a particular issue or agenda visible on the national stage, but it has reduced the opportunities for individual citizens to engage in politics, particularly at the local level. It may be that citizen boards, in their efforts to be effective, have similarly excluded citizens, albeit unwittingly.

One problem may lie in the way board members relate to one another, and therefore, the public. Disagreements always exist over what is in a community's best interest, and often those disagreements will lead to polarization in the community. Sometimes board members will replicate that polarization. When that happens, and debates ensue between two camps, it can be very difficult for citizens who don't fall into either of the camps to weigh in on the conversation. Ironically, however, even when board members work together to surmount polarization, the results can be equally problematic for citizens. When members seek consensus by deferring to one another or engaging in logrolling—supporting one issue in exchange for a colleague's support of another issue—the conversation is likewise closed to citizens. And in both cases, there is usually a failure to thoughtfully examine all potential solutions to a problem—and weigh the trade-offs inherent

Judy Freiwirth and Maria Elena Letona, "System-Wide Governance for Community Empowerment," *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Winter 2006, pp. 24-25.

[Centro Presente, a Latino rights organization in Cambridge, Massachusetts,] undertook a process to become an organization "of the community." Its long-range goal was to build power within its community, and Centro's leaders realized that if they were to be true to their mission of community empowerment, they needed to overhaul and completely transform their governance system. . . .

If nonprofit organizations are to be truly accountable to their communities and constituencies, democracy has to be at its core. Yet, by and large, the nonprofit sector has tended to replicate structures and processes that do not foster democracy within organizations. We have observed that traditional governance models, based on outdated top-down "command and control" paradigms, still dominate. Such hierarchical structures not only run counter to democratic values and ideals, they often impede an organization's achievement of its goals and, ultimately, its mission. If the voices of those who are directly impacted by our actions are not included in key decision-making processes, we too often arrive at wrong conclusions or decisions that are incongruent with constituencies' needs, let alone with our missions.

in choosing one solution over another.

In his new book, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*, Cass Sunstein describes some other group dynamics that might keep board members from recognizing and deliberating on the full range of options available. Simply listening to others' opinions may lead people to self-censorship, he argues, either because people fear being ridiculed or disliked or because their respect for a colleague keeps them from contradicting his or her position. When there appears to be a general consensus on a matter, Sunstein writes, someone who disagrees with the group might not voice his opinion for fear of unnecessarily delaying the decision-making process.

Other research on leadership has shown that it is particularly difficult for a leader to "resist the social pressure from within his or her social circle to agree with close friends concerning how to interpret widely shared core values," write Prasad Balkundi and Martin Kilduff in a 2005 article

for *The Leadership Quarterly*. Since many trustees tend to sit on multiple boards and are often part of a small, local elite, they might be reticent to challenge the prevailing ideas or beliefs of the group.

Yet many will bristle at the suggestion that they succumb to these influences. They might insist that they don't self-censor and aren't affected by groupthink or other social pressures. If they defer to one another, it is because of their respect for one another's expertise and an attempt to move things along. But what if this impetus to get things done and defer to expertise contributes to the exclusion of citizens?

Another prevalent, and understandable, practice may also be to blame. The problem has been articulated in relation to grantmaking foundations, but it might also apply to the boards of nonprofits, or even municipal and school boards. The problem is that foundations often base their strategies on what has been proven to work, something that makes perfect

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sense, until one looks more closely at some unintended consequences. By following so-called proven strategies, foundations as well as boards tend to limit their own thinking and creativity. George Frederickson, a professor of public administration at The University of Kansas, writes in a June 2003 paper for the Kettering Foundation that the practice breeds *isomorphism*, which is the “pattern of increasing similarity, homogeneity, and congruence between and among organizations in similar fields.” The more that boards tend to follow one another, the less likely innovative new practices will occur.

The other problem is that when following *what works*, there is an implicit understanding that what is desirable is a foregone conclusion. The reality is often otherwise. The president of one grant-making foundation argues that rather than looking at what works, foundations should be asking *who cares*. Experts can provide technical solutions, but only citizens can say what is important to them and why. And this information is necessary both to understand why something is a problem and to understand what sort of solution might best be able to address people’s concerns.

What Might Boards Do?

It is not in the scope of this article to make sweeping recommendations. And even if Kettering knew what boards

ought to do, which it doesn’t, it would be antidemocratic for us to tell them. However, it might be helpful to look to some of the insights of people who have been wrestling with these very issues. One of them, Jane Urschel, is the associate executive director of the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB). Writing in the spring 2004 issue of *PRISM*, a publication by CASB, Urschel states that school board members need to rethink “our attitude that we are the experts.” The real question, she says, is “how can we reestablish the mission of the school in the context of the larger purposes of the community?” Her question might be posed more generally to citizen boards: how can they reestablish their own missions in the context of the larger purposes of the community?

At the Kettering Foundation, we would argue that the purposes of the community are more than the particular values of a place, which are probably diverse and often at odds with one another. The purpose of a community, in its most profound sense, is to work together to confront the problems that the people of that community, collectively, encounter. So if the work of boards is to operate in the context of that purpose, of that fundamental, democratic purpose, then they must operate in such a way as to allow, even facilitate, though at least not block, this collective work of the public in a community. This broader notion of public

accountability and democracy in general has sweeping implications for many institutions, but it might have particular meaning for citizen boards.

Another insight comes from Phillip Boyle, who teaches in the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the same issue of *PRISM*, he writes that “in a democratic society, how we decide is as important as what we decide.” The key, according to Boyle, lies in recognizing the underlying core values that are at play in any decision. “To govern democratically, board members must learn how to facilitate public conversations about the core values that underlie public choices,” writes Boyle. He argues that all public problems are informed by four basic values: community, equality, prosperity, and liberty. These values provide the underlying motivation for our decision making. It is a similar notion to what we at Kettering have referred to as people’s primary imperatives. These are the societal equivalents of the personal need for food and water. They are what social psychologists have called the “end-goals,” things such as equality, peace, or security; or the means for these goals, such as the importance of being honest, ambitious, or forgiving.

If decisions are recognized in terms of the trade-offs among these values, a certain common ground can be established as to what is fundamentally at stake in a particular decision. This does not imply that a consensus can always be found. It simply opens up the conversation so that what is at stake is articulated in terms people can identify with. It also might help align potential solutions to a problem with those things that are most important to people, and to a community.

But maybe the larger question for boards to consider is what it would mean for them to take up Urschel’s challenge to understand their role in the context of democracy—in the context of citizens working together to solve the problems that they face collectively. How might accepting this challenge alter the way boards function? How might it affect citizens’ perceptions of their ability to shape their communities? And how might it affect the role of citizens in our democracy?

Paloma Dallas is an editor with Kettering Foundation Press. She can be reached at dallas@kettering.org.

Phillip Boyle, “Do School Boards Matter?,” *PRISM*, Spring 2004, pp. 19, 21.

Public problems occur when people pursue different public values. To solve a public problem, public officials must first identify which values are at stake. Once they have done that, they must make two kinds of choices. First, they must decide which value or values they want more of, and second, they must decide how much to give up of one value to get more of another. . . .

Seldom do citizens elected to office know everything they need to know or how to do everything they need to do. To govern effectively, board members must learn to work in a political system laden with value conflicts—one with many players but nobody in charge. To govern democratically, board members must learn how to facilitate public conversations about the core values that underlie public choices.

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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