

CONNECTIONS

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**Getting to We: Bridging the Gap
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THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:
Fractured or United?

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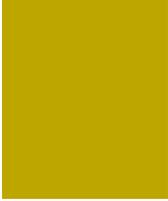
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Catalyzing Change: Unleashing the Potential of Communities

By Richard C. Harwood

This article is adapted from Unleashed: A Proven Way Communities Can Spread Change and Make Hope Real for All (Kettering Foundation Press, 2021) by Richard C. Harwood.

The fault lines we face are legion. They include long-term economic decline, racial division and racism, persistent poverty, lack of educational opportunity, civic and political mistrust, and a loss of faith in organizations and leaders. These and other challenges conspire against people, frustrating them and entangling them in hardship, driving and shaping their destinies, and sadly, slowly wringing out their hope.

How do we go about more intentionally unleashing the innate potential of people and institutions and groups in communities to address our common challenges? At the same time, how do we create a civic culture in which people come together to shape their own lives and gain real hope about their future and the future of our society?

THE OPPORTUNITY

There is a golden opportunity before us now to unleash this innate potential. My work has taken me to hundreds, if not thousands, of communities all across the United States. Three themes have emerged with increasing clarity and currency from these experiences.

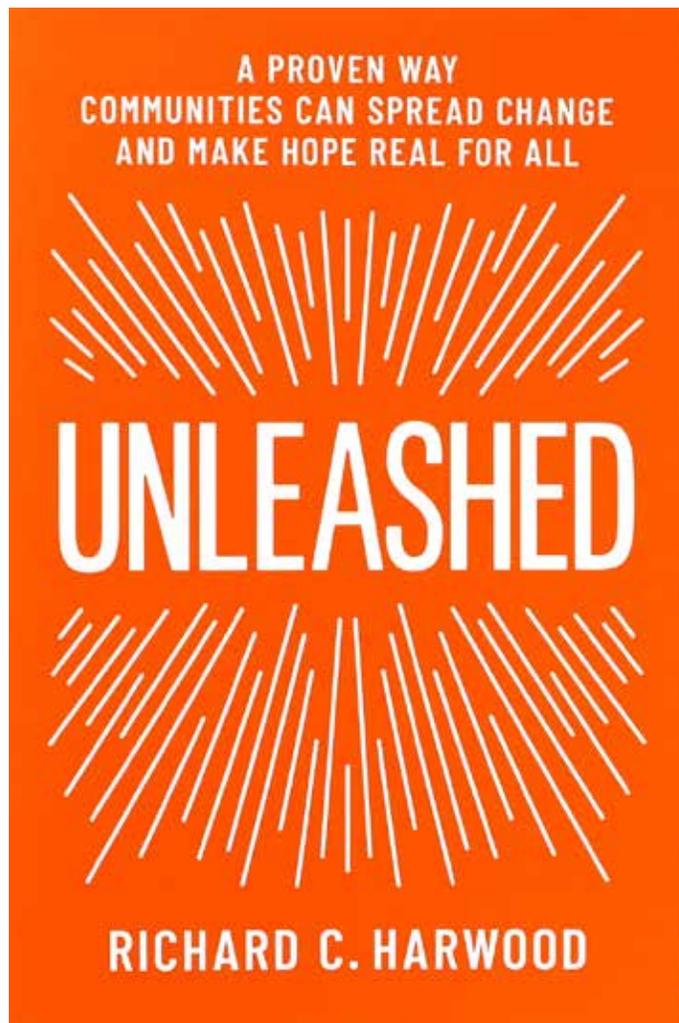
First, so many of our challenges—especially the fault lines I have highlighted—require that we marshal our shared resources if we are to effectively address them. No one leader, no single organization or group, and no individual citizen can tackle these problems alone. These challenges demand a shared response. There must be concerted efforts to bring people and groups together, guided by a sense of common purpose and working in mutually reinforcing ways.

Second, so many Americans deeply yearn to exercise a greater sense of control over their individual and shared lives, and to summon and

put into action a sense of personal and collective agency. Americans by nature are doers. Amid the pervasive acrimony and divisiveness gripping our public life and politics today, people want to build things together. People want to be part of something larger than themselves.

Third, these times urgently call for us to produce a more just, equitable, fair, and hopeful society. The recent crises we have faced have laid bare long-standing inequities, disparities, and injustices in our society. There is a basic need to address these challenges, and this will require us to take different approaches from the past.

So much of this work must happen in local communities. Yes, there are challenges that beg for a national or state response—new laws, regulations, and other important policy solutions. But let's be clear: it is in local communities where people can turn outward toward one another to see and hear each other; where dignity can be afforded to each and every individual; where mind-sets and behaviors affected by biases, preconceived notions, and prejudice must fundamentally shift; where people can work hand in hand and come to recognize each other's innate capacities; where we can marshal those capacities for good; and where we can create a shared responsibility for how we work together.



A SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

Over a period of two years, my colleagues and I conducted in-depth examinations of nine communities, each of which The Harwood Institute had worked with at some time during the last 30 years. Our goal was to see what we could learn about how people got started—and why. What did they struggle with? What choices did they make? What context were they operating in, and what ultimately moved them ahead?



Change ripples out in communities through an interaction of highly intentional actions and serendipity. This interaction and its effects can be proactively created.

Beyond these questions, I wanted to understand the nature of the chain reaction that unfolded once things got started. How do organizations align their actions with the community? And how do the mind-sets, behaviors, and choices of individuals shift over time? In addition, there were questions about the nature of the obstacles these individuals, organizations, and groups faced, and how they overcame them at different stages of their efforts.

We learned that change ripples out in communities through an interaction of highly intentional actions and serendipity. This interaction and its effects can be proactively created. The interactions themselves cascade

through a chain of events, both in real time and over time. While each step has a purpose, exactly where the interaction leads is often unpredictable. The good news is that this chain of events can be catalyzed and nurtured. Through the creation of a critical mass of these interactions and chains of events, a community can actively marshal its collective resources and strengthen its civic culture. And people can restore their belief that they can get things done together.

The stories of the nine communities are truly inspiring. I have come to deeply admire the individuals who stepped forward to make things happen. Against great odds, they often took one step at a time, not knowing exactly what would result, if anything, from their efforts. But they persisted. They created real, tangible progress—and hope.

LOOKING AT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

Each of these nine communities is a unique place that faced its own set of fault lines and challenges. Each has its own history. These places reflect communities of different sizes, demographics, and regions of the United States. Each started in a fundamentally different place. Nonetheless, each story helps us understand what it takes to ignite and spread change.

In Oak Park, Illinois, a relatively well-off community, the public library discovered a growing desire among many residents to tackle underlying issues of inclusion, equity, and poverty. The library realigned its mission and its work with the community and, in turn, sparked ever-growing change throughout the community.

Winchester and Clark County, Kentucky, a small rural community, was on the brink of being left behind. But residents there decided to fight an opioid crisis, embrace children who felt abandoned, and bridge local divides of race, geography, and religion. The actions taken were spearheaded by unexpected people,

acting in ways hard to imagine, and creating unpredictable progress by taking just one step at a time. Most recently, something enormously special has occurred: over 60 organizations and groups have come together to meet twice a week to collectively address systemic issues around COVID-19.

A local United Way in Spokane, Washington, was seeking a new mission and found the community instead. In the process, it helped lead the way to a dramatic transformation of local public education and the ways in which the community marshaled its collective resources to support youth, reduce truancy, and raise the graduation rate, among other efforts.



Winchester, Clark County, Kentucky

PHOTO BY MICHAEL ANDREWS



In the meantime, the organization transformed its own focus and became relevant again.

Youngstown, Ohio, was decimated by job loss, corruption, and fragmentation. The community was “waiting for a knight in shining armor” to save it. But residents and local groups started to take small actions in the areas of financial literacy, public education, equity in the arts, neighborhood redevelopment, and others. Each action built, one upon another, creating new possibilities that rippled out in all directions.

In Red Hook, New York, a small, rural village upstate, people came together first to change the town’s sole stoplight. Before they knew it, this one small action unleashed people’s innate capabilities to address long-simmering challenges posed by young people leaving town, a failing economy, and residents who seemed disinclined to work together. A new can-do civic culture has emerged,

taken root, and spread.

Las Vegas, Nevada, is known as a sprawling, fun-loving, go-it-alone city. Against all odds, a new civic culture emerged as people recognized that they needed each other and must work together. New shared progress has been made on everything from homelessness to foster care, food insecurity, immigrant empowerment, and the connection of important institutions (such as public media) with the community.

Flint, Michigan, is a city known for suffering devastating blows: the loss of the automobile industry, the growth of crime, and the poisoning of its water supply. But the people of Flint set out to build connections and take action on racial divisions and racism, downtown rejuvenation, religious divisions, and the use of the arts to lift up marginalized voices. While the challenges for this city persist, the community’s resilience continues to grow.

In Mobile, Alabama, after 40 years of defeated school levies and longtime racial, social, and economic divisions, the community found its way back into the public schools. By coming together across its many divisions, the community was able to build public will for sustained action on public education, establishing new public accountability for the school district and for the community itself. Mobile transformed not only its public education but the community's civic fabric as well.

Finally, there is Battle Creek, Michigan. The community was looking for a sign—any sign—that progress was still possible. Six individuals came together to spark the needed change. It began with the Burmese population, and then ever-expanding change rippled throughout the community on issues of education, youth, diversity, and inclusion, among many others. These actions generated a stronger civic culture and a can-do spirit.

Sometimes, it appears that change just happens in communities spontaneously, inexplicably, or even magically. Other times, we are led to believe that it is wholly orchestrated, that some linear plan has been carefully laid out, engineered, and implemented. Neither is usually the case. These nine communities

help us to see and understand that something very different is at play, a dynamic we can help to catalyze, nurture, and grow.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

I still remember the very first time I wrote out the list of key characteristics of how people can unleash their own innate capabilities and the potential of their communities (see side bar). As the words began to unfold on my sheet of paper, I felt this incredible sense of excitement. These characteristics are based in large part on what we learned when we examined patterns across the stories from the nine communities. They can help us understand in greater depth and detail how change starts, grows, and spreads in communities. I could immediately see the importance and the implications of naming and spelling out these hallmarks for change.

There are many ways for communities to go about trying to solve their problems. There is no single way. Let's be clear about this. These characteristics help to illuminate how it is possible to unleash the innate potential of people, institutions, and groups to strengthen civic culture in their communities and to address their entrenched fault lines. They bring to life how to do the work in ways that restore people's belief that

Here are the 10 characteristics of how change sparks, grows, and spreads in communities:

1. A chaotic or unpredictable chain of events is driven by people making a series of intentional choices about where and why to begin their efforts and what to do next.
2. The chain of events hinges on a reframing of what matters to people in the community.
3. The reframing sparks a different notion of what needs to be addressed, how, and by whom.
4. It doesn't really matter who in the community sparks the chain of events. Anyone or any group can get things going.
5. The precipitating cause for people taking action is always different—and is simply a point of departure.
6. Change spreads as a result of people working through networks—not through the whole community, as if it operated as a single unit.
7. A small cadre of change agents can catalyze growing and expanding chains of events.
8. There is a profound realignment to “community” among organizations, groups, and individuals engaging in creating change.
9. Small changes that people, organizations, and groups produce lead to a major shift in the underlying conditions—the civic culture—of the community.
10. Time and relentless patience are essential factors for communities to move forward. There is no quick fix, no single program, no one initiative that creates a new trajectory for a community.

we can get things done together. They are central to making hope real for people.

I want to underscore that, while each of the characteristics has been isolated so that it is clear, understandable, and actionable, collectively, these characteristics operate as a system. They are interrelated. It is their interaction that gives them their juice and creates a dynamic within a community. What's more, there is nothing linear about them. They cannot be followed step by step like some paint-by-number exercise or cookbook recipe.

When these characteristics play out in a community, a community can further develop—even regenerate—itsself. People and groups can come together and marshal their shared resources. They can exercise greater control over their lives and tap into their personal and collective agency. The actions taken often happen in unexpected ways, in unimaginable combinations of people, groups, and organizations, and produce results that no one could really have foreseen.

MAKING INTENTIONAL CHOICES

There is another point worth making here. When working with people in communities, they often seem to be waiting for permission to take action.

“Can I do this?” they want to know. “Should I? What happens if no one supports me?” I wrote about this in one of my earlier books, *Stepping Forward*, in describing the difficulties that we often find ourselves in when working in communities. We all face knotty questions: whether to act, what to do, and with whom, when, and why? At the heart of our questions are the choices we must make. I often say to people, “In this work, I am asking you to make more choices, not fewer ones.” It is by making such choices that we gain a greater sense of control over our individual and shared lives, and exercise our personal and collective agency.

The people and groups that catalyzed the chain reactions in the nine communities continually made choices. They chose to engage community residents in what mattered to them. They made choices about what to focus their efforts on and how. They made decisions about whom to partner with in pursuing those efforts—or, as I might put it, “whom to run with.” There were choices they made about what innate capacities and other resources they could tap from within themselves and from within their communities. They made choices about learning from the community as they did their work: what was working and what



Change happens only when we make intentional choices.

wasn't, who was involved and who else needed to be, how they could further spread their efforts, and what issues and changing conditions in the community did they need to respond to. They engaged in shared learning so they could continually recalibrate their efforts to be most effective.

As human beings, we often fear making choices. There is ambiguity and uncertainty. There is concern about being blamed for something going wrong. We fear tackling a challenge because we will have to engage with people who are different from ourselves, with whom we may feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar. When we choose to listen to others, we may hear things that are hurtful or painful to us or that are filled with the sorrow or rage of others. But here's what I know for sure: change happens only when we make intentional choices. ■

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