

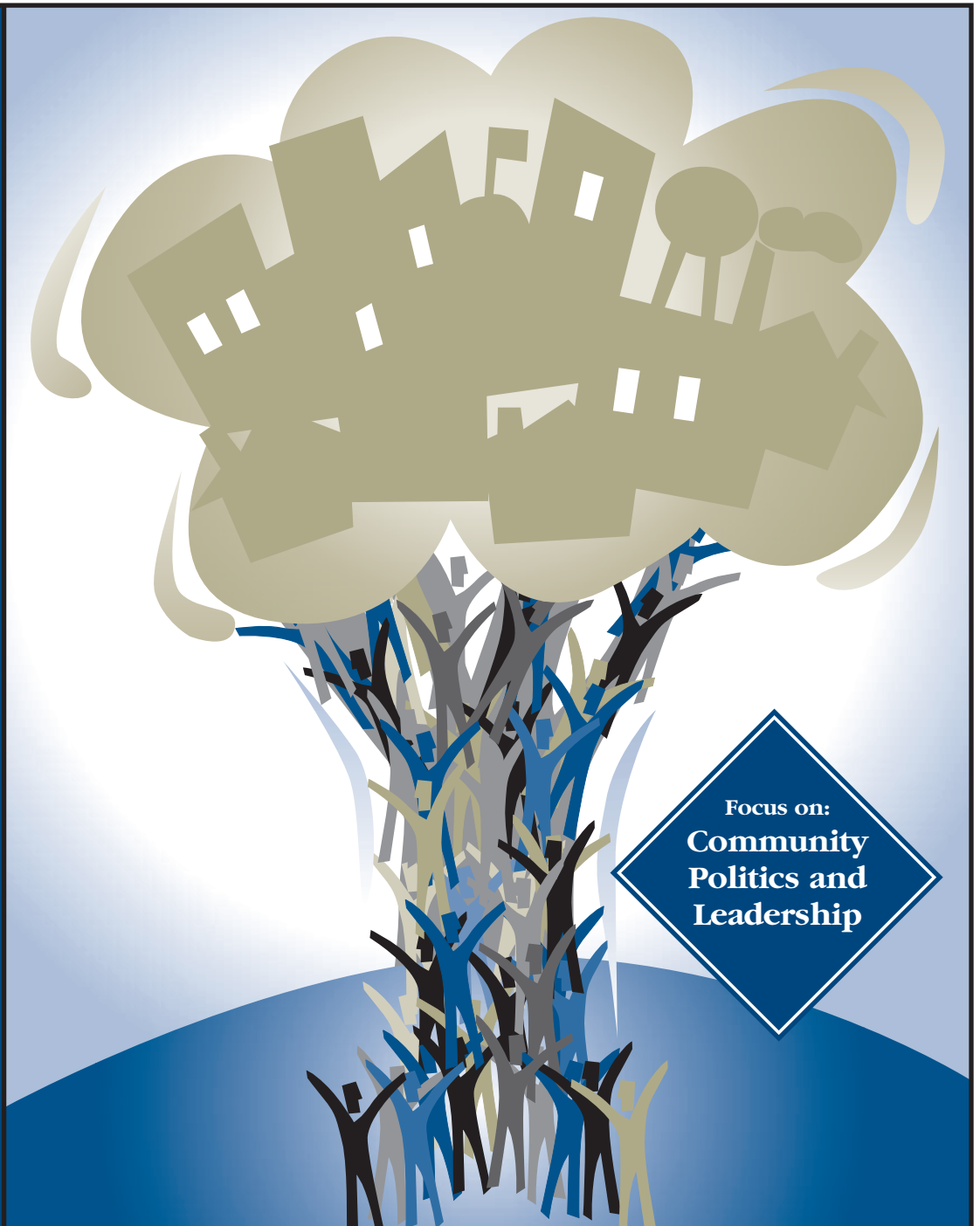
# CONNECTIONS

VOLUME XIII

ISSUE 2

March 2003

- **The Little Republics of American Democracy**  
.....page 2
- **A Question Revisited: What's in a Name?**  
.....page 7
- **Reflections on the Practice of Community Politics**  
.....page 9
- **Inactive Communities: Lessons from Rebuilding**  
.....page 13
- **Shared Learning with Uniontown: Lessons in Community Development**  
.....page 16
- **From Dialogue to Action in Tajikistan**  
.....page 19
- **Catalysts for Change: Toward Leaderful Communities**  
.....page 23
- **Make the Leap**  
.....page 26
- **Books Worth Reading**  
.....page 29



# Make the Leap

By Richard C. Harwood

Last week, a community leader wondered aloud to me, “Why is it that people get so excited at training sessions but then don’t do anything differently when they go back home?”

Most people and organizations that try to bring new ideas and practices into public life have asked themselves this question or one similar to it. Those of us in this line of work often feel as though we are banging our heads against a wall when seeking to generate change. But we often create such frustrations ourselves:

- ◆ We think it is far easier for people to genuinely learn new ideas and practices than it is.
- ◆ We fail to understand people’s “readiness” for learning — and what constitutes readiness and how it evolves.
- ◆ We simply focus our attention on the wrong kind of people.
- ◆ We make big plans for learning but then feel the need to plow ahead so fast that our plans take a back seat.
- ◆ We say we are committed to change but do not fully understand what it will take.

We confuse proclamations and plans with the exercise of true, sustained efforts. It is time to stop banging our heads against the wall.

*The Public Learning Journey: What It Takes, How to Make It* is about the process by which people learn new public ideas and practices. And it is a *process*. It is based on years of Harwood Institute experience working with communities, organizations, and individuals. It calls for sponsors of the learning journey to be more vigilant about their goals and expectations, their audience and the context, and the overall process of public learning.

## The Third Leap Is the Charm

There are three leaps people make in the Public Learning Journey. Each leap is separate, critical, and builds on the others:

**Opening up.** The first leap takes place when people personally open themselves up to something new. But “opening up” is not just about hearing a new idea and thinking, “Yes, that’s a great idea!” It occurs only when people are engaged in looking inward to question their existing beliefs about the challenge being addressed, think about individual responsibility for what they can do to improve things, and take ownership of the need to *personally* change.

But most people resist this kind of deep introspection, which prompts questions about how and why they do what they do. People are more likely to open themselves up to the learning experience if they can discover a gap between their existing knowledge/practice and the challenges they face. And not just any idea will propel someone forward; we find it must be a “reorienting idea” — a compelling idea that turns accepted thinking around, crystallizing a new way of seeing something pivotal. Reorienting ideas have an intuitive language (not academic or theoretical) and ready-made coherence.

Opening up is fundamentally important to the public learning journey but is actually the least challenging among the three leaps. The problem is that many programs stop at the first leap, assuming they have met their goals. Seldom do deep practices emerge from the first leap.

**New practice and personal turmoil.** People make the second leap when they earnestly enter into an ongoing cycle of learning a new set of practices. But this part of the journey is far easier said than done.

In learning new practices, individuals need to be able to reflect on what they are learning and figure out how to put into play new approaches to their everyday work. This requires providing people with the room to ask questions as they try new approaches; room to be highly skeptical; and room to think in concrete, practical, and even political terms about how they can use the new ideas and practices in their daily lives.

A number of our colleagues in democratic civic engagement are also exploring leadership. The Kettering Foundation has commissioned Richard Harwood of The Harwood Institute to do some major research on leadership in the course of his own work in that field. In “Make the Leap,” Harwood shares some of the findings he has made in his own work.

— Maxine Thomas



This learning process often creates great personal turmoil, as people must examine and change long-held practices and assumptions about how things work. Not recognizing this period of turmoil is a common and costly mistake; people often “fall off” the journey at this point.

Thus, people need to be supported in their day-to-day work environment, which is likely to resist new ideas and practices. Sponsors must keep people engaged when the going gets tough, providing opportunities to revisit the opening-up stage and to go through trial and error in putting new approaches into daily practice. It is essential that individuals know they will have a guide or partner in this *ongoing* process.

As the learner begins to put new practices to work, he or she will have to come to terms with the reality of a resistant environment and face the choice of having to either revert to old ways of working or buck the tide. This choice creates within people even more internal turmoil. This second leap is higher and farther than the first, requiring important levels of discipline and vigilance — among both individual learners and those who sponsor learning.

**Integration.** The working focus of leap three is quite literally the personal transformation of ingrained reflexes and old working assumptions. This transformation is not just about changing a few ways of doing things, but about applying a new lens to how individuals think and act in public work. Indeed, as they make the third leap, people find they can readily translate their newfound knowledge to new situations as they arise.





*Engaging people in learning new public ideas and practices is nothing short of a journey; there is no easy fix.*

For this leap to occur, the learning process must actively engage people in creating and implementing mechanisms in their daily life that institutionalize the new ideas and practices. This suggests that people must not only make the new thinking and practices their own, but also must reshape the work or community environment itself. Many people are unwilling or unable to take on this challenge. Instead, they change only some of their ways of thinking and acting, and so a full transformation does not occur.

In this third leap, sponsors of the learning journey must also find new ways to actively support people — and do so over time. Without this active support, most people end up feeling isolated in their struggle to integrate new ideas and practices into their work and lives.

One last point: Much of the work in leap three must focus on the active cultivation of five key personal traits: courage, humility, discipline, stamina, and personal accountability. These traits, which some onlookers might see as being “soft,” relate to people’s ability to sustain their efforts and continue to learn at deep levels. We find that leap three ultimately revolves around these traits.

#### **Obstructions, Obstacles, Impediments, Bumps, Hurdles, Stumbling Blocks, Hitches, Catches, and Disincentives**

There is a second set of factors, a kind of overlay, that affects the public learning journey. The challenge for sponsors of public learning is to engage with these factors, be strategic about them, and *work* them. But far too often we find these factors are not genuinely considered or are given a kind of perfunctory lip service. When this occurs, the entire public learning process can be undermined.

**Personal Capacity.** At the individual level, there are personal-capacity factors that combine to accelerate or hinder public learning. In structuring public learning, it is essential to gauge people’s core capacities (their experience, training, and maturity), individual readiness, and ingrained biases. Too often, those trying to engage people in public learning are unwilling to take these factors into account and structure inappropriate learning processes as a result.

**Context.** It almost goes without saying that sponsors of public learning need to take into account the context in which the learning is to take place; but it must be said. It is essential to unpack a web of factors that include: the incentives and disincentives to learning within an environment; collective narratives that drive a community or organization; the core stability of the environment; the community or organization’s developmental stage and its capacity to change; and the culture and norms that support experimentation, new ideas, trial and error.

People often “talk” about these factors, but then overlook them once they get started on a public learning journey. Context is critical.

**Audience.** In seeking to generate change, civic efforts often set out to “change” the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time. It is a common trap. But we find that initial efforts should concentrate on identifying and running with *Early Adapters*<sup>™</sup>, people who combine idealism and down-to-earth practicality with risk taking. Such people seek tangible outcomes and help others see what is possible; these outcomes are vital if others are to engage. Identifying such *Early Adapters*<sup>™</sup> is not always a straightforward process, but it is critical.

#### **Prepare to Leap**

We can keep banging our heads against the wall — or leap over it. Engaging people in learning new public ideas and practices is nothing short of a journey; there is no easy fix. Far too often those who fund, manage, and promote such efforts fail to properly structure and support this journey. But with a deeper understanding of what it takes — three leaps, together with the factors that affect them — we can begin to reframe how we work with people on the public learning journey.

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