

# 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**

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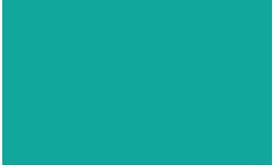
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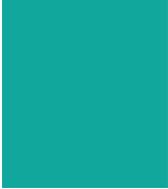
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# CONTENTS

- 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



# Democratic Practices That Inspire Collective Action: Engaging the Full Community through Citizen-Centric Strategies

By Cheryl Hilvert, Michael Huggins, and Doug Linkhart

**T**here is a sense in many communities today that something is off-kilter in how residents and local governments approach community engagement and public problem solving. Many government officials are skeptical

about the knowledge, rationality, good faith, and capacity of ordinary citizens to think about and take responsible action on complex community issues. Citizens, in turn, are often skeptical about local governments' public participation processes, question whether they will experience genuine opportunities to make a difference in how public problems are decided, and are similarly skeptical about their own abilities to work productively with others to overcome differences and take meaningful action. In the meantime, important, persistent problems that require collective action are not getting better.

## COMPLEX ISSUES REQUIRE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACHES

“Civic disconnect” is often present when local governments offer only limited opportunities for civic engagement. In these cases, community members may simply be “informed,” via vehicles such as newsletters and public hearings. While this simplified approach to engagement works in some cases, complicated issues and projects require a more comprehensive approach to ensure the community is part of a deliberative process that creates workable and sustainable action strategies. Collaboration with community members is even more important when a community is faced with a wicked problem—

a messy, real-life situation lacking a clear and agreed-upon problem definition. In these cases, there is a deeper need to involve community members in describing the problem and exploring policy solutions.

Interwoven with complex sub-issues, a wicked problem centers on the challenges of resolving the conflicting values and perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Think homelessness, criminal justice, and educational disparities.

Wicked problems are not solved in the conventional sense, only made better or worse by a decision or action. How to fix a broken water line is usually a straightforward proposition for most local government managers. Where and how to provide affordable housing that addresses the needs of homeless and marginalized populations is something else again.

Wicked problems are rarely addressed successfully through sole reliance on professional expertise or adversarial politics. Community efforts are more likely to succeed with relational problem-solving strategies centered on active citizen engagement, collaboration, and deliberative processes.

The challenge to local government leaders is how to do this in ways that not only make visible progress on the most persistent problems, but also strengthen citizens' confidence

in public processes and in their own abilities to accomplish meaningful public work.

## CORE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

One approach to addressing complex community issues may lie in systematically incorporating core democratic practices into community engagement and problem-solving processes. Drawing on decades of research with local communities, the Kettering Foundation has identified six core democratic practices critical for rebuilding citizens' abilities to work with each other and with local governments to generate effective



**One approach to addressing complex community issues may lie in systematically incorporating core democratic practices into community engagement and problem-solving processes.**

and responsive decision-making. These practices have been paired with examples from communities throughout the United States.

### **1. Identify or name the issues**

facing citizens in their own terms; that is, in terms of what is meaningful and valuable to them.

In an example of being open to community members naming an issue in their own terms, Charlotte, North Carolina, undertook several approaches to listening to community voices, following a report on economic inequity in the city and a fatal officer-involved shooting in late 2016. These included Can We Talk? dialogues, in which residents engaged in open conversation with police, and Take10CLT, in which city employees surveyed people passing by, asking open-ended questions about their views on the city.

**2. Frame issues** so that a range of actions are considered and the potential trade-offs are evident.

An example of framing is a process in which community stakeholders in El Paso, Texas, broadly defined resiliency to include economic prosperity, affordable housing, and other goals not traditionally included under this heading. The resulting resiliency strategy is aimed at deploying innovative initiatives that directly address the diverse needs of the El Paso community.

### **3. Make decisions deliberatively**

and weigh the trade-offs among choices to minimize hasty reactions and move toward sound public judgment.

Done well, participatory budgeting can represent a deliberative process for decision-making. One of the pioneers of this practice in the United States is former Alderman Joe Moore, who used a year-long community process in Chicago's 49th Ward to determine the priorities and projects that he submitted to the city and its related agencies. Since 2010, the residents of Ward 49 worked to suggest projects, set priorities, and determine the allocation of \$8.3 million in capital expenditures.

**4. Identify available community resources**, including intangible ones, such as enthusiasm and commitment.

Stockton, California, is focusing attention on trauma issues in an effort called "Healing South," which includes an asset-mapping strategy that outlines a variety of partners, programs, and physical resources providing trauma and social support. The group coordinated with community-based organizations, schools, and faith-based groups to engage residents in focus groups about what they think contributes to trauma in Stockton and what kind of support is needed beyond existing

## ENGAGING THE FULL COMMUNITY



services. This information helps focus policy advocacy and systems change and increases access to appropriate services.

**5. Organize community actions** to address a public problem in a complementary and coordinated fashion.

As part of its implementation of a communitywide visioning process, San Antonio, Texas, has formed a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Collaborative. The collaborative includes an impressive list of cross-sector organizations, including public entities and community organizations, as well as

faith-based and secular institutions. Specific goals for reducing teen pregnancy have been established, with particular attention paid to Latino and African-American populations, and these goals were exceeded during the first seven years of collective work.

**6. Encourage constant collective learning** to maintain momentum.

A project in southeastern San Diego, California, to reduce heart disease taught organizers about trust and how to motivate action.

The area has a high concentration of African Americans and the county's highest incidence of heart attacks and strokes. In working with local congregations, the organizers found that previous efforts that overpromised and underdelivered had left many people mistrustful of such partnerships. By engaging in candid dialogues about race, exploitation, and neglect and by forming a data stewardship agreement that ensured transparency and local ownership, the project gained the participation of the congregations and other residents in the area, ultimately reducing the number of heart attacks by 22 percent since 2010.

Kettering research has found that citizens' consistent application of these practices in their public relationships with others, with community institutions, and with local governments is essential for building joint public leadership, solving public problems, and developing the broad civic base necessary to govern effectively in a democracy.

### **MANAGERS' SURVEY SHOWS ACCEPTANCE OF PRACTICES**

In 2018, the authors surveyed local managers to examine how important they believed each democratic practice was to their public engagement efforts and how comfortable they were in using each practice.

The managers had either participated in learning exchanges at the Kettering Foundation or were finalists for the National Civic League's All-America Cities Award program. For the past several years, the Kettering learning exchanges have brought city managers together for biannual wide-ranging conversations about public engagement, wicked problems, democratic governance, and the leadership practices of local public managers. Since 1949, the National Civic League has recognized 10 communities yearly with the prestigious All-America City Award, which celebrates the work of communities in using inclusive civic engagement to address critical issues and create stronger connections among residents, businesses, and nonprofit and government leaders.

The survey found that managers, who were familiar with the six democratic practices and believed they were important to undertake, rated these practices to be either "extremely important" or "very important" as follows:

- Naming issues (87.5 percent)
- Framing issues (75 percent)
- Deliberating with citizens (75 percent)
- Identifying community resources (66.7 percent)

- Organizing complementary community actions (79.2 percent)
- Encouraging constant collective learning (62.5 percent)

Of managers surveyed, at least 54 percent felt either “extremely” or “very confident” in implementing these practices and were most likely to implement the following practices:

- Naming issues (54.2 percent)
- Framing issues (70.8 percent)
- Deliberating with citizens (66.7 percent)

Those practices least likely to be undertaken by managers were organizing complementary community actions (28.3 percent) and constant collective learning (38.1 percent).

## ENGAGING THE FULL COMMUNITY

Local government managers routinely name issues and frame options for their elected officials. They are accustomed to using deliberative processes to negotiate the tensions among stakeholders’ underlying values, assess policy option trade-offs, and find appropriate solutions to community issues and problems.

These process strategies inform local decision-making and are leadership competencies with which managers are generally comfortable. Familiarity and confidence with these foundational leadership processes may be why managers in our survey

were more likely to feel comfortable in undertaking naming, framing, and deliberating. Confidence with these practices may serve as a bridge to expanding the use of these approaches to broader application in engaging the full community in public problem-solving work.

The use of deliberative processes for community engagement can be an effective way to address local challenges. Community members can be a source of innovative and context-specific solutions for addressing difficult and perplexing wicked problems. Effective use of relational and citizen-centric strategies can do much to enhance local efforts to solve public problems and provide effective democratic governance. We encourage managers to incorporate these practices in both their organizational and community leadership work in finding creative and deliberative solutions to the issues, activities, and problems that confront them today. ■

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