

CONNECTIONS

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An Experiment Studying Experiments

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From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

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The Work of
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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Leaderful Communities: Exploring Citizen-Leaders

By James (Ike) Adams and Erin Payseur Oeth



City Hall, Tupelo, Mississippi

We are part of several groups in different communities that are exploring questions with Kettering about the role citizens play in leadership efforts in community and implications for democratic practice. For communities to work, they need people who actively engage in community problem-solving without regard to formal position, authority, or institutional affiliation. People who do that might be called citizen-leaders, and what they are doing might be called exhibiting *leaderfulness*. One question we might ask is, What fosters leaderfulness?

The work we describe was part of a research exchange convened in spring 2020 and was framed around a draft of David Mathews' new book *Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities*. We convened a group of 10 citizen-leaders representing three geographic communities



PHOTO OF WELCOME TO MISSISSIPPI SIGN: TRAVELVIEW/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM PHOTO OF STATUE OF JAMES MERIDITH: JAMES KIRKIKS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; PHOTO OF CITY HALL, TUPELO, MISSISSIPPI: DENISTANGNEY/IR/ISTOCK.COM

within North Mississippi—Tupelo (2), Lafayette County/Oxford (2), and Bolivar County/Cleveland (6). These citizen-leaders committed to gathering weekly over the course of 10 weeks throughout the summer of 2020. They represented a range of ages and backgrounds. Six of the ten had university affiliations, although their community work was distinct from their official role. Collectively, they had tackled issues such as affordable housing, youth development, youth-on-youth gun violence, racial justice, and health and wellness.

We explored some of the key markers of citizen-leaders. Do citizen-leaders see themselves as leaders? How do they understand their role as citizens? How do they



Do citizen-leaders see themselves as leaders? How do they understand their role as citizens? How do they first demonstrate leaderfulness?

first demonstrate leaderfulness?

Through this 10-week program, several key themes emerged:

- There are small but significant steps citizens can take, e.g., picking up litter, that may counter cynicism and increase individual power and agency.
- Citizen-leaders often reflect a love of their community and inspire that love in others.
- Citizen-leaders assume the roles of both expert and citizen, often moving fluidly between these roles.

TAKING SMALL, YET SIGNIFICANT STEPS

An interesting thread emerged early on regarding litter. While many of our citizen-leaders were engaged in projects tackling complex community issues, many shared experiences they had in their neighborhoods picking up litter.

One participant mentioned she was frustrated seeing trash alongside her road and then one day decided to do something about it herself. Another does weekly pickups with youth, regardless of whether anyone else shows up to help. Still another talked about cleaning up around the football stadium. We were surprised at how common this experience was among our group. Many members of the cohort had engaged in this

seemingly small practice, and many continue to do it alongside their other work. In discussing their motivations, they reflected a sense of pride in their community and identified it as something that they *could* do.

This discussion on litter led to some interesting insights. One participant recounted her experience in complaining to leadership and leaving frustrated. She then decided to pick up trash herself weekly and afterwards felt empowered. Others resonated with this experience. It seemed that in this seemingly simple practice of choosing to pick up litter, they were finding a sense of agency and power. It was a posture that put themselves as a contributor to their community and one in which they took on an active role. It did not require any special skills or experience, no positional authority. It required only eyes to see what needed to be done and the willingness to act on it. They talked about it as almost an antidote to the frustration and cynicism they felt toward others' lack of engagement. Their attitude seemed to reflect a choice between being frustrated that others are not addressing the issue and tackling it themselves. In choosing the latter, they seemed to see themselves as agents of change and their role as citizens as those who can make their communities better.



Perhaps in rediscovering our agency and power, we also rediscover our role as citizens. In looking to institutions to do too much, we may set ourselves up for failure, cynicism, and frustration. When we see ourselves as actors, though, even with small and simple steps, we rediscover our own agency and power.

INSPIRING OTHERS

Another theme that emerged was the love for community that our participants expressed and the struggle to inspire that love in others. In spite of the complex issues they were facing, ongoing frustrations, and a lack of engagement by others, they still talked about the beauty and strength

of their respective communities and a desire to instill an appreciation of that in others.

One citizen-leader recounted a frustrating conversation with a neighbor regarding debris and lamented that she didn't seem to care about the neighborhood. As others nodded in solidarity, a realization seemed to surface that not everyone shared that same love of their communities. The conversation shifted to deeper questions: What does it mean to love our community? How do we help others fall in love with their community?

And further, if love for one's community is part of the motivation for citizen work, *How do we attract and engage those who do not have that love or pride in their community? What inspires others to join in community work?*

Several potential answers began to emerge. One participant working on addressing youth gun violence in Tupelo talked about reaching out intentionally to violent youth offenders and talking to youth on the street to hear their voices and their ideas for engaging the issue. She talked about how important it was to hear from them and validate their voices and how she wanted to engage them in imagining a better future for themselves and their community. She saw them as potential actors in addressing the issue and as a key part of the

solution, even before they identified that agency in themselves. This concern gathering, as we often describe it, brought value not only in shaping potential deliberative conversations but also in sparking engagement and agency in others.

A participant from Bolivar County offered another approach. He talked about the connections he built to support his youth program and how much of his work was inspiring others to join in his efforts as he led the way. He highlighted the importance of the ask, the intentional invitation and outreach, centered in relationship and trust. He recounted how many businesses, associates, and friends ended up contributing to his work simply because he invited them along. He found that often others were glad to contribute *when asked*. This theme emerged of participants intentionally engaging with other community members, reaching out broadly to those who may not *yet* see themselves as citizen-leaders, and inviting them to join in the work.

In doing so, these participants were paving the way for other citizens to see themselves as citizen-leaders and to discover a new love for their community and perhaps a new role for themselves as part of it. They saw themselves as *door openers*, not as gate-keepers, making way for leaderfulness to spread in the community.

FLUIDITY OF ROLES

As citizen-leaders who were accustomed to community work in different settings, many of our participants had assumed the role of experts, often educating others on an issue, why it was important, and what they should do about it. They also often assumed the role of citizen, engaging with institutions and government in collective decision-making to advocate for change. Many had become adept at role switching, walking comfortably in both.

One example of this fluidity between roles surfaced in our conversations about the start of school. Across our different geographic communities, school systems were making different decisions about how school should reopen in the fall of 2020 given the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this issue affected many of our participants directly, as parents or as citizen-leaders, it became a relevant topic of discussion.

When a local school board had voted that all classes would be held in person for the fall, several of our participants quickly mobilized alongside others to address concern in the community about a lack of citizen input. An online petition quickly circulated and put pressure on the school board to reconsider its decision.

In this scenario, it became clear that these citizen-leaders were

assuming roles both *as experts*—other citizens were looking to them for action, relying on their expertise and experience in navigating the political action, and *as citizens*—being parents or community members of an impacted community, relying on school boards and state policymakers for information themselves and working with institutions to affect change. They were both citizen consumers and citizen-leader producers.

This ability to move fluidly between expert and citizen seemed to serve citizen-leaders well in their community problem-solving. It gave them several distinct advantages.

First, they were comfortable and receptive to learning from others. They were open to new insights into the issues they were addressing and seemed eager to learn new



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perspectives and approaches. Rather than assuming they had mastered an issue, their posture as citizens allowed them to continue to learn, bring in new voices, and engage more deeply in community work.

Secondly, this dual role also ensured that they were not just passive recipients of that information; they passed it along to others. It seemed to position them as citizens who were further along on a journey, offering their guidance to those who were coming behind them.

Finally, these shifting roles gave them a greater appreciation for other citizens. They seemed to view citizens as essential to their work and valued their thoughts, experiences, and involvement. They sought ways to engage others and were receptive to building their expertise in democratic strategies, such as concern gathering and naming and framing, that could broaden their reach. It seems they were building their expertise to position themselves better for cultivating other citizen-leaders.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Through the 10-week program, this cohort of citizen-leaders offered valuable insights into the role of citizens in our democracy. As we engaged with them and their community work, we gained valuable perspectives on how they understood

their roles as citizens and some of the ways they demonstrated leaderfulness.

We learned that citizens can take seemingly small but significant steps that may counter cynicism and increase individual power and agency. These small steps can set the stage for future action and may offer helpful starting points for cultivating new citizen-leaders.

We also learned that citizen-leaders reflect a love of their community and often inspire that love in others. They see value in intentionally inviting others to join them and reaching out to those who may be disengaged. They want others to see the beauty in their communities and to share that sense of ownership.

We observed that citizen-leaders frequently assume the roles of both expert and citizen. Their ability to fluidly move between these roles is an advantage that positions them well for cultivating other citizen-leaders, which in turn will lead to more leaderful communities. ■

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