

CONNECTIONS

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THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:
Fractured or United?

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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To Work Together, Learn Together

By David Mathews



Kettering Foundation’s research review this year has been focused on the troubled relationship between citizens and authoritative, or “governing,” institutions. This is the subject of a recent Kettering publication, *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*. Loss of public confidence, particularly in the federal government, has been growing for some time. And the partisan polarization in the Capitol has caused many Americans to look to their local communities to play a stronger role in solving some of the problems facing the country. While local communities aren’t immune to the problems we see nationally, they appear to be doing better. Yet they are faced with persistent problems that don’t respond to the usual problem-solving strategies. Chronic poverty is an example. In this piece, I’d like to introduce another strategy for dealing with these especially difficult, long-term problems that plague our communities.

DIFFERENT PROBLEMS/ DIFFERENT STRATEGIES

The sources of these persistent problems, which have been called “wicked” and “systemic,” come from different locations in a community, so they require a response from throughout an entire community; that is, from the community as a

whole. One institution or profession can't do all that needs to be done. And these deep-seated problems can't be turned over to experts because they don't have technical solutions.

Another challenge is that in order to gather the community as a whole, those in leadership roles must enlist not only the "usual suspects" but also those community members who rarely, if ever, participate. Trying to engage their fellow citizens frustrates local leaders because of what they see as public apathy. On the other hand, citizens bristle at the charge of being apathetic. From their perspective, even though citizens believe they should make a difference, they don't see anything that they can do to make a significant difference in the way their community works.

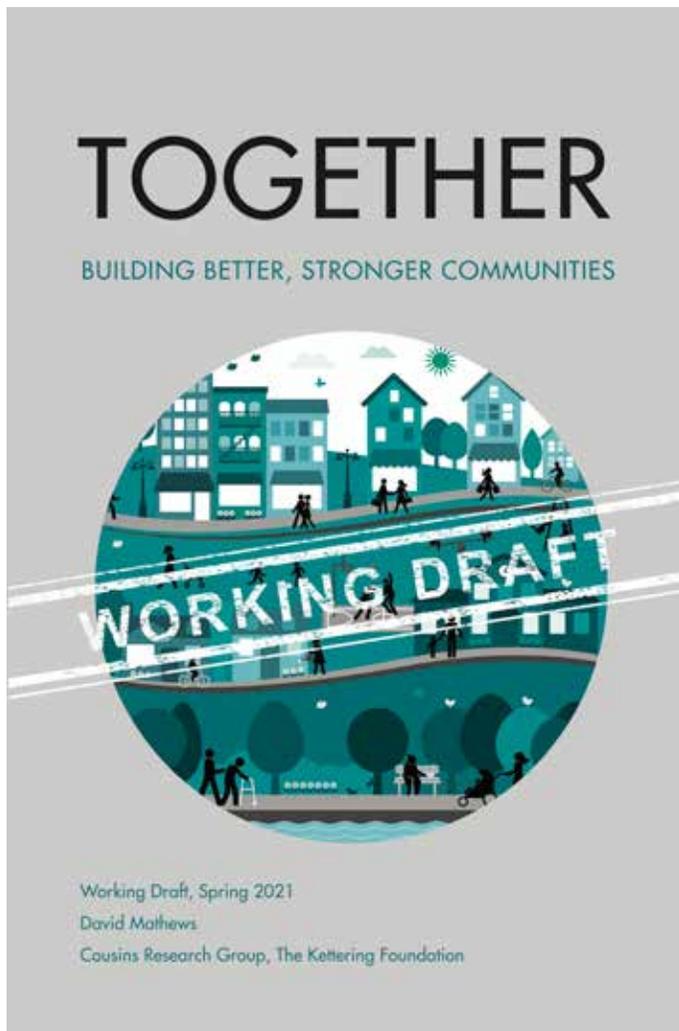
Kettering research suggests that there may be an additional strategy for bringing together the community as a whole to combat these chronic problems. It is based on indications that effective communities are like the hardest working students in class: they are determined learners. These students may not have the highest scores on IQ tests, but they respond to challenges and keep plugging away despite setbacks. Communities that do better than most in combating persistent problems are like these students. They are communities where people learn together about

the nature of the difficulties they face. Their problem-solving strategy is, at its core, a learning strategy. This strategy is the subject of a new report, which is a companion to Kettering's recently released report, *With the People*. The title of the new report is *Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities*. It is now available online and in print from the Kettering Foundation Press.

There is a reason these two books are companion pieces. *With the People* is about governing institutions working more collaboratively with citizens as partners, not just as clients or consumers. Obviously, for that to happen, citizens must do their share in this collaboration. How neighborhoods, towns, and cities can do that work is the subject of *Together*, which



Kettering Foundation's research review this year has been focused on the troubled relationship between citizens and authoritative, or "governing," institutions.



is a workbook for groups of citizens to read and discuss.

Together offers frustrated citizens—both leaders and community members who doubt they can make a difference—new ways of looking at their community to help them discover more opportunities for working together. I want to highlight “discovering” because it is at the core of a learning strategy. (Kettering

was founded by inventors, and their kind of learning was learning in order to discover.)

When we make discoveries, it is often because we come to see old problems in a new light. We notice things we have passed over before. *Together* offers some questions people can use to shine a new light on how they see their community. That light is brighter when those in leadership roles and seemingly less engaged citizens answer these questions together and compare what they see. Their respective ways of looking at the community are usually different. People don't necessarily see the same things the same way. That difference can be helpful because it expands and enriches not only the way they understand their community, but also how the community understands itself. And when that happens, discoveries are more likely.

The Importance of Naming and Framing

The questions I'm talking about are much like those in a medical checkup, except this checkup is for a community rather than an individual. This is why *Together* is called a workbook. I'll give you an example of one of these checkup questions. It is about what happens every day in a community, yet its significance isn't usually recognized. Routinely, experts, political leaders, and opin-

ion writers say, “Our problem is X.” When they do this, they are giving a specific name to a problem. And they have reasons for choosing their name: perhaps for partisan advantage, perhaps to present factual information, or perhaps to rally citizens around an agenda. Fine. But do their names capture what people, as human beings, really care about deep down? I’m talking about the things we need in order to survive. Everyone is motivated by these basic imperatives: being safe from danger; having the freedom to do what will allow us to prosper; being treated fairly by others; and, most important, having some control over what is happening around us in order to get as much of what we need as possible.

Scholars call these essentials the ends and means to life itself. Most people may not use such scholarly language, but when they talk about what is deeply valuable, they tell stories about their most meaningful experiences, which reflect their concerns. These concerns aren’t like the things wished for on a Christmas list or noted in a list of complaints. They are basic, even primal. These survival imperatives surface when we are trying to make a difficult decision about troubling issues that are filled with tensions among the many things that we hold dear. One example I often use is this: that which will make

us safe from the danger of criminal violence will often infringe on our personal freedom. Or, as in the case of a pandemic: to be safe from severe illness or death we may have to isolate ourselves in our homes, even at the cost of being away from loved ones. Not recognizing and dealing with tensions doesn’t make them go away. They resurface to block progress in problem solving.

Problems in a community, however, are seldom given names that take into account what people consider deeply valuable. Instead, they are given names by experts or politicians and the media. These names are authoritative; they are simply to be accepted. But community learning would be more likely if the names given to problems included what people consider most valuable. Then, citizens would see that they are already involved because their con-



Not recognizing and dealing with tensions doesn’t make them go away. They resurface to block progress in problem solving.



A deliberative learning strategy is built around an exchange of perspectives and the concerns that they reflect.

cerns are recognized. Even if people differed with one another on what actions to solve the community's problems would be best, they would be more likely to discover that they share the same basic survival imperatives. This recognition can change the tone of the community conversation. It becomes framed less about people versus people and more about people versus problems. That change encourages people to listen more to those who disagree with them about what actions are best. It's then that people often discover that an issue, which initially seemed to be one-sided, is much more complex. And seeing that complexity can open the door to discovering new ways of dealing with persistent problems.

Because the names that are given to problems—and who provides them—are so crucial, questions considering naming are on the checkup list. These questions set the stage for

the deliberative decision-making needed to make sound judgments about how to deal with long-term community problems.

Kettering explains deliberation in other publications; I won't go into that here. However, because the subject of this piece is community learning, I should note that deliberative decision-making is a form of learning. The ancient Greeks knew that. They called deliberation “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.” To deliberate together is to learn together. Kettering has seen this happen when observing deliberations in National Issues Forums.

Different and Together: Recognizing and including the names that reflect what people hold most dear is a big step in getting people to work together on problems that can be overcome only by joining forces. But do the differences in opinions on which actions are best go away? Usually not, and that's fine as long as the tone of the decision-making isn't toxic. As I said, decisions about what needs to be done can benefit from a more complete understanding of a problem, which comes from recognizing people's different experiences with it.

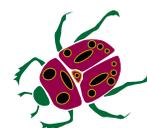
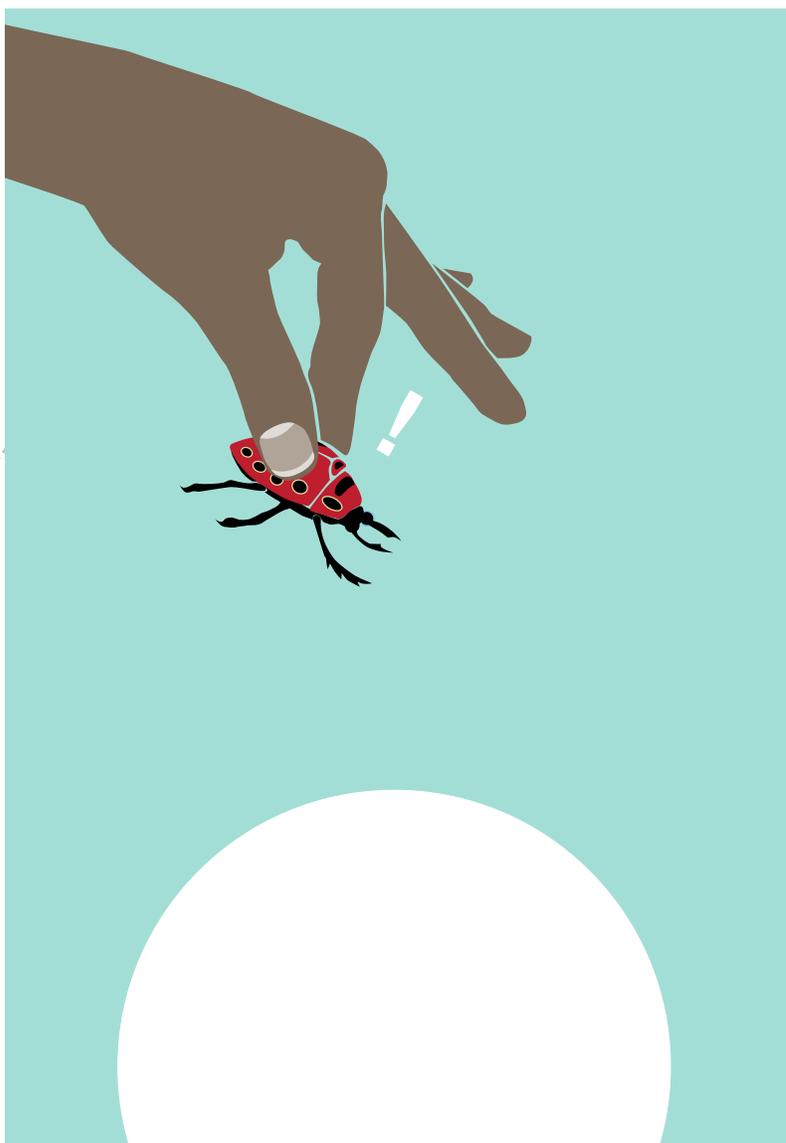
A philosopher once told me a story, which has stayed with me, about the importance of different perspectives in learning and problem



solving. I have made a philosopher the hero in my version of that story. It begins with a tiny beetle crawling on a large white ball. Everywhere this beetle goes—forward, backward, to the right, to the left—there’s nothing but white space. Now, imagine that the philosopher asks the beetle, “Is space finite or infinite?” Based on its own experience, the bug says, quickly and assuredly, “Space is infinite. Everywhere I go every day, I see an endless white surface.” Then the philosopher picks the bug up off the

ball and holds it high to give the bug a different perspective. The philosopher asks again, “Is space finite or infinite?” Now, the bug realizes that space is not infinite at all. It is quite finite.

The point of the story is that being exposed to other experiences, like the one the philosopher gave the beetle, can lead to a better understanding of reality—the reality of our “ball,” our community. In community learning, hearing the experiences of others can do what the philosopher did: provide



other perspectives. A deliberative learning strategy is built around an exchange of perspectives and the concerns that they reflect.

Tensions: What would cause people to consider the views of others—especially contrary views—when there isn't a philosopher and a beetle? As I said, we have seen that occur in deliberative decision-making. The compelling force is seeing that there are tensions among the many things we consider valuable. People are uncomfortable when caught in tensions, and the discomfort causes them to try to search for ways to resolve them. As seen in my example of the tension between collective safety and personal freedom, we don't like the stress of being pulled in different directions by all that we care about. We have all experienced that during the pandemic.

I'll say it again because it is so important: if tensions aren't recognized and worked through or reconciled in some way—at least to the point communities can move forward—they will undermine problem solving. Recognizing tensions, though uncomfortable, is essential to finding what is practical—that is, what we can live with—at least for a while. People don't have to be in full agreement to work together. They just have to recognize they need one another, even those they don't like.

GENERATING POLITICAL WILL

Dealing effectively with persistent problems requires recognizing differences in experiences and working through conflicting opinions. But that isn't all. Combating the persistence in problems also requires sustained political will and energy. Learning together is a source of that energy. So other questions in the checkup are about what resources are in a community that citizens can use to make the differences they would like to make.

When people make discoveries by deliberating, it generates political energy because people come closer to recognizing what they can do to make a difference. They can contend with issues that they thought only experts could. They can better understand the experiences and concerns of the people who differ with them. They can make some sense of things that had been utterly baffling. And as they recognize what they can do, they are often able to make the most important discovery of all: see the power they didn't know they had.

In deliberating to make decisions, people name problems in terms of what is most valuable to them. It naturally leads to questions about what should be done (the options) and who the actors should be. Democratic deliberating treats citizens as necessary actors and raises

questions about what they should do. When people share different experiences to gain a broader, more complete understanding of problems, they can uncover options for citizen action that weren't visible before. Discovering new opportunities to make a difference generates the political energy needed to sustain the civic momentum required to combat persistent problems. Communities that are continually learning are less likely to stop when they fail. Their learning helps them to fail successfully by profiting from mistakes.

Consumers or Producers?

When citizens are making choices about how to respond to community problems, they are beginning to act like producers, not consumers. In the community checkup, there is no better question to ask than how citizenship is understood. The checkup should look at the way local institutions are organized to treat citizens. For hospitals, are they just patients? For businesses, are they just customers? For law firms, are they just clients? For the news media, are they simply readers and viewers? For educational institutions, are students taught how to be civic actors?

Leaders or Leaderful?

The success of communities that do well is usually attributed to good leaders, meaning those in positions



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of authority. They are certainly important, but a learning strategy treats everybody in a community as a leader (someone who simply takes the initiative to work with others). And when many people in a community are seen as capable of exercising that kind of leadership, that community becomes *leaderful*.

The purpose of the checkup is for everyone to realize that they can make some difference. They have powers and resources that they may not have recognized. Everyone has experiences, skills, and knowledge that when used in tandem with the skills and knowledge of others, can combat feelings of powerlessness. You will find chapters in *Together* that discuss both the sources of citizens' power and their resources for acting.



The best learning never stops.

One of my favorite quotes is from Henrik Ibsen, who reminded us why citizens have to be actors in their communities. He wrote that “a community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm.” Given the difficulties communities face, from drug abuse to the breakdown of families, a few good leaders aren’t enough. Leadership and citizenship need to become synonymous. In a resilient community, leadership is everybody’s business—not just the business of a few. Communities that learn together are more likely to become leaderful.

Why Just a Draft?

Most books are meant to be read in the comfort of an easy chair or at a desk. *Together* isn’t. It’s a workbook written to be read one chapter at a time and then discussed by people who want to come together to understand how they can contribute to making their community a better place to live. The book is designed to be studied and discussed—perhaps by community economic development groups, civic organizations, or

community leadership programs—in a manner similar to a book club. *Together* may even be useful in starting new groups of civic-minded people who are open to considering an additional strategy for community building.

But why does *Together* have a “Working Draft” label splashed across the cover? Why not wait and publish it when the book is completed? The reason is that it can never truly be finished. The last chapter’s pages are mostly blank so they could be used to make a journal or record of what the group learned from their checkup. This book isn’t for a one-time project; it’s for an ongoing process. Results from the checkup should be useful in community planning for the future.

Part of that ongoing process might include exchanging checkup experiences with other groups in other parts of the larger community or in neighboring communities. One group’s journal on the blank pages of the last chapter could go to another group and become the basis for a new round of learning exchanges among communities in a county or state.

The best learning never stops. ■

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