

LEADERS OR LEADERFULNESS? LESSONS FROM HIGH-ACHIEVING COMMUNITIES

by David Mathews



ABOUT THE **KETTERING FOUNDATION**

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.

ABOUT THE **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP**

The Cousins Research Group is one of the internal research divisions of the Kettering Foundation. Named for Norman Cousins, a leading American journalist and Kettering Foundation board member from 1967 to 1987, the group synthesizes different lines of study into books and articles and also proposes new lines of inquiry. The central focus for the group, as for the foundation, is on the role that citizens play in a democracy. Within the Cousins Research Group, there are a number of "departments." One group looks at the effect of federal policy on citizens, communities, and democracy itself, with an eye for implications on the relationship between citizens and government today. Another subset, the political anthropology and etymology group, examines the origins of human history for clues to how human beings collectively make decisions. A core group is also asked to prepare our research for publication. This group regularly writes for Kettering's periodicals, *Connections*, the *Kettering Review*, and the *Higher Education Exchange*, as well as for other publications.

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FOREWORD

This research report suggests the need to rethink conventional notions of leadership and makes the case for “leaderfulness,” a characteristic of high-achieving communities. These communities have the ability to change and adapt when faced with new challenges. Equating leadership with initiative, the report discusses the necessity for communities themselves to change when faced with problems that can’t be solved unless initiatives come from every sector.

After making the case for leaderfulness, the report shows how ordinary community routines, like giving a name to a problem, can be done in ways that encourage everyone to become engaged. The report also deals with barriers to leaderfulness, including some conventional ideas about leadership.

This is an invitation to participate in rethinking leadership for change, particularly in the communities where we live, work, and raise our families. The central ideas are that communitywide change requires a great many initiative takers and that a critical job for them is to make their communities “leaderful.”¹ As John Gardner put it, communities need initiative takers from every part of the community and in every facet of community life.² That is what it means for a community to be leaderful.

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here is a widely held belief that change only occurs when a few courageous leaders step forward to take charge and overcome entrenched power. History is full of examples of great leaders who have been agents of change: Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, George Washington. You can complete the list. Could “just citizens” working with just citizens ever change anything?

Kettering began to think about this question as a result of a study of two communities that, although similar, were quite different in what they achieved.³ However, the more dysfunctional of the two actually had the best leaders, as leadership is traditionally understood. They were well educated, well connected, professionally successful, and civically responsible. Yet what stood out in the higher-achieving community was not so much the characteristics of the leaders as their number, their location and, most of all, the way they interacted with other citizens. The higher-achieving community had 10 times more people providing initiative than communities of comparable size. The community was “leaderful.” And its leaders functioned not as gatekeepers but as door openers, bent on widening participation.

BEGINNING WHERE WE LIVE

Because we are facing an array of daunting domestic problems and a morass of international uncertainties, many Americans think we need to make basic changes in the way the country operates. We believe that the chances for change are best beginning at the local level, in communities where we can get our hands on problems. Change has to start there before it can take place nationwide. At the same time, we are deeply worried about what is happening to our sense of community, to our ability to live and work together. As Benjamin Barber put it, we worry that “beneath the corruptions associated with alcohol and drugs, complacency and indifference, discrimination and bigotry, and violence and fractiousness—is a sickness of community: its corruption, its rupturing, its fragmentation, its breakdown; finally, its vanishing and its absence.”⁴



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Calls for reform come from every quarter and touch every facet of American life—ranging from the way we organize our businesses to the way we raise our children. People say they want more than a few improvements; they want to change the “systems” that seem to control their lives—the criminal justice system, the welfare system, and, most of all, the political system. Some also want to change their community in fundamental ways—in the ways people work, or often don’t work, together.

When I say “community,” I don’t mean just a place or a collection of individuals; I mean a group of diverse people joined in a variety of ways to improve their common well-being. And by change, I mean the process by which people redirect their talents and energies or reorder their relationships so as to realize their vision of the best community. So community change means a change in a community itself, and only a community can do that. For me to change myself—my weight or habits or ways of relating to others—I have to do something. The change has to come from within. So when a community wants to change itself—to be more of what it would like to be—the same principle holds. For there to be fundamental change, the citizens in a community have to act. Large groups of people can’t sit on the sidelines.

ENGAGING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

There are relatively easy ways to change particular things about a community, but changing a community itself is quite different. There are some things that citizens *must do*—and only citizens can do—in order for change to be more than cosmetic. We typically look to our major institutions—governments, schools, etc.—to bring about change. Yet there are certain things that even

the best governments, local institutions, and all of their professionals can never do. For example, our governments, national or local, can't create their own legitimacy. They can't define their own purposes, set the standards by which they will operate, or chart the directions they are to follow. Citizens have to do that. Governments also need broad support if they are to act in a consistent manner over the long term. Their foundations are in the common ground for action that only the citizenry can create. Governments can build common highways but not common ground for action. And governments—even the most powerful—can't provide the popular will needed for effective action. Governments can command obedience but they cannot create will. There is political work to be done in the community before the politics of government—electing officials, passing laws—can be effective. We can elect our representatives but not our purposes. To make much the same point in a slightly different way: only the public can define the public's interests. In order to be legitimate in the eyes of the people, governments must represent those interests. No matter how well run they are, governments can't be the judge of what those interests are. They can't define their own mandates. Why? In a democracy, a "NO SMOKING" sign in public really means

"we have decided there should be no smoking here." It means "no smoking" is in the public interest. Absent our decision—and the support that must follow—signs, rules, and even laws have little enduring effect.

Another reason for engaging the whole community is that the nature of the most serious problems facing our communities requires the active participation of a large number of citizens. Even doing their job, governments and institutions can't solve these problems by themselves. Ronald Heifetz, a physician now teaching government at Harvard University, knows from his background that there are significant differences in types of problems and that these make different demands on doctors and patients. Medical problems range from those that are routine and can be cured by a physician, to more serious ones where the diagnosis isn't clear-cut and there are no technical fixes. Think of the difference between a broken arm and diabetes; there is a technical remedy for the former but not the latter. For the most serious problems, the patient and physician have to combine forces.

Similarly, our most serious community problems are those where the very definition of the problem is unclear and the nature of the treatment is undefined. And our most

serious problems seem to be increasing—despite our best efforts to solve them. These are the problems that take advantage of a diminished sense of community and then further loosen the ties that bind people together. Crime is a prime example. According to criminologists, the signs of a community in decline (litter on the streets, loitering, public drunkenness, and broken windows in abandoned housing) create an environment in which more serious crimes like robbery, drug dealing—and eventually murder—flourish.⁵ These are the kinds of problems that governments and their experts can't fix by themselves. Without the community fully engaged, there is little hope of a cure.⁶

We also need leaderfulness in our communities to harness the tremendous reservoirs of untapped civic energy in America. Even Americans who feel pushed out of politics-as-usual and deny taking part in any kind of politics tell stories about their community involvement.⁷ A man from Des Moines describes helping organize a neighborhood watch; another from Dallas talks about being active in his local block association. Someone else from Des Moines reports, "I've been involved in schools—on parent advisory boards." A woman from Seattle says that people there were "working on getting the city to preserve open space."

The person sitting next to her points to citizens who were "organizing to take care of public parks." People describe what they do in organizations to help low-income children, environmental groups, community-improvement coalitions, and other civic associations.⁸ While no one knows how much of this civic energy there is in the country, we do know that we will need a lot more of it to rid our streets of crime, clean up the environment, put the homeless in homes, and educate our children.

HOW COMMUNITIES CAN BECOME LEADERFUL

Leaderful communities are necessary because change is a journey of the many steps it takes to move a community from one place to another. Anyone who takes any one of those steps has provided leadership. This kind of leadership isn't the prerogative of a few; it's the responsibility of the many. *When citizens talk about the quality of leadership in their community, they are talking about themselves!* If we are talking about change *by* and not simply *in* a community, *then leadership consists of all the activities needed to bring about change.* And there are many of them. Think about all of the things that have to be done to change something relatively simple—like remodeling an old house. Someone has

to file a building permit, someone has to design the remodeled structure, someone has to tear out the old walls, someone has to order new materials, someone has to do the carpentry, someone has to add electricity and water, someone has to repaint—and so on. The interaction of the workers is as crucial as what each one of them does individually. The walls have to be in place before the painters can do their job. Remodeling is a dynamic process of interaction. The same is true in communities. They aren't static but rather dynamic, and their patterns of interaction are critical. For a community to change, even more people have to be involved in even more tasks than in remodeling a house.

What I have just described is a functional concept of leadership, which is quite different from the theory of leadership that is built around what one person—the leader—does. From the perspective I am talking about, leadership is provided by anyone who carries out any of the tasks in the work of change. This kind of leadership passes to different people at different times. There are many leaders.⁹

This leaderfulness can develop around the ways a community goes about doing its routine business; that is, around the various

tasks that make up the work of a community, these are the equivalents of the tasks for remodeling a house. Here are some of them:

Naming Problems and Framing Issues

In a community, who names problems and the names that are chosen—even the language that is used—are critically important. If experts name problems in technical terms, a great many people who need to be providing initiatives aren't going to get involved. Citizens usually have a different “take” on issues than experts or institutions. They respond to issues described in a language that is based on everyday experience and the things people consider most valuable. For example, many Americans are inclined to see stopping drug abuse as a family or community issue rather than simply a matter of enforcing the law or preventing drugs from entering the country. Naming a problem solely in legal or professional terms shuts out those who see drug abuse every day in their neighborhood and think of it as a problem of failed families, weak communities, and lack of economic opportunity.¹⁰

The name we give a problem also determines who will be available to deal with it and what kind of response will emerge. Naming problems in terms of what people consider valuable enables them to engage issues in ways that reflect not only their own concerns but also the concerns of others. That builds a sense of shared fate; it is the first step in citizens taking responsibility for what happens to them as a community. And when people take responsibility, it increases the leaderfulness in communities.

Naming problems in public terms can set off a chain reaction leading to action. For example, giving a problem a name and describing it to reflect the way families and communities experience it prompts people to think of things they can do to combat a threat. Problems can then be recast, or “framed,” around various options for actions. If the problem is drug abuse, the issue of what to do can be framed around such alternatives as urging young people to “just say ‘no,’” or strengthening communities through projects like a neighborhood drug watch, or attacking root causes, like the lack of jobs. Framing an issue this way, laying out all the possible options, helps people get a handle on a problem that might otherwise overwhelm them. People exercise leadership when they see ways they can make a difference.

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Making Decisions Deliberatively

Naming problems and framing issues in public terms sets the stage for another critical step in creating leaderful communities, and that is making choices together so people can act together. At a town meeting in Grand Rapids, a mother who had lost two sons to random violence said simply but with conviction, “We have to band together to stop the killing.” Communities can’t band together, however, unless they can make choices about the purposes and direction of action, which are always difficult decisions. Conflicts inevitably arise because a great many things are valuable to us when we think about acting, and we have no way of being certain which of our concerns should guide our decisions. For example, on an issue like keeping drugs off our streets, we place a premium on families and so we are tempted to use our resources to strengthen them. Yet we also believe discipline and order are valuable, and that prompts us to use our resources to strengthen the police force and build jails to get drug dealers off the streets.

Making difficult choices about what we should do requires deliberative decision making, which is different from sounding off, pleasant conversations, information

gathering, and debate. Deliberation explores basic questions: What is valuable to us when we think about the specific problem-at-hand? What are the costs and benefits of the various options for acting on the problem? What are the tough choices we have to work through? What trade-offs are we willing to make? While people don’t have to come to absolute agreements, they do have to find a range of compatible actions they can live with.

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To deliberate, people talk citizen-to-citizen and face-to-face rather than simply listening to expert presentations. They examine a wide variety of perspectives fairly and carefully, evaluating the pros and cons of all the options. That is what deliberative decision making is—carefully weighing options against all we consider truly valuable.

Deliberative decision making is the doorway to action. While it doesn't result in agreement, it can produce a general sense of direction and reveal shared or interrelated purposes. These “products” of deliberation create a sense of possibility, which generates civic energy for implementing decisions. By watching thousands of deliberative forums over the years in the National Issues Forums, which are convened by civic and educational organizations all across the country, the Kettering Foundation has been able to see just how this kind of decision making works.¹¹ Its first effect is to change people by changing their attitudes. Participants may not change their own positions on an issue, but they may change their opinions of others' opinions because deliberations allow people to “take in” the experiences of others.¹² As we internalize the views of others, we change. And as our perception of others changes, we see possibilities for acting together that we didn't see before. This promotes leaderfulness.

Deliberative decision making may also alter the way people see issues. Think about changes in a local economy, for example. Many economic development programs begin by trying to attract new industries to relocate in their area. Communities with this objective have defined their problem initially as a need for jobs. Yet later, after deliberating, some come to see their economic problems in a different light. What they really need, they decide, is to create prosperity, not just add jobs (which might or might not bring prosperity). This redefinition of the issue has led some communities to develop strategies for creating an “entrepreneurial economy.” They have found unique but existing strengths to create niches in the economy for a variety of businesses.

Modifications in these two key perceptions—of the problem and of one another—unlock the sense of possibility that is the driving force behind change. People don't have to be given a guarantee that what they do will be successful. They are most likely to become involved if (1) they understand clearly how the problem affects what they care about, (2) they see that there is something they can do about the problem, and (3) they discover that there are others who will work with them.¹³

Acting Together

Leaderful communities are created through the common work of community or civic action. This action follows from deliberative decision making and is different from institutional action, which is uniform, linear, and usually coordinated by some administrative agency. The fire department lays out rules for exiting a building safely. It sends an inspector to supervise a fire drill. The interactions are vertical—from officials down to citizens or, in some cases, from citizens up to officials. Civic action, on the other hand, isn't linear, beginning at one point and ending at another. It is an organic, ever-repeating collection of efforts, richly diverse and involving many people. Neighbors working together to restore a park—pitching in to clean up the trash, plant trees, build benches—is an example. The interactions are horizontal—shoulder-to-shoulder, citizen-to-citizen. This sort of action is neither the product of an administrative plan nor is it spontaneous or magical. It grows out of deliberation, which, if it goes well, results in a sense of direction. We are able to identify where interests overlap and where purposes can be joined.

Think of a community faced with the problem of growing vandalism. As people deliberate over what to do, they may not

agree on any one solution, but they can develop a shared sense that cleaning and fixing up the neighborhoods might help. Several neighborhood groups may meet afterward, with residents volunteering to show up at local parks the following Saturday. Once people have a common sense of direction and have made a commitment to act, they are able to take on all kinds of projects. And their community becomes leaderful.

Citizens acting together isn't a substitute for carefully planned action by governmental or nongovernmental organizations. Yet it has particular qualities that other forms of action lack. Economists would say its transaction costs (the costs of organization) are lower because, even though it requires a degree of coordination (everyone won't show up at the park to pick up trash at the same time), it isn't administratively regulated. When people have overlapping purposes, their diverse efforts tend to mesh, complementing and reinforcing one another.

Because the various efforts that make up civic action can be mutually reinforcing, the whole of the effort can be greater than the sum of its parts. Each actor's contribution is augmented, made larger, because someone else's action supports or helps complete it. This is complementary action. To get a better picture



of actions that are mutually reinforcing, think about a jazz combo in which each member's performance is supported by the playing of the other musicians even though there is no conductor directing them. The musicians have overlapping purposes in that they have a shared theme that embraces many interpretations. Jazz is leaderful music.

Note, too, that the musicians in a jazz group play different instruments. Civic action's strength comes from combining diverse talents and resources. If everyone had the same instrument or had the same skills, they would have a hard time reinforcing one another. Their collective capacity would be limited to whatever the dominant skill happened to be. When communities are leaderful, civic action is an alloy of diversity.

Institutional action is often ineffective when it isn't reinforced by civic action. Consider

the way a good neighborhood-watch program helps a police department do its job. Fred Smith, who retired three years ago from the machine-tool shop, devotes Monday afternoons to watching the street from his front porch (until it's time for Monday night football). Once everyone is home from work, the Joneses and the Turners walk together after supper for company, to exercise, and, not incidentally, to establish a presence on the block.

Because official interactions are vertical while community interactions run the other way, they can support each other. When the two are woven together, as with threads, the result is the strong "whole cloth" of action. If it were not for different lines of thread crossing one another in the fabric of our clothes, our elbows would come through our shirtsleeves.

THE CITIZENRY HAS TO BE INVOLVED IN AN ONGOING PROCESS OF MAKING JUDGMENTS ABOUT WHETHER THE RESULTS A COMMUNITY IS GETTING FROM ITS EFFORTS ARE CONSISTENT WITH WHAT IS TRULY VALUABLE TO PEOPLE. THIS IS TRUE PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY.

Nobel Prize-winning scholar Elinor Ostrom pointed out that even our largest and most powerful institutions can't do their work effectively without support from the work of citizens. If one presumes, she argued, that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers,

medical personnel, and social workers are essential to better public services. But ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of these services means that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account. The term *client* is used more and more frequently to refer to those who should be viewed as essential co-producers of their own education, safety, health, and communities. A client is the name for a passive role. Being a coproducer makes one an active partner.¹⁴

Using All of Our Resources

The resources communities use to do their work are distinctive; they include assets found in even the poorest places.¹⁵ These resources are organic and often intangible, such as commitment and political will or civic energy. They are found in the experiences and talents of people. Yet, even though these resources could reinforce institutions, they often go unrecognized and unused because they don't look like institutional resources. However, opportunities to identify these resources occur in deliberating as citizens enlarge their understanding of a problem. When people see a problem more completely, resources

that were unrecognized or seemed irrelevant take on new significance. The same is true of the people and organizations that control those resources.

Recognizing resources citizens have in communities can be prompted early on in framing issues by including citizens in the list of potential actors. As Ostrom pointed out, institutions—governments, schools, hospitals, and major NGOs—are obvious actors, yet while necessary, they are seldom enough to deal with a community's most persistent problems. These problems come from many sources, and so must the solutions, a recognition that makes for leaderfulness.

Judging Results Together

The civic action that citizens take, like all other forms of action, has to be evaluated to see whether the results were what was intended. However, this kind of action requires an open form of evaluation and learning, which promotes leaderfulness.

We want to know the results of our efforts because we want to be successful. And well we should. If we didn't insist on results, projects to change communities would degenerate into the worst kind of therapy: warm, fuzzy feelings of momentary comfort.

Typically, we judge projects by bringing in professionals to evaluate them or we use quantitative measurements ourselves to see whether we have more or less of certain things. Without intending it, this can push the citizens of a community to the sidelines and undermines the very thing that makes for success—a shared sense of civic responsibility.

Getting particular results on a particular project needs to be kept in perspective. Being successful over the long term requires more. The citizenry has to be involved in an ongoing process of making judgments about whether the results a community is getting from its efforts are consistent with what is truly valuable to people. This is true public accountability; that is, a system of accountability in which citizens are directly involved in assembling and evaluating the evidence of what has happened—evidence that includes people's experiences. And the community evaluates itself—rather than just receiving reports on what various institutions and agencies have done. That reinforces leaderfulness.

Let me use a hypothetical illustration. A community might decide to improve its schools by having professionals set measurable standards of "success." Local districts might have wide latitude in

implementing the standards, but the outcomes would be calculated against these predetermined criteria, in much the same way a carpenter measures a board. The community would be limited to determining success by standards it never set. That inevitably undercuts people's sense of accountability—of citizens holding themselves, not just the schools, responsible for outcomes.

Measuring success in the way carpenters measure boards also runs into another problem: not all the results we want are quantifiable. *Even more serious, before we can measure our success, we have to decide what success means.* And that decision is an inescapable community responsibility. A community has the right to say what results it wants—and making that determination is a critical part of community learning. The real purpose of assessing what happens isn't to lay blame but to learn what we need to do next. In the process of comparing what we intended with what happened (where measuring can be useful), we learn a great deal about how we function as a community. We may even change our definition of success after we see the results of our efforts.

Leaderfulness and shared learning are inseparable.

BARRIERS TO LEADERFULNESS

If having a leaderful community is such a good idea, why aren't there more? Even with all its promise, there are many obstacles to this concept of leadership, and especially to a concept that puts so much emphasis on change. Remember the truism: no one likes change except a wet baby. These are some of the barriers and misunderstandings:

Leaderfulness Ignores the Importance of Strong Leaders

To repeat a theme from the first pages, the concept of leadership in this report makes a claim on everyone. The tasks in community work are jobs for every citizen. The ability to do the work is an ability that everyone has or can develop. There are few things that established leaders do that no one else can. Of course, competencies vary with individuals; some people are more skilled at some things than others. Yet, there aren't certain people (leaders) who are especially competent and others (followers) who are less able and have less responsibility.

To some, this notion of leaderful communities implies that we don't need strong leaders. Nothing could be farther from the truth. While everyone in a community has a role in change, it isn't true that

everyone will take up their responsibilities simultaneously, like runners at a starting line. A few always have to take the first step. We always need strong leaders, especially those in positions of authority, to act on their authority. But we don't need others who feel that the imperatives of initiative or leadership have no claims on their behavior. While we usually think of "top-down" as the antithesis of "bottom-up," we need both going on simultaneously. Leadership can't be understood as lone individual action whether at the top or bottom. We don't need less from the people thought of as leaders; we need more leadership initiative from everyone else. Communities need the kind of leadership that invites—in fact, demands—responses from others. As one local newspaper editor reminded his fellow citizens, if you want the job done, you will have to do the work yourselves.¹⁶

Rejecting Initiatives

Communities can fail, not because there are no leaders or because the leaders have the wrong "style." They fail because people don't make good use of the initiatives that come from those who attempt some form of leadership. Initiators can't ensure the response they will get. Communities shut out people with unpopular ideas all the

time. Still those with no initiatives at all are rare. There are usually some people who want to improve their circumstances in even the worst situations. The direction of a community's movement, forward or backward, is determined by its patterns of interaction, by the habitual way that people respond to one another. Everyone, whether he or she wants to be or not, is a player. Even choosing not to participate affects the game. Each of us has decisions to make about how we play, and we are responsible for those decisions.

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Engaging the Citizenry

Some leaders may see *themselves* as an adequate representation of the public. They see citizens outside of their circle of leaders as either a mass audience or a collection of interest groups or simply those to be served. Citizens as actors making things that benefit the community as a whole are considered too rare to take seriously.

Established leaders may also think of the citizenry as an obstacle to what they want to do or as a mass of individuals who complain about private concerns. Lacking understanding or patience, people expect problems to be solved overnight—and then lapse into indifference until a crisis stirs them out of their lethargy.

To be fair, leaders often say that being more inclusive is important. Yet it is often difficult for them to describe how they would tap the capacities of more citizens or build new relationships with the public, except as volunteers who perform discrete tasks.¹⁷

Officeholders Aren't Sure about What to Do with the Public

Officials often have much the same difficulty with the public as established civic leaders. The problem may not be that officials are contemptuous of citizens; often the difficulty comes when officeholders think they are handling the public in exactly the right way.

Most officeholders in community-level government and local institutions see themselves as guardians of the public's interest. They believe there are only two options for dealing with the community: let those in authority, after listening to people's concerns, exercise their own best judgment about what should be done or let the community face the uncertainties of direct, popular decision making. Officials focus on these two options because most can see no middle ground; they don't see any way of governing *with* the public. Either they can run their operations in a "professional" manner, or the community will be lost to the masses.



While officeholders often describe citizens as uninformed, emotional, indifferent to serious problems, and preoccupied with narrow, parochial interests, they may still continue to reach out to them. Town meetings, open hearings, appearances at countless civic clubs, and public information programs are their ways of “educating” the people. Their job, as they see it, is “to bring the public along” so that citizens will accept the plans they have made. Throughout the process, officials try to shape both public attitudes and the amount of involvement.¹⁸ People’s response, however, is often to feel manipulated, not educated. *What citizens often find objectionable is the very behavior their officials think is the right way to do their jobs.*

The principal exceptions to the conventional way of dealing with the public come in situations when the nature of the problem is unclear, the goals of the community aren’t defined, values are at issue, conflict has gotten out of hand, or gridlock has set in. Then, officeholders seem more likely to depart from the standard techniques of “public relations” and experiment with new ways of relating to the community.¹⁹ For example, when gridlock or polarization sets in, officials are left with only the voices of special interests. They need a genuine public voice and not

just the combined voices of interest groups. To hear that voice, they need community deliberation, where people will do more than debate their positions; they need forums where people can reframe issues and work their way through difficult choices.

Planning and “Visioning” Make No Provision for the Public to Make a Choice

The citizenry that might become leaderful is also shut out when leaders assume that change can be effected without people ever having to make any hard choices. Uncertain about the public to begin with, leaders may develop elaborate programs without any provision for real deliberation that would challenge citizens to face up to difficult decisions about purpose and direction. Since people take more responsibility for what they have chosen or participated in choosing, this undercuts civic responsibility—along with reducing the ranks of potential leaders who might work for change if they had a hand in deciding what the changes were to be. Change often means giving up something, and people without a say aren’t disposed to make a sacrifice.

PEOPLE TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHAT THEY HAVE CHOSEN OR PARTICIPATED IN CHOOSING.

Sometimes citizens are asked to make choices but only about means, not about ends, which are, by right, the province of the public.

Those who see themselves as guardians of the “true” public interest may decide what the objectives are and then try to get people involved in deciding whether to do what they think has to be done this week, next week, or the week after. This may be done with the best of intentions, to increase public participation, yet if citizens haven’t decided what the goals are, they aren’t likely to join in efforts to implement objectives that others have set.

Training Programs Are Based on the “Leaders-Followers” Paradigm

Some of the most serious obstacles to making communities leaderful have come from conventional notions of leadership. The “leaders-followers” paradigm, which dominates much of the thinking about

leadership, implies that there are some people who are leaders and others who aren’t. It makes “the leaders” responsible for “the followers”—as in the business maxim “managers have to create an environment where workers can be productive.” If that is good business advice (which is doubtful), it is terrible advice for communities. Critics of this conventional idea about leadership find that the emphasis on leaders has accomplished little other than to create a massive training industry. They also argue that the importance of the leader’s personality has been overrated, and that the hope that leaders will solve our problems prevents us from attending to organizational dysfunctions that make it impossible for even capable leaders to lead. These critics say that what the so-called “leaders” do is dependent on what the presumed “followers” do or don’t do.²⁰

Fear of Change

Even organizational theorists, who believe that followers should be challenged with their responsibilities and want to drop the fiction that leaders can solve problems by themselves, warn that the redistribution of responsibility throughout a community will bring with it considerable anxiety. Believing that those at the top are in control, even if

we don't like what they do, is reassuring.²¹ Without that reassuring dependency, communities face a host of fears.

Some people are afraid to take the initiative and make the sacrifices that change requires because they worry about being ripped off by the greedy and self-serving. While change requires risk taking, this fear promotes just the opposite, avoiding risks. Others wait for permission to work for change even though change requires claiming responsibility and not waiting for permission. People who want change may also want to feel secure and be cared for. Yet change means living with feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

Still other people impose conditions on their becoming politically engaged and working for change. They say they are waiting for trust and fairness to be established *before* they do anything political, not recognizing that community politics is about establishing fairness and that only involvement builds trust.²² And finally, while citizens may want to deal with the substantive issues that change entails, they can be easily distracted from the difficult choices they have to make by tales of waste, fraud, and abuse, which allow them to transfer responsibility to others.

Of course, people with these fears *can* overcome them. Citizens who pay the price that change demands are as fearful, uncertain, and hesitant as anyone else. They make changes, not because they suddenly become confident, but because they add something else to the equation—a sense of possibility, a belief that if they act, they might make a difference. Focusing entirely on problems and intractable issues can overshadow this sense of potential and unrealized opportunity.

Uncertain about Their Power to Make a Difference, Some Opt Out

“I can't act because I don't have the power; others are in control,” is often the response to the challenge of change. Sometimes people think they need to be given power—*then* they will act. However, no one can empower another person. If power could be given, who would really have the power, the recipient or the giver? “Power” means “to be able”; and from the perspective of leaderful communities, our power comes from who we are, our unique talents and experiences. No one can give another person their talents and experiences. They don't need to. Everybody knows something; everybody can do something. Power is in our very being.

While there can be powerful individual actions, the most powerful form of power comes when people join their talents and experiences. Power grows out of patterns of interaction, out of people's ways of relating. Being a powerful actor doesn't mean doing just what one wants to do, unrestrained by anyone else. Actually it is the influence of others that can make our individual actions stronger. Think of what an editor does for a writer or what a voice coach does for a singer or a coach does for a gymnast. Even the pros have coaches. And for good reason. To not submit what they do to the critical review of others limits people to their own resources and insights. The power of leaderfulness comes from orchestrating the combined abilities of a community in ongoing, self-assessing actions.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The major finding in this research speaks to people in positions of authority and influence as well as to everyday citizens and civic organizations. Communities can become stronger and more resilient and leaders can become more effective by altering the way they go about their usual routines. They don't have to do anything that is so different. They just have to do what they

normally do a bit differently. The keys to leaderfulness are in the routines used to carry on the work of the community, such as the way problems are named and a framework of options is created for decision making. There are also opportunities for leaderfulness in the processes of decision making, in the identification of resources, and in the orchestration of actions to make them more complementary. Most of all, there is potential in turning outside evaluations into inside, communitywide civic learning. If there is one thing that is characteristic of high-achieving communities, it is the way people learn together. They have found out how to fail successfully; they learn from mistakes. This shared, leaderful learning keeps the momentum going for fundamental change. Henrik Ibsen reminded us that "a community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm." Given the deep-seated, interrelated problems we face—from joblessness to the dangers threatening our children—a few good leaders won't be enough. Leadership and active citizenship need to be seen as synonymous.

Notes

1. Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 270. Starhawk uses the term *leaderful* to describe groups in which “everyone . . . feels empowered to start or stop things, to challenge others or meet challenges, to move out in front or to fall back.”
2. John Gardner, “Leadership Papers/11: The Changing Nature of Leadership” (Washington, DC: The Independent Sector, 1988), 8. Gardner discusses the need to devolve responsibility for decision making among many people at the grassroots level.
3. The Harwood Group, *Forming Public Capital: Observations from Two Communities* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, August 1995), 5. See also Suzanne W. Morse’s chapter, “Growing Leaders,” in *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 181-206.
4. Benjamin R. Barber, “The Civic Mission of the University,” *Kettering Review* (Fall 1989): 69.
5. Thomas A. Repetto, “About Crime: With Order Comes Safety,” *Newsday* (June 5, 1990): 58.
6. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994), 73-100.
7. *Ibid.*, 41-50.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.
9. Franklyn S. Haiman, *Group Leadership and Democratic Action* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1951), 38.
10. Using the issue of how to deal with the drug problem has the advantage of illustrating the difference between the way experts or professionals may approach an issue and the way citizens experience an issue. However, this example has the disadvantage of seeming to suggest that citizens should make choices about means and not ends. Actually, the most important decisions made are about objectives, purposes, and directions. The details of implementation are usually the province of professionals. In the case of the drug issue, however, there was already a public consensus on the objective. There is little controversy over whether we need to combat the abuse of street drugs.
11. National Issues Forums (NIF) are part of the programs of thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as libraries, high schools, and colleges. Neighborhood associations, prison literacy programs, community leadership programs, and a diverse array of other organizations are also part of the NIF network. The forums take their name from the NIF issue guides they use, which are prepared by the Kettering Foundation. For more information, visit www.nifi.org.
12. For a more complete account of the effects of public deliberation, see John Doble Research, *The Story of NIF: The Effects of Deliberation* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1995); Public Agenda, *The Public’s Capacity for Deliberation* (New York: Public Agenda for Kettering Foundation, 1995); and UNM Institute for Public Policy, *A Builder’s Guide to Public Deliberation: Executive Summary of Understanding Public Deliberation* (Albuquerque: UNM Institute for Public Policy, prepared for the Kettering Foundation, 1995).
13. The Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1993), 11-14, 31-34.
14. Elinor Ostrom, “Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society.” *The Newsletter of PEGS (Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society)* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 8.
15. John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann call these resources “assets” and describe them in *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, 1993).
16. Vaughn Grisham and Rob Gurwitt, *Hand in Hand: Community and Economic Development in Tupelo* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1999).
17. Richard C. Harwood, *The Public’s Role in the Policy Process* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1989), 26-27.
18. *Ibid.*, 11-17.
19. *Ibid.*
20. James Krantz, “Lessons from the Field: An Essay on the Crisis of Leadership in Contemporary Organizations,” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 26, no. 1 (1990): 52.
21. *Ibid.*, 53.
22. The Harwood Group, “From the Heart of America: Whither the American Consensus” (unpublished report, August 1992), 4-5.



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