

CONNECTIONS

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Governing *With* the People

By David Mathews p. 2

**Felt Democracy: Multinational
Research Exchange Week, 2019**

By Wendy Willis p. 48

**When Communities Embrace
Shared Responsibility**

By Richard C. Harwood p. 68



Exploring the
Relationship between
**THE PUBLIC
AND GOVERNMENT**

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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CONTENTS

- 2 **Governing *With* the People**
David Mathews
- 16 **City Managers: Creating a Collaborative Culture of Engagement**
Ron Carlee
- 22 **Democratic Practices That Inspire Collective Action: Engaging the Full Community through Citizen-Centric Strategies**
Cheryl Hilvert, Michael Huggins, and Doug Linkhart
- 28 **Imagining the Deliberative City Manager: The Case for Local Systems Leadership**
Martín Carcasson
- 35 **A Public Voice: A Look at National and Local Efforts**
Tony Wharton
- 41 **Connecting to Congress**
Michael Neblo
- 48 **Felt Democracy: Multinational Research Exchange Week, 2019**
Wendy Willis
- 55 **Costa Rica's Ottón Solís: A Politician Who Puts Citizens First**
Maura Casey
- 61 **Decades of Dialogue: Reflecting on US-China Exchanges**
Maxine S. Thomas
- 68 **When Communities Embrace Shared Responsibility**
Richard C. Harwood

Imagining the Deliberative City Manager: The Case for Local Systems Leadership

By Martín Carcasson



Scholars and practitioners continue to inform our collective understanding of both wicked problems and the corrosive hyperpartisanship that undermines the ability of citizens and government officials to work together to address these shared community problems. They also emphasize the critical importance of high-quality communication and engagement and the need to proactively build capacity to support such communication. Fortunately, a growing community of practice has been applying insights from the fields of conflict management, collaboration, public participation, deliberative democracy, and systems thinking in order to rethink our public processes. This reduces our propensity for bringing out the worst in human nature (such as the need for certainty and the preference for simple good-versus-evil narratives) and increases our ability to tap into the best of human nature (our sense of purpose, empathy, creativity, and our need for community). This essay argues for the need for cities to build their deliberative capacity, with a particular focus on the role city managers could play to tap into these developing insights and elevate the quality of communication in their communities.

For several decades, practitioners have been successfully running

deliberative forums, many relying on National Issues Forums issue guides, designed to bring people together in productive ways to address shared problems. Only over the last several years, however, have theorists and practitioners such as the Kettering Foundation's president David Mathews (*The Ecology of Democracy*) and John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (*Deliberative Systems*) begun to think more broadly about how communities overall function as deliberative systems. For such systems to function well, there must be broad engagement and collaboration across public, private, and civic lines, especially participation from "bridging" or "mediating" institutions such as libraries, schools, colleges and universities, local media, community foundations, and civic organizations such as the United Way, Lions Clubs, and Rotary. Healthy deliberative systems boost what Robert Putnam called "bridging social capital," which develops as people connect and build trust across perspectives. Those connections are critical to warding off the polarization that can so easily develop, as well as to supporting the difficult but rewarding collaborative efforts that we know are our best shot at addressing wicked problems well.

Critical to a high-functioning deliberative system is the capacity and skills to support the long-term

conversations and engagement that are the hallmark of such systems. A broad range of players need to be in the room, including practitioners who know how to tap into that potential. The kinds of conversations to sustain this work often require convenors, issue framers, process designers, facilitators, and reporters, and these capacities can come from many places. Many cities, counties, and school districts are working to build their capacity to support deliberative efforts, creating facilitation teams across departments, and hiring public engagement specialists who are trained not only in public relations, but also in public participation



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and deliberative processes. Similarly, the community impact literature highlights the role of “backbone organizations” as key behind-the-scenes factors in the success of broad community projects. The realization of the value of collaboration is finally being met with the recognition of the necessity of strongly supporting collaborative efforts as essential aspects of a local system.

THE EMERGING DELIBERATIVE ROLE OF THE CITY MANAGER

Within this growing understanding of the importance of deliberative systems, for the past few years, the Kettering Foundation, led by director of exploratory research and former city manager Valerie Lemmie, has worked with the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA), the National Civic League, and the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) to convene groups of innovative city managers from across the country to explore their potential role in realigning their professional routines to better connect with how citizens work as actors, problem solvers, and cocreators in their communities. As I have worked with these city managers, participated in their conferences, and engaged the public administration literature, it has become very clear that city managers can play a

transformative role in their communities if they come to see the importance of viewing their community as a deliberative system and focus on their role in enhancing that system.

For several reasons, I believe city managers could be game changers in their communities from a deliberative perspective. To set the stage, however, a very brief description and history of the position is necessary. The council-manager form of government is the most popular form of local government, operating in more than half of the cities in the United States. An elected city council sets the policy direction of the city and votes on broad decisions, but a professional city manager is hired by the council to carry out the day-to-day operations. City managers in most cases have professional accredited degrees in public administration, thus there is a robust training structure already in place, as well as key professional development organizations such as ICMA.

City managers originally developed because of the demonstrated need for professional knowledge as cities became more complex and, in some places, captured by political machines. In *The New Public Service*, Janet Denhardt and Robert Denhardt argue that historically there have been three approaches to the role of public administration in cities.

Initially, when the field developed in the early 1900s, the focus was on apolitical expertise. The city manager's role was to run the city by avoiding politics and applying knowledge. A second approach, which began to dominate toward the end of the 20th century, reimagined the city manager more as a CEO, running the city as a business, focused on effectiveness and efficiency and providing services to taxpayers. Most city managers today are still trained and operate within some combination of these two approaches. Denhardt and Denhardt argue for an emerging third approach, which they call the new public service model, that goes beyond the focus on efficiency and effectiveness and recognizes the broader range of public values that must be addressed in local public life. They highlight the limitations of the earlier models, especially in terms of public engagement.

The new public service model, or what some call public value governance, has clear connections to deliberative engagement. There is great potential in city managers seeing their cities as deliberative systems and focusing on their role in developing and managing those systems. In many ways, city managers are well situated to adopt this role. The mindsets and skill sets critical to

deliberative engagement could be instilled in the professional training at the master of public administration (MPA) level. As professionals rather than elected officials, city managers are more insulated from politics and generally have a longer tenure with their communities, which allows them to build a culture of deliberative engagement within both city hall and the broader community. Most important, by the actual wording of their position, city managers are called upon to “manage” the city. As we learn about wicked problems and how communities must work together to address their shared problems, city managers must extend beyond managing internal city staff to consider how to increase the capacity of the community overall to address problems effectively. This perspective is not new to public administration; scholars such as Tina Nabatchi, Matt Leighninger, Lisa Bingham, and Kirk Emerson have examined the importance of democratic or collaborative governance and the limits of focusing solely on government actions to address wicked problems.

DELIBERATIVE SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

Systems guru Peter Senge recently argued for the importance of “systems leadership” in a *Stanford Social*

Innovation Review article with Hal Hamilton and John Kania. They argue that in order to make progress on our society's most intractable problems (i.e., wicked problems), we need systems leaders who cultivate a different set of skills and positionality than that of traditional leaders. Systems leaders must work to foster collective leadership and build the capacity in their communities so people can learn collectively and constantly cocreate innovative actions.



In order to contribute to an overall environment that supports deeper conversations about difficult issues, city managers—and other key community leaders—will often need to avoid the natural impulse toward certainty and clarity and model the difficult work of allowing and managing uncertainty.

Marrying their thoughts on the role of systems leaders with the idea of communities functioning as deliberative systems is particularly fruitful.

Three aspects of deliberative systems leadership are especially relevant to city managers. These may call for significant shifts in the mindsets and skill sets of some city managers, but for many with whom we have worked, the transition would be much less dramatic. First of all, deliberative systems leadership is about humility and managing uncertainty. Facilitators know that if a group is going to truly deliberate and do the hard work of cocreating actions to address complex issues, then the opinion of its leader must not be revealed. The traditional leadership model of having charisma and a strong opinion and mobilizing the masses to take on a challenge is unfortunately often counterproductive when addressing wicked problems, especially in a polarized, adversarial environment. In order to contribute to an overall environment that supports deeper conversations about difficult issues, city managers—and other key community leaders—will often need to avoid the natural impulse toward certainty and clarity and model the difficult work of allowing and managing uncertainty. Using the language of wicked problems is certainly one way to do

THREE ASPECTS OF DELIBERATIVE SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP RELEVANT TO CITY MANAGERS



LEAD WITH HUMILITY AND NEUTRALITY—help to create a learning environment that welcomes nuance and creativity



MANAGE TENSIONS—seek out and bring tensions forward to enable the community to address them



CREATE SPACES FOR CIVIC LEARNING—work to expand the overall deliberative capacity of the community

this as labeling an issue as wicked inherently expresses that the speaker does not have the solution. Admitting the wickedness of a problem, in other words, is an act of humility, which can be difficult for some city managers, particularly if they were trained in the more traditional sense of their role being the expert who solves problems for the people. Such humility from leaders, however, helps create a learning environment that welcomes nuance and creativity.

A second key aspect, clearly building on the first, is that a big part of deliberative systems lead-

ership is about managing tensions. Much of my work as a deliberative practitioner involves identifying the inherent underlying tensions and trade-offs to difficult issues, framing them in a productive way, and putting them on the table for people to work through and ultimately cocreate community responses. Too often, we avoid those tensions, or partisans frame issues as if no true tensions exist, thereby fueling poor communication and polarization. The more our leaders take it upon themselves to seek out tensions and bring them forward, the better our communities

will be able to address those tensions. John Nalbandian's work in the public administration literature is valuable here as he has argued for city managers to see themselves as facilitators negotiating the inherent tensions in managing a city. Concepts such as Barry Johnson's polarity management, Ronald Heifetz's adaptive work, Robert Quinn's competing values framework, Deborah Stone's policy paradox, and even Aristotle's notion of virtue should all be staples in MPA programs in order to equip city managers to be adept at helping their communities navigate the inherent tensions they all must face.

The third key aspect is that deliberative systems managers must constantly survey the system and work toward having the various necessary capacities developed and roles fulfilled for the deliberative system to thrive. This is crucial to a deliberative system, and a city manager is likely in the best position to oversee this work. Deliberative communities need the capacity to support ongoing conversations and collaborative efforts, which means people or bridging organizations that serve the roles highlighted earlier (convenors, issue framers, process designers, facilitators, and reporters). In some cases, city managers may play those roles themselves; often, they will simply make sure they are adequately provided either through city staff or,

ideally, from the community. Long term, a key task of all city managers must be to proactively work to expand the overall deliberative capacity of their communities. The Kettering Foundation and others often refer to this responsibility of city managers as creating spaces for civic learning.

A key function of community leadership in the face of wicked problems and growing partisanship is taking more responsibility for the quality of communication and engagement in communities. That involves not simply leaders communicating well themselves—though that is certainly part of it—but also working to develop stronger norms and expectations and working to build the necessary capacity across the community to support the kind of engagement our communities need to thrive. Cities that develop this capacity will be stronger, more connected, and more resilient. Robust deliberative systems, however, do not develop naturally. In the end, local deliberative systems are in desperate need of leadership, and the history of public administration is a history of city managers constantly evolving to meet the essential needs of the day. ■

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