

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2018

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Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



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.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

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ISSN 2470-8003

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Networks of Interaction: An Indiana Center for Public Life

By Lisa-Marie Napoli

We often hear the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child.” I believe it takes a village to support a community. A village, to me, refers to the webs of local relationships that people create in the places where they live. People have always worked through local networks to facilitate learning and complementary interactions. The village, as such, is the key resource to successfully address shared concerns. To revitalize our communities, we need to engage in iterative processes “in our villages” to develop the capacities of people to govern their lives together.



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In 2012, I began to participate in the Kettering Foundation's learning exchange with people developing centers for public life. The Kettering exchange resonated with my interest in the networks that make up community life. I have found it incredibly energizing and the insights have been tangible in almost immediate ways. Centers typically take the form of individuals and organizations working with citizens to strengthen norms of decision-making and, thereby, strengthening democracy. The nature of networks is critical here: the key to centers working as hubs of democracy is, in many ways, for them to realize that they are not at the center as one might imagine a hub to be.

Rather, the centers are most effective as part of larger, networked sets of interaction. The aim is to decenter themselves in the work. They do so by working with others in the mode of learning.

In the Kettering learning exchanges with new centers, participants learn the fundamentals of gathering citizen input in naming and framing problems in ways that can be used to create useful guides for making public choices. They also work on ways to prepare facilitators who work to convene deliberative forums and report on the work in ways that keep things growing. In so doing, the centers are learning to be resources for people who want to create the civic infrastructure that allows for democratic self-governance.



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CREATING A CENTER FOR PUBLIC LIFE

When I first started participating in a Kettering learning exchange, I was confident in my skills of facilitation and communication learned through my college coursework and professional training. However, when it came time to apply democratic concepts in community work, the knowledge received and the experiments put into practice through these exchanges dramatically shifted the quality of my work and the approach I took.

The learnings and experiences allowed me to see ways to cocreate networks of community collaborators as a structural approach. Each center has a different compositional make-up. In my case, the work is housed at Indiana University's Political and Civic Engagement Program in Bloomington, Indiana. Our initiative is called Voices for Democracy and Civility and is carried out through collaborations with people and organizations in the community.

Our work in Bloomington is an example of how learning centers can become cocreators in the work to engage community members in dialogue and deliberation, to identify problems, and to support movement toward solutions. The networks developed with other people concerned about the issue, in targeted all-inclusive ways, are a key aspect for the work of centers for public life.

Over the years, my work developing a center has changed and grown. The work grew most visible when I was invited to be at the table, in a figurative sense, to help design public engagement processes to address pressing problems in Bloomington. Being "at the table" can be a limiting concept if it is inferred that only key stakeholders are involved. Here the term is used to suggest a large, unifying circle (or an inclusive table) that pulls representation from the



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community together to do the work of implementing democratic practices. The skills and knowledge that I developed through the Kettering learning exchanges were sought after, listened to, and utilized in successful public engagement processes.

The foundational principles that brought me to the work were trust and listening. I had to trust that what I was learning about democratic practices would guide me in public engagement. To do so I needed to share these ideas with networks of community members. At the same time, I was also aware that I needed to be patient and be sure that I did

not espouse my work or skill as the only right way. I wanted to confidently contribute to the process because I knew it had the potential to be beneficial, but I was at the table to listen and learn at the same time. I think this approach of listening to learn has made all the difference in the success of our development of collective work.

A NETWORK APPROACH

In 2016, the mayor of Bloomington requested assistance for a new city initiative to address downtown safety and civility issues. He stated that as “we come together as community members, we will encounter neighbors from all walks of life and must

ensure that we are able to do so in a way that is safe and expresses the value that each of us brings to our community.” In response to this initiative, a Downtown Safety, Civility, and Justice Steering Committee formed with representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Bloomington’s Safe and Civil City Program, the Community Justice and Mediation Center, Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University’s Political and Civic Engagement Program, and the Shalom Homeless Shelter. Each person at the table contributed on an equal playing field. Leadership emerged in many ways, at different times, for the success of the project. Our steering committee developed the same intention: to create and utilize a three-stage public engagement process to identify problems associated with safety and civility and to move toward solutions. We were able to cocreate and implement an inclusive public engagement process through the unique conglomeration of this group.

Using a network approach wasn’t without its challenges. One thing I learned was that when a network, or a team, of people do the work, it is possible for things to fall through the cracks. With a more organic, networking approach, there is a need





for diligent oversight. Our project included a three-stage process and, in the final stage when we held a communitywide discussion to generate action ideas, the announcement of our public engagement work was not disseminated in an adequate manner. This slip caused public outcry and had potential to impede our work. Our team learned that when working with others citywide, careful attention to communications needs to be spelled out clearly, and include a timeline, to be sure it is accurately carried out by others.

Another difficulty of utilizing a network approach is that it requires a lot of time spent in meetings to collectively educate one another,

make decisions, allocate responsibilities, monitor follow-through, share challenges, and move through the process in a manner in which all participants of the network are on the same page. I recall, at one point the way our steering committee framed the problem shifted. While the mayor requested that we facilitate conversations about “aggressive panhandling,” we wanted to hear what the community found most important and shifted the framing to open up the scope of issues. The naming of the problem moved from being about issues of panhandling to issues of safety and civility for all, with a focus on homelessness. In this way, we created an opportunity for citizens to

identify problems in their own terms and to discuss potential solutions.

During dialogue related to safety and civility, we also learned an important lesson about language.



It seems crucial that centers for public life and others doing this work remain solid and work with a variety of community collaborators to contribute insights, knowledge, experience, and know-how, not as experts but rather as cocreators to discover what communities need, to design effective public engagement processes, and to help manifest a healthy democracy.

Early on, we stopped using the term *homeless people* and instead started referring to *people experiencing homelessness*. This may seem insignificant, but it was an important distinction we learned in a focus-group session with participants who were panhandling, living on the streets, and staying in temporary housing. They asked us how we would feel if we were consistently referred to as mortgage-paying or rent-paying people. It gave us pause. From that point on, our steering committee altered the language so that all community members would be comfortable.

Another example of a center working in and with the community is Bloomington's Nonviolent Civic Engagement Initiative (NCEI). A collective network, from a vast array of community, university, government, and nonprofit groups, share information, skills, and opportunities to support steps for nonviolent social change. The participants in this network represent a wide variety of organizations: Bloomington United; the City of Bloomington's Human Rights Commission, Safe and Civil City Program, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday Celebration Commission; Indiana University's Office of Student Life and Learning, Political and Civic Engagement Program, and Service-Learning Program; and the Monroe County Public Library.

In a recent NCEI project with our local library, a participant mentioned, “Boy, trying to have a conversation about an important topic is a lot harder than I thought it would be.” I laughed because I know many of us can relate. The work is important and not as easy as it may seem on the surface. These groups, through a network of interaction, provided input to design an approach to support effective civil discourse strategies.

AN EXPANDING FIELD

Enhancing democratic practices can require extremely hard work to design and implement, and takes a lot of focused time to approach issues in as all-inclusive ways as possible, and it is critically important. In a stark political era of divisiveness, it is refreshing to hear and read about dialogue and deliberation in mainstream ways, especially through national public media and other similarly spirited mediums. I believe it is critical for those of us trained to facilitate courageous and constructive conversations to continue within networks of interaction to encourage the work and maintain quality attention to detail that a truly democratic process of dialogue and deliberation deserves.

For those who have been working in the dialogue and deliberation field

for several decades, some see this era as bringing an identity shift. No longer is this work relatively on the fringe, where others are surprised by its existence and have a hard time imagining how to do it. Many new participants in the field are jumping right in, some doing great things and others confusing the process. Without judgment, it seems crucial that centers for public life and others doing this work remain solid and work with a variety of community collaborators to contribute insights, knowledge, experience, and know-how, not as experts but rather as cocreators to discover what communities need, to design effective public engagement processes, and to help manifest a healthy democracy.

Living our lives and doing our work together, as a broad public collective of networks of interaction, provides opportunities to support, inspire, and learn with and from one another. This is our village. We have a shared responsibility to include, and be a part of, community life in a holistic way where we have opportunities to enhance democratic practices, energize community voices, and strengthen democracy. ■

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