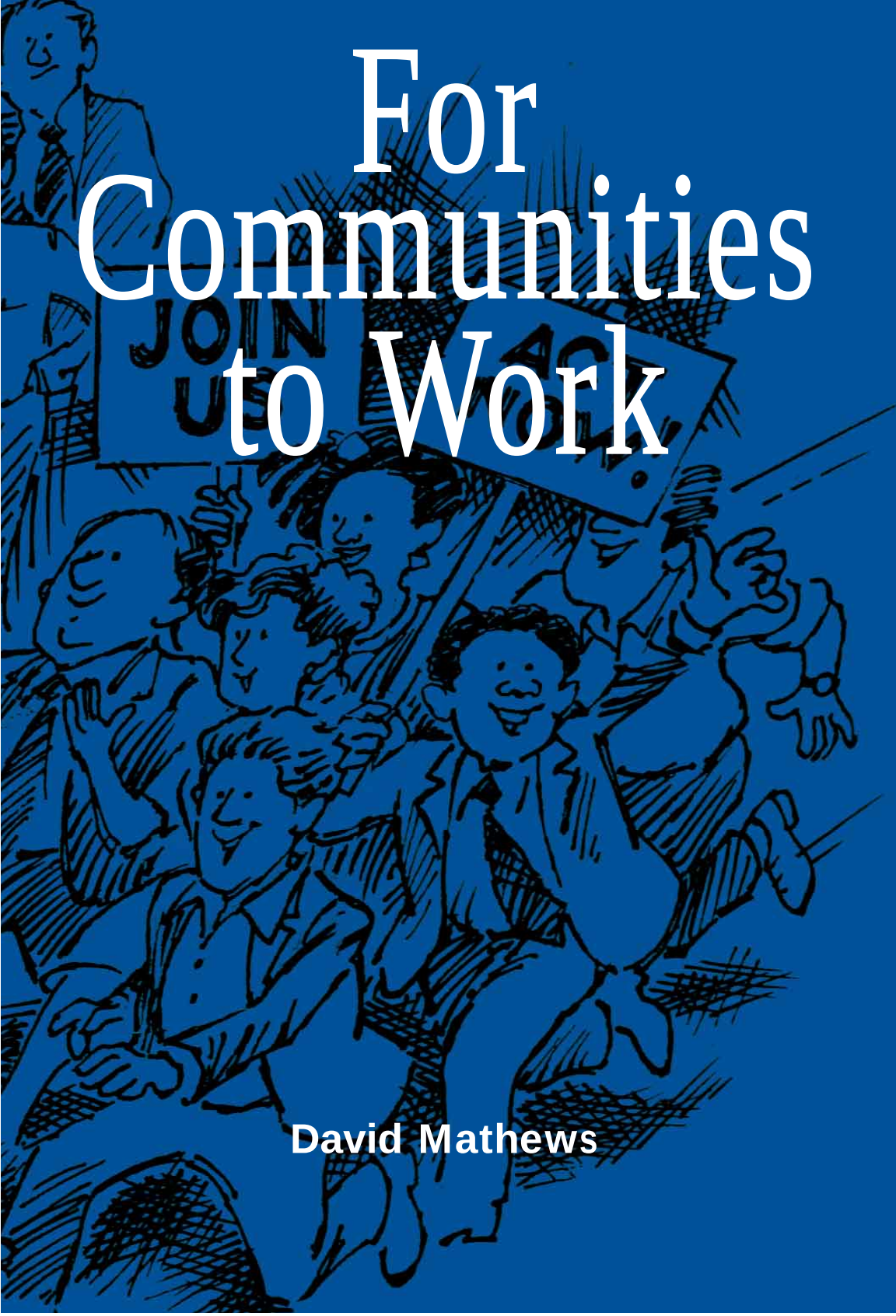
For Communities to Work



David Mathews

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David Mathews

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Introduction

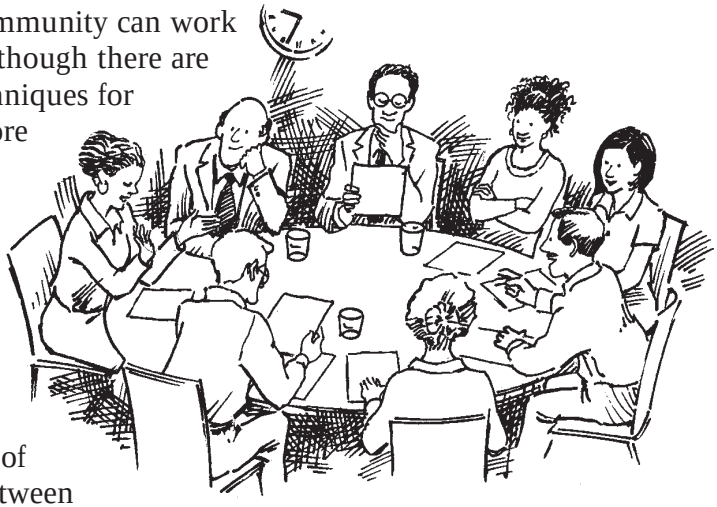
Having spent over a decade studying communities, the Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan research organization, has discovered an unrealized potential for constructive community change — the power of an engaged public. Lasting improvements are probably impossible without one.

By a "public," we at the foundation mean a diverse body of people joined together in ever-changing alliances to make choices about how to advance their common well-being. Communities must have citizens who will take responsibility for what happens and who can make sound decisions about their future. By an "engaged public," we mean a committed and interrelated citizenry rather than a persuaded populace. There is an important difference between the two. Members of an engaged public have decided among themselves on a course of action and are political actors directly involved in making changes; an engaged public owns its problems and its institutions. A persuaded populace has been convinced by leaders to let them implement certain programs. We found we had to make this distinction because the term "public engagement" has been used to describe a form of public relations aimed at gaining popular support for an institution or a cause. Public engagement in community affairs is not just a means of getting support for projects; it is an end in itself.

Publics aren't fixed, like buildings; they have to be created and recreated. This book explains how private individuals become public citizens and how publics form. It is intended as background for civic organizations that want to look at the state of the public in their communities. It presents a broad framework, leaving supplemental texts such as *Making Choices Together* to provide greater detail. Neither this nor the foundation's other materials offer how-to guidance. You will not find techniques in these pages, only descriptions of practices.

Political practices are ways people relate to each other and their problems that have intrinsic worth. Techniques are purely instrumental means of getting things done. Hammering a nail is a technique; few hammer for hammering's sake. Choral singing is a practice; it has intrinsic value to the practitioners as well as social benefit. People genuinely like to sing together. To take an example from politics, deliberative dialogue seems to be intrinsically valuable to citizens. While it produces useful outcomes, people also like this way of talking and relating for its own sake.

This overview of Kettering's work focuses on putting an engaged citizenry back into our communities. It is about generating the political will for what some call "public work," or the work of citizens with each other. The book isn't about ways a community can work more efficiently, though there are many useful techniques for doing that. A more complete title might be *For Communities to Work in Ways That Realize the Full Potential of Democracy*. Here is an illustration of the difference between working and working democratically.



In Des Moines, the problem at hand was the rising cost of health care. Although the city hasn't completely eliminated what is clearly a nationwide difficulty, the situation has improved as a result of the role played by the public, according to a Public Agenda research study. The issue was framed to lay out all the options for controlling costs. What was at stake was presented not just in technical terms but in terms of what people consider valuable. More than 200 public forums challenged citizens to face up to the difficult choices that had to be made. The media ran stories on the issue, which reached 76 percent of Des Moines residents. As a result, more than 30,000 people participated in the decision making.

Throughout the campaign, public understanding of the issue grew and, by its end, people knew they had to act. They didn't decide on only one solution; there were many, and they complemented each other. The community's first health maintenance organization was opened, with greater participation than expected. Hospitals eliminated rooms and began to offer a variety of new outpatient services, for which the state legislature authorized insurance coverage. Owing to these and other efforts, insurance rates have dropped by 5 percent. In this instance, the community obviously worked — and it worked democratically.

Other cities have acted decisively, but with little or no public involvement. In the early 1980s, faced with the all too familiar problem of multiple local jurisdictions working toward conflicting goals, business leaders often tried to persuade local governments to merge. Not surprisingly, many residents opposed such consolidation. In one instance, a major business threatened to move its headquarters unless a merger was effected. That "solved" the problem. Fearing a loss of 700 jobs, the surrounding township voted itself out of existence. Citizens participated, but only to ratify the consolidation plan. Despite charges of blackmail by some, the majority of residents seemed pleased that a solution had been found. This community also worked, but the politics was quite different.

You will notice that the word "politics" is used to describe the things citizens do both with other citizens and with governments to change their communities. We recognize that the term usually refers to election campaigns and the activities of governments. We use a broader definition in order to take into account all that is required to sustain a polis, or community. A neighborhood association organizing to keep streets safe is political. A citizens' forum on ways to improve the economy is political. A coalition working for a better education system is political. And all those concerned about such matters have political interests. So politics doesn't belong only to officeholders; it rightly belongs to everyone. This book is about how citizens can reclaim politics.

To talk about a public becoming a greater force in community politics is not the same as advocating mobocracy, or government by popular whim. What is public and what is popular are not the same.

For example, there is a vast difference between public judgment and popular opinion. Public judgment is shared and reflective. Popular opinion is individual and reactive. To think of politics as a *public* activity changes the very meaning of politics. It becomes the art of making collective decisions and developing productive relationships, so that diverse people can act together in ways that give them greater control over their common fate. Politics is not simply passing legislation and electing representatives.

In addition to summary reports like this one, the foundation also makes available the questions and methods used in its studies, so that communities can do their own research. The questions can be found in documents such as *Community Checkup* and *Hard Talk*, which are described later.

A final word: We have found that making politics more public is a work in progress. Creating a more effective citizenry requires using different concepts of political possibility to carry out experiments and learn from the results. This book is based on what the foundation has learned from watching people who are doing that. It is written in the hope that its readers will add to the discoveries.

Acknowledgments

This book is based on an earlier work *Community Politics*. The examples come largely from stories people have told us about their communities and from more formal studies conducted by independent research organizations. These are cited in the second edition of David Mathews' *Politics for People*. Canvassing of relevant literature was done by an able research group at the foundation. Melinda Gilmore took responsibility for verifying and updating factual material and bibliographical information. She and Judy Suratt edited the text. Angel George Cross prepared the manuscript.

one
The Challenges of Change

We've all wondered why some communities are reasonably effective at making needed changes while others, apparently not that different, aren't. Or, why a given community is sometimes able to manage its problems and sometimes not. Communities of every size face similar problems. The only difference is that some are able to exercise a degree of control over those problems, while others become dysfunctional under the stress of their difficulties. Simply put, some communities come together, while others come apart. Although there are no definitive explanations of why that is so, we can make some educated guesses.

Communities that have come together and acted through a revitalized public to gain greater control over their futures have usually made fundamental changes in their politics. They haven't just solved problems; they have changed themselves by changing the way they go about their collective business. While this book doesn't offer models (for reasons that will be explained later), it does draw lessons from the way these high-achieving communities have met the ever-present obstacles to change.

Generating Political Will

Long-lasting, fundamental, systemic change obviously requires a great deal of will. Generating it is the first challenge. Some of the most striking instances of the force of political will come from stories of how people have acted in times of crisis, as in World War II. Yet there are less dramatic local examples of the power of will that has become institutionalized in people's habits of working together. It is the kind of quiet commitment needed to change a community. Deeply rooted, it has staying power and is not superficial enthusiasm.

Political will is conventionally thought of as a massive outpouring of civic duty born of an enlightened commitment to the common good. A more realistic assessment suggests that it grows out of joining self-interests rather than replacing them with a unitary, general will. Not all self-interests are selfish.

> Finding connections among differing interests in order to generate political will is a strategy that worked for the owners of floating homes in one Washington State community. It helped them keep their homes and preserve the lake. According to Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota, proposed development plans for the lake area would have banned these homes. But owners, rather than arguing solely for their own interests, formed an alliance with others in the area — even though they had different concerns. As a result, small businesses joined the effort, as did environmental groups. Sacrifices were necessary: homeowners, for example, had to agree to pay for sewage lines to prevent pollution of the water. While protecting the lake and everyone around it took years of work and a lot of political will, the effort was successful.

Of course, there are many obstacles to making changes in a community. Even modest improvements are often resisted, perhaps because no one really likes change. It is also not uncommon for reforms begun with enthusiasm to lose momentum owing to a lack of sustained commitment.

Yet, just as individuals can't stop drinking or using drugs until they become genuinely willing to change, communities must become committed to changing before fundamental improvements can begin. How does a critical mass of citizens overcome inertia and outright resistance? Developing a shared sense of responsibility for what happens to the community seems critical. In the last example, people had different interests but shared a sense of responsibility for the lake.

In sum, the amount of political will available in a community seems to depend on the extent to which people claim responsibility for what happens to them. They have to own their problems rather than blaming them on others. That principle was well stated by Davis Merritt Jr., editor of the *Wichita Eagle:* "The only way . . . for [our] community to be a better place to live is for the people of the community to understand and accept their personal responsibility for

what happens." Communities where efforts to change concentrate on building ownership and claiming responsibility are more likely to become better places to live. One civic leader said his community succeeded in effecting educational reform because everybody in town was "trying to teach our kids." In this case, the people themselves owned the change because they had created it. They hadn't "bought" it from another source.

A sense of ownership may be a product of the way community difficulties are named. The seemingly neutral act of describing a problem has powerful political implications. More about that later.

Engaging Citizens

When changes are needed, it is quite common for leaders to develop proposals and "sell" them to citizens, using sophisticated marketing techniques. Sometimes people are persuaded: they buy what is being sold. But do they own it? Not always. Will people take responsibility for what happens, or will they blame the "manufacturers" for anything that goes wrong? We are more likely to take responsibility for what we have participated in creating. That requires real engagement — citizens making up their minds by talking to other citizens. Although it isn't wrong for leaders to try to persuade, it doesn't follow that all citizens have to do is sit back and be convinced.

For an engaged public to develop, involvement has to be widespread and to include all kinds of people, not just activists and advocates. Communities that leave large numbers on the sidelines can't really change themselves, nor can they act effectively on their problems. For example, while parents must obviously be included in any effort to improve schools, the constituency for educational improvements is certainly not limited to this fraction of the population.

Seeing beyond Solutions

Attempts to build stronger communities often fail to realize their objectives. People become frustrated with the enormity and complexity of their problems and settle on a solution they can get their arms around. They launch a specific project with a clear goal and a completion date. If young people are graduating without basic job skills, the solution may be to raise funds to buy computers for the schools. Although projects like this can be very useful, they don't usually lead to systemic change.

Fundamental change focuses on the community as a whole rather than a particular part of it and on the interrelationship of problems rather than just the one that seems most manageable. Therefore, while community-changing efforts may begin with specific projects, these have to be integrated so that they will be mutually supportive and, consequently, more effective. Mutually supportive initiatives are most likely to be developed when citizens have a comprehensive perspective on the community.

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Recognizing Unintended Consequences of Business as Usual

The search for better ways to make necessary changes is often prompted by disappointments that result from following conventional wisdom. When a community tries to address a major problem, it acts in a fairly predictable fashion, almost as though it were following a formula:

1) It cuts the problem down to a manageable size.
2) It finds a plausible solution.
3) It delegates responsibility to an accountable institution.
4) It gets busy with visible activity.
5) It sells the public on what the leadership has decided is best.

It is clear why this formula is appealing; it is easy to follow. And it is appropriate for some kinds of community problems, though not for those deeply rooted in the very nature of the community. These difficulties — for example, the persistence of pockets of poverty despite an improved economy — are actually clusters of interrelated problems. In the case of poverty, they include demands that today's industries make on workers, inadequate education, absence of good work habits, weakened family structure, and (some would say) lack of compassion for the less fortunate. We often try to make our task more manageable by concentrating on just one of the interconnected problems.

The problem that appears most soluble usually provides the name we use to characterize the whole difficulty. If we think a problem in the educational system is best dealt with by addressing teacher preparation, then the "education problem" becomes the more man-

ageable "teacher problem." With such a definition, the next step — a quite logical one — is to find a remedy that can be clearly understood and readily implemented. We want an answer that will appear reasonable and be supportable. We tailor the solution to the problem as we have named it. For instance, we might solve the teacher problem by instituting a teacher-training program.

In order to act quickly and efficiently, we delegate responsibility. Community leaders designate an existing institution or create a new one to implement their solution. For the teacher problem, a college might be charged with providing further training. The leaders want to be sure they get results, so they establish procedures to hold the designees accountable. That sets the enterprise on a predictable course, to which no one is likely to object.

The conventional assumption is that accountability is demonstrated by measurable outcomes. So improved education is equated with increased attendance of teachers at training programs or higher scores of students on standardized examinations.

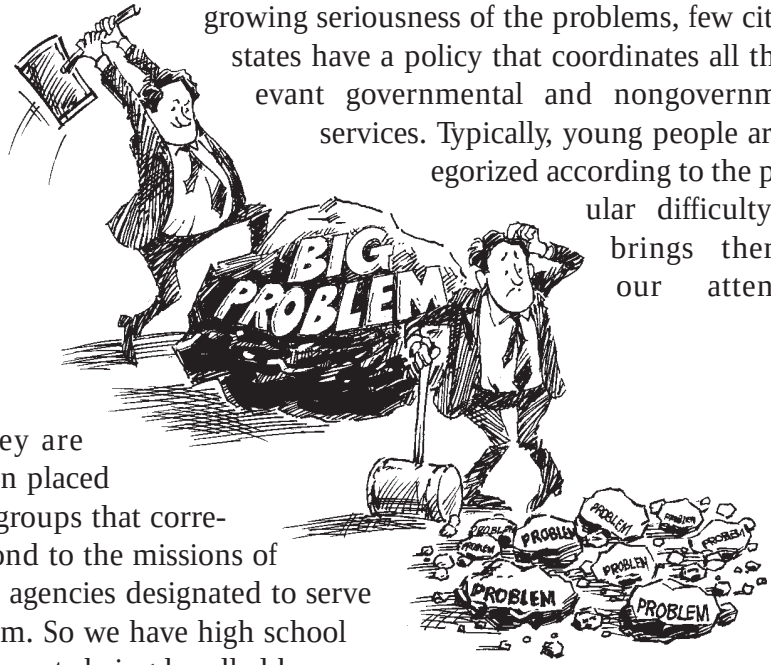
Finally, conventional wisdom holds that any new enterprise has to be legitimate in the eyes of those in positions of authority and, perhaps, in the eyes of the citizenry at large. If leaders are concerned about public acceptance, they work on "educating" people, on convincing them of the merits of their solution. And, since early evidence of progress is presumed to guarantee approval, there is pressure for quick, tangible results — particularly the kind of results that satisfy the media's definition of success and that will, therefore, be reported in the press.

While this familiar way of "doing politics" appears sensible, what actually happens is sometimes the opposite of what we had hoped. We run into unintended consequences that undermine our strategy.

Fragmentation

When we define a problem in such a way as to make it manageable, we may unwittingly fragment it. *Breaking a complex set of problems apart can lead us to overlook vital interconnections.* Consider what often happens when we try to help young people who wind up on the margins of society. There are as many agencies providing services

for youth at risk — pregnant teens, drug abusers, high school dropouts — as there are labels for what afflicts them. Yet, despite the growing seriousness of the problems, few cities or states have a policy that coordinates all the relevant governmental and nongovernmental services. Typically, young people are categorized according to the particular difficulty that brings them to our atten



They are then placed in groups that correspond to the missions of the agencies designated to serve them. So we have high school dropouts being handled by schools, teenage mothers-to-be by federal nutrition programs, and children with emotional problems by community social service organizations. While each of these agencies may be helpful, the left hand often doesn't know what the right hand is doing. Though the subdivisions are logical, they ignore an important reality: individuals are whole people, whose maladies are interrelated.

Solution Wars

Some efforts to make needed changes don't even get as far as fragmented initiatives. Pressure to find the "right solution" can lock a community into a never-ending battle between proponents of different plans. Those who rush to solutions often say that everybody knows what the problem is. Actually, what people know is usually just their own personal experience with a problem. *Communities have been known to spend their energy debating which of a number of predetermined solutions is best, little aware that there is no agreement on the nature of the problem.* How a problem is understood varies with people's

circumstances and interests. Unless there is mutual understanding of different perspectives, people are not likely to work together as a community.

> Kettering's work suggests that civic organizations can end or prevent solution wars and encourage a fresh start by raising questions that prompt people to step back and identify what it is they really want for their communities before talking about specific solutions. These questions must probe beneath current debates in order to find out what citizens care most about. The questions the foundation used in its research can be found in a document called *Hard Talk*.

Loss of Agency

Once a community decides on a civic initiative, a sense of urgency usually develops — a feeling that action can't be delayed. "Now" becomes the adverb of choice. Pressure to act prompts citizens to look to full-time staff in their civic organizations to get the job done. (Obviously, citizens can't do everything; they have to depend on organizations with the resources to carry out the day-to-day administration of community projects.) Yet, here again, unintended consequences follow, in this case from the sensible and necessary delegation of responsibility. Citizens are moved to the sidelines; they become disengaged, or they substitute money for personal participation. The political climate changes. Without direct involvement, people lose interest and political will begins to evaporate. Civic organizations lose authenticity, vitality and, ultimately, effectiveness. *Staff members can complement citizens, but they can't replace them without their organizations losing much of the legitimacy they enjoy as agencies of the public.*

A similar loss of agency may occur when informal civic associations turn projects over to formal institutions. The unintended results are much the same. Civic groups wither away just as they are becoming "successful." This "sudden death" has occurred when citizens join with schools on projects to improve education. People spend hours negotiating with school officials over how to work together. They are directly, personally involved. Finally, a project is selected — perhaps reading skills are to be improved by adding more books to the school

library. Responsibility then shifts to the librarian, who selects the books. Citizens turn to raising money. And, shortly after the new library collection is dedicated, the civic group, which could have been a continuing source of school support, fades away. The community has the golden egg but has lost the goose that laid it.

This scenario, often repeated, contrasts sharply with one in which a civic group decides to help an elementary school by having its members read to children so that teachers can attend to other duties. In this case, citizens are more likely to remain interested: they become engaged the moment the group decides to undertake the project, and they continue to share the work.

The Perversion of Accountability

When management of a project is transferred to an institution, citizens try to maintain control by insisting on strict accountability. That, too, may produce unintended consequences. Conventional methods of demonstrating accountability can sometimes interfere with responsiveness. And accountability procedures have occasionally become ends in themselves.

Suppose a school board wants to respond to the public by making changes people have asked for. Or, suppose the media pressure a board for a response to citizens' demands. In either case, the board makes a new policy or issues a directive mandating that the school system and the superintendent act in certain ways. Operating within the bureaucracy, the superintendent translates the mandate into measurable objectives and appropriate procedures for principals. Principals then pass these along to teachers, usually with the requirement that they fill out forms to show that they have followed the mandated procedures.

While the intention may be commendable, each step compromises the responsiveness that indicates true accountability:

- Time needed to work with citizens is spent completing forms.
- Following procedures becomes a substitute for achieving results.

- Bureaucratic rules constrain the freedom of administrators and teachers to act in creative ways.
- Passivity sets in because, with less going on, there is less to account for.

Of course, no school board intends these outcomes. Indeed, members are usually highly critical of bureaucracies for causing them. They do not recognize that the bureaucracies are responding to the same pressures a board feels to show that it is doing its job. They want to demonstrate that their decisions have been beneficial.

Slowly, the critical interaction between teachers, their pupils, and the community diminishes. The social reinforcement that students and educators receive from that interaction is lost. And young people learn less. All the procedures for accountability have been followed; but, intentions to the contrary notwithstanding, the board hasn't fulfilled its responsibility to the community.

Diminished Public Responsibility

This is not to say that being accountable is unimportant; we properly insist on it because we want to encourage responsibility. If we don't insist on knowing results, programs to build stronger communities can degenerate into the worst kind of therapy, providing warm, fuzzy feelings of momentary comfort. Outcomes must be known and evident to more than those who are directly involved. The difficulty arises when conventional methods are used to "prove" that a particular technique or program succeeded. These tend to weaken the public's sense of responsibility and ownership, an unfortunate and certainly unintended consequence.

For example, a group of civic leaders might decide to improve the public schools by having experts set measurable standards of "success." Individual schools might be given wide latitude in implementing the standards, but the outcomes would be calculated against these predetermined criteria, much the way a carpenter calculates the length of a board. Citizens would then find success measured by standards they hadn't set. Indeed, their own standards may have changed as they worked on school improvement and became clearer about what was most important to them. The result is an erosion of the public's sense of accountability, of people holding themselves, not

just officials and institutions, responsible for outcomes. *The way we go about defining success and judging results can undermine the very things that make for success.*

An alternative to conventional evaluation would be creation of a public mechanism for judging the outcomes of civic efforts. The community would be responsible for establishing indicators of success and would have to determine constantly, by direct examination, whether its expectations are being met. (This is precisely what happens in a courtroom: jury members see the evidence firsthand.) Citizens need an opportunity to consider their standards because these often change as reforms unfold. They also need the challenge of evaluating themselves as a community, not just their institutions and professionals.

In sum, getting the results we want requires ongoing public judgment. Those results are not always quantifiable and, more important, we can't remove ourselves from the evaluation process without adverse consequences for community learning. The purpose of evaluation is not to fix blame; it is to find out what we have to do next.

three

Undelegable Responsibilities of the Public

How is it that unintended consequences sometimes result from doing what conventional political wisdom prescribes? Of course, little we do in life turns out exactly as we plan it. But the kind of counterproductive results described in the last chapter can often be traced to the prevailing tendency to underplay the role of the public. Community politics, as it is usually practiced, is not wrong; it is just incomplete. It leaves citizens on the sidelines because they are regarded as a nuisance rather than an asset. Yet, without them, there are things that institutions, governments, experts, professionals, and officials — even at their best — can never do.

Institutions in a democracy can't create their own legitimacy. They can't, on their own, define their purposes, set the standards by which they will operate, or chart the basic directions they will follow. Governments can't sustain decisions that citizens are unwilling to support. Neither can they ensure the public action often required to complement the work of formal agencies and their professionals. Governments can build common highways, but not the common ground needed for public action. And governments — even the most powerful — can't generate the political will necessary to keep a community moving ahead on difficult problems. They can make us pay taxes but can't make us endure the sacrifices required to overcome difficult problems. Finally, governments can't create citizens — at least not democratic citizens capable of governing themselves. It is up to the public to transform private individuals into political actors.

Dealing with "Wicked" Problems

A public has its own work to do in tandem with its institutions, particularly in responding to the most worrisome community problems — those that seem to grow in seriousness despite the best efforts of institutions to solve them. These are opportunistic problems that take advantage of a diminished sense of community and then further loosen the ties that bind people. Conventional remedies are inappropriate to these problems. Following business as usual is like treating cancers with the plaster casts more suitable for broken bones. Unlike fractures, our most serious community problems result from multiple factors, more human than technical, that won't go away. They are deeply embedded in the social and economic circumstances of the community.

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber call these "wicked" problems because

1) the diagnosis or definition is unclear,
2) the location or cause is uncertain, and
3) any effective action to deal with them requires narrowing the gap between what is and what ought to be — in the face of disagreement about the latter.

Rittel and Webber argue that conventional ways of responding to problems are ill suited to those that are wicked. They point out that most institutional programs are based on our national experience in dealing with the problems of post-Great Depression America. These were discrete and definable; they could be addressed by setting concrete goals and eradicated through the application of professional expertise. Though by no means easy to solve, these problems did have solutions — in this sense, they were "tame." After the depression, professionals designed programs to build affordable housing, clean the water supply, construct schools and hospitals, and stabilize financial institutions. They went on to create a national highway system and to wipe out dread diseases. Their programs were very successful, and so their methods of analyzing, planning, and evaluating were adopted by governments and other institutions.

Wicked problems are neither discrete nor easily defined. They are as tricky as they are aggressive and vicious. Each is a symptom of

another, in a never-ending chain. While bridges are built and diseases eradicated, wicked problems persist. Therefore, success in dealing with them can't be determined in the same way as the reliability of an engineered structure or the curative power of a laboratory-developed drug.

Despite the distinctive characteristics of the problems that never disappear, most civic strategies for addressing them call for the same kind of planning, goal setting, and measurement of outcomes used to address tame problems. Yet, when problems are wicked, a shared understanding of the approximate nature of what people are facing is more important than a technical solution. In fact, dealing effectively with a wicked problem depends on *not* reaching a fixed decision about a solution early on. The ability of citizens to exercise good judgment and to experiment in the face of uncertainty becomes more important than the often deceptive certainty of experts.

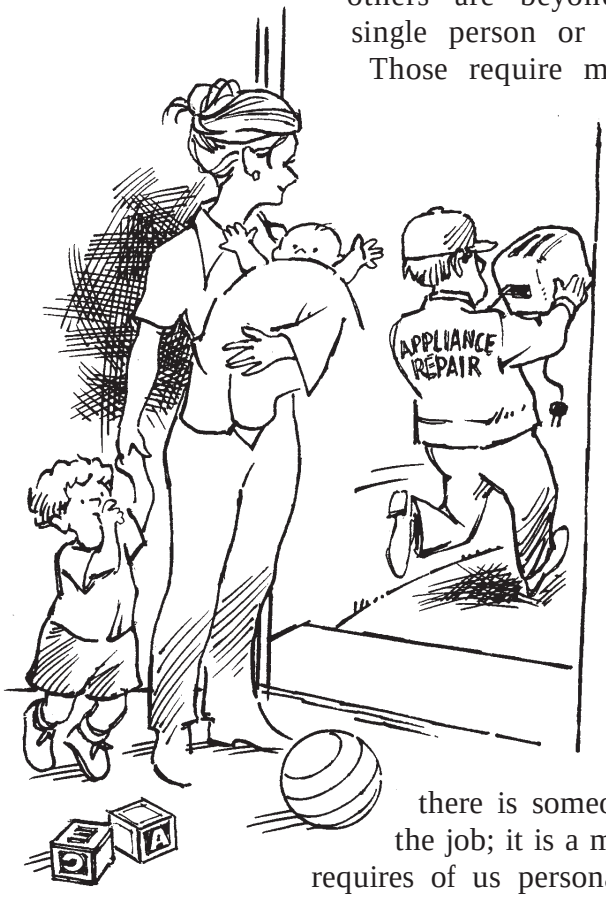
Ronald Heifetz, a professor of government at Harvard who trained as a physician, has a deep appreciation of the distinctive characteristics of wicked problems. It is not surprising that he bases his argument for an engaged public on his experience with medical conditions that are wicked. In Heifetz's typology, health problems range from "mechanical" difficulties, which can be remedied by a physician, to the most serious ones, for which there is no clear-cut diagnosis and no technical fix. For those, the patient and physician have to combine forces. The same is true of our most serious political problems — those that governments and other institutions, with all their expertise, can't handle by themselves. Without an engaged public at work, there is little hope of solving them.

In order to study the ability of communities to distinguish wicked from tame problems, Kettering developed a series of diagnostic questions. They can be found in a document titled *Community Checkup*. Here are four of the most basic ones:

What type of problem is the community facing? Some problems may be on the surface; like gum stuck to the bottom of your shoe, they can be handled easily. Others are far more deeply embedded in the moral, social, and economic fabric of the community.

Does the problem require an ongoing response, or will one intervention do the job? It is important to know whether a problem needs continuing attention or only a single decisive action. Think of the difference between cutting down a tree and growing corn. I can cut down a tree once and for all in a single sawing. If I want to grow corn, however, I have to take a series of steps: tilling, planting, fertilizing, weeding, harvesting. For growing corn, one trip to the field isn't enough.

Does the problem require a unilateral or a multilateral response? Some problems can be handled by one institution or agency, while others are beyond the power of a single person or institution to solve. Those require multilateral action. A school board can change graduation requirements but can't overcome the myriad forces that put young people at risk and interfere with their education.



Is the problem delegable or undelegable? Some problems, like fixing a toaster, are delegable. Others, like caring for a loved one, are not. The issue is not whether there is someone else who can do the job; it is a matter of what the job requires of us personally. While a broken toaster is better off at the shop, a child in need of care is better off in a loving home. Similarly, for some community problems the human resources that citizens can bring to bear are indispensable.

Empowering Institutions

While it is common for institutions and government agencies to talk of empowering people to deal with their problems, the most important empowering moves in the opposite direction, from citizens to institutions. Through the actions of citizens working together, the public often enables governments and other community institutions to do their jobs. Unfortunately, the essential role of citizens is obscured by the distrust and hard feelings that separate the public from many of its institutions.

Although people may feel barred from meaningful participation, that is not exclusively the fault of either citizens or institutions. Take the case of the public's hostility toward governments. The common assumption that officeholders don't care about citizens (except on Election Day) is an oversimplification that fails to capture the ironic misunderstanding separating officials from the public. Someone once explained that a marriage can be troubled, even though each partner lives up to his or her ideal of a good mate, if neither accepts the other's definition. The better each one becomes at doing what he or she believes is right, the more they dislike each other. That is much the same as the situation in which the public and governments now find themselves.

Many government officials see themselves as the true guardians of the public interest, with only two options: they can listen to the public's concerns and then exercise their own best judgment about what should be done, or they can let the community face the uncertainties of popular decision making. These officeholders are unable to imagine any middle ground, such as governing *with* the public. Either they are completely in charge, or the community will be lost to the masses.

In certain situations, however, the guardians' approach doesn't seem applicable. Even though officeholders may not see a way to govern with the public, they sometimes find themselves needing citizens — when the nature of the problem is unclear, when the goals of the community aren't well defined, or when values are at issue and conflict has gotten out of hand. Officials are often at a loss when tradeoffs are required but there is no consensus about which choice is

preferable. They are also stymied when political gridlock, brought on by interest group conflict, closes down the machinery of government. Officeholders are then left with only the voices of special interests. They need a public that is not just a collection of interest groups; they need community forums in which people do more than simply debate.

Under these circumstances, would officeholders take the risk of attempting a new relationship with citizens? Would people be able to get beyond accusing and complaining? Some already have; what they are doing is reported in Chapter 5.

Creating Citizens

Community Checkup, mentioned earlier, includes the obvious follow-up questions: When our community needed a public to act, was there one? Did it act? Frequently, the answer to both is no — because people didn't get involved. In fact, many Americans think this failure to respond is inevitable. Elites as well as nonelites often believe that average folks lack the time or motivation to be active citizens. That perception is the most serious obstacle to realizing the potential of democracy, since it is self-confirming.

Americans become citizens by doing the work of citizens. They become confident in fellow citizens only when they are joined with them in public work. The next chapter explains what makes people decide to do that work. While conventional politics assumes that Americans have to acquire an interest in public matters, our research suggests that they already have public concerns. They find the time to become politically engaged when they see those concerns reflected in an agenda for action and when they see a possibility that they can make a difference.

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Public-Making

A strong public is essential to a community that works democratically, and it must be continually re-created. How does a public form within a geographic community? A public obviously comes into being when people live the life of active citizens. But what prompts them to do that? Before Americans will take the first step, they have to answer several questions.

None of these is either general or abstract. Each is very particular and concrete, and is generated by some immediate problem or by a growing awareness of a threat to everyday life.

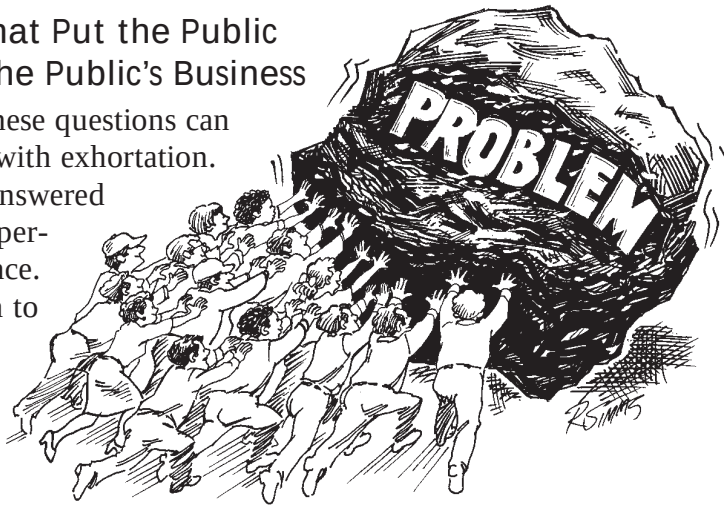
Gateway Questions

- **Is this a problem that affects me?** People have to find a connection between the problems they hear about and their own sense of what is valuable before they will get involved. And what is valuable to people goes well beyond their pocketbooks.

- **Can I do anything?** Even if citizens are convinced that a problem is serious and poses a danger, they have to feel that they can get their hands on it. Otherwise, they give up. When they do find a handle — something they can do personally — they usually become convinced that they might make a difference. That sense of possibility is full of political energy.

- **Who will join me?** At the same time people are trying to find out whether they can make a difference, they test to see whether others will join them. Instinctively, they seem to know that they are power*less* alone but power*ful* when they band together. They also reason, "If we start working jointly on little things, we can get together on bigger ones."

Practices That Put the Public Back into the Public's Business



None of these questions can be addressed with exhortation. They can be answered only through personal experience. It isn't enough to be told, "This problem affects you in the following ways." Or, "You must get involved." People become engaged and publics form around practices like these:

Naming Problems in Public Terms

Notice that the gateway questions follow a logical order and that the first is whether a reported problem affects what people consider valuable. The name a problem is given — the way it is described — either indicates or fails to indicate how it connects with their deepest concerns. Problems are often named by officeholders or professionals who use language that reflects favored solutions. For example, drug abuse may be described by law enforcement officers as the consequence of drugs coming into the country. Social service professionals may describe the same problem as the result of a lack of adequate counseling. Citizens, on the other hand, tend to see drug abuse as a symptom of weakened families and an absence of community solidarity.

Problems are also named by ideologically driven advocates, who recognize that controlling the name is a public relations advantage. Citizens, however, often back away from partisan language, not wishing to be drawn into battle.

Whether put off by ideological rhetoric or bewildered by technical names, many Americans have difficulty finding a connection between problems described in such terms and what is most valuable to them.

What are the things of greatest importance to us? We value security and fair treatment. We want to know how the problems being discussed affect the well-being of our families or the economic stability of our communities. We want to know whether the problems bear on the way we are treated by others or on our opportunities. Just as everyone has the same basic physical and social needs (to have food, to belong), citizens share basic political motives. It would be difficult to find someone who doesn't want to feel secure and be treated fairly.

Ask people what they think is most important to the well-being of their community, and you will get a sense of these deeper motivations. When a group of citizens asked themselves, "What do we want most for our community?" people said, "We want to live in a place we can be proud of." The response indicated a yearning for a decent and well-ordered community. It revealed deep-seated convictions rarely mentioned in planning documents or traditional "goals" reports. People don't become attached to a community unless they feel that what is most valuable to them personally is reflected in the issues the community considers most important. To name a problem in public terms, which is not the same as describing it in everyday language, is to identify these concerns.

Who defines a problem and the name it is given determine the number of people who will be available to solve it and the kind of response that will emerge.

Framing Issues for Making Hard Choices

Naming problems so people can see the connection to the things they value is an important first step toward engagement. But focusing on concerns we all share can mask tensions among the many things we hold dear, so problems must also be framed as issues in order to highlight these tensions. We can't act together until we acknowledge conflicting motives and "work through" them. And we don't become fully engaged and take responsibility for what happens in our communities until we make decisions about how we are going to act. Those choices tell us how we can get a handle on problems and what we are and aren't willing to do to address them.

In order for our decisions to be sound, issues must be presented so that we see all our options — as well as where various approaches

to a problem conflict. That doesn't usually happen. Typically, an issue is framed around some plan or solution and the public sees opposing arguments rather than all the available options. Or citizens are overwhelmed by facts that refute other facts, which leads to terminal confusion.

Making choices together not only permits collective action but also promotes accountability. People tend to take more responsibility for what they have chosen, or have had an opportunity to influence, than for what has been decided by others. Despite this self-evident truth, communities sometimes plan for change without providing for any public decision making. Though citizens are often invited to envision the future, they don't necessarily have opportunities to face up to tough decisions about how to get what they want. If those in positions of authority don't imagine the public acting, they won't create space for the public to decide how to act.

The most important choices citizens make are about purpose and direction. Whether arrived at formally and by design or informally and by default, these decisions shape the fate of a community in a way that nothing else does. *A community is the product of its choices.* Making choices together allows people to narrow the gap between what is happening in their communities and what they think *should* be happening.

Choice making is difficult because it inevitably involves us in disagreements over what should be — disagreements not over what is most valuable in the abstract but over what is most valuable when we have to find a way to control health costs, reform the welfare system, or balance economic growth with environmental protection.

People care deeply about a great many things, and their concerns lead to different approaches to a problem, or options for acting. Conflicts inevitably arise because we have no way of being sure which of these concerns should guide us in making a given decision. The conflict is not only among us but also within us individually. When it comes to health, for example, we all want the best care, yet we also want the most affordable care. The choice is a hard one because the better the care technically, the less affordable it is likely to be. Any proposal for dealing with the cost of technically advanced health care runs directly into this predicament.

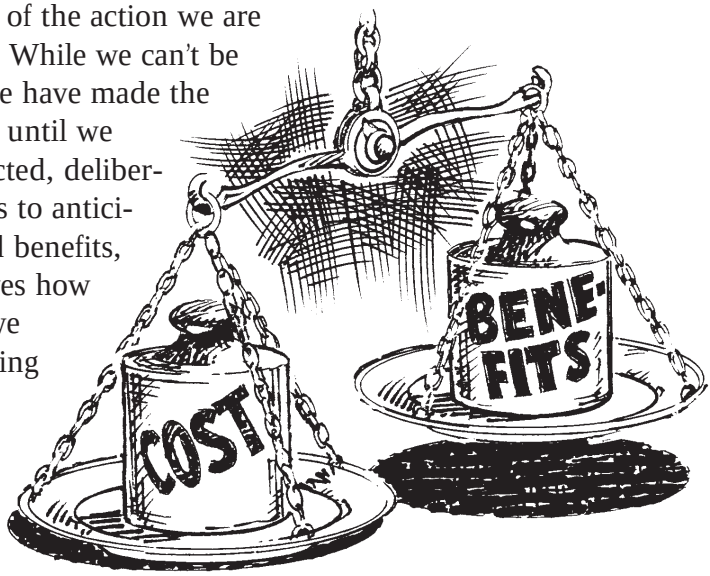
Conflicts like this make choice work difficult. When we face issues squarely, we can't escape the pull and tug of those things most valuable to us. Genuine choice work entails deciding among options, each of which has both positive and negative implications for what we hold dear.

Deliberating to Decide

What are the most effective ways to go about choice work? Making decisions together proceeds best when we use that form of talking and reasoning known as deliberation, or deliberative dialogue. General discussion isn't as effective because it doesn't lead to decisions, and debate tends to center on two options, often polarizing people to the point that they won't work together.

The particular character of deliberative talk comes from the work it is designed to do. If we are to increase the probability that our decisions will be wise, we can't just sound off, argue over solutions, or clarify values. We have to explore and test our ideas as we struggle with hard choices, considering the pros and cons of each option. To deliberate is to weigh the consequences of various approaches much as people used to weigh gold on an old-fashioned scale. What are the costs of doing what we want to do? What are the benefits?

Deliberation increases the likelihood that our decision will be sound by helping us determine whether we are willing to accept the consequences of the action we are about to take. While we can't be certain that we have made the right decision until we have finally acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate costs and benefits, to ask ourselves how high a price we would be willing to pay to get what we want.



Public deliberation is hard work, but it is a very natural process. We have all deliberated privately over such matters as changing jobs. We ask ourselves (and often our family and friends) which options fit best with the things that are most important to us. The difficulty is that we often value more than one thing. Leading a deliberative forum is reminding participants that they have the same kind of work to do on a question facing the community. From that point on, moderators step back and let people engage one another, though they occasionally pose a question or two in order to ensure that the group has considered all the options fairly — including the unpopular ones. At the end, moderators usually ask several questions to find out what the forum has accomplished.

Kettering research has found that people seek a deliberative setting when they are confronting difficult issues. They aren't looking to choose sides and score points; they want a situation where there is respect for ambivalence and appreciation of the gray areas in policy matters. People want free expression of all the emotions associated with politics — without the acrimony that characterizes partisan debate. They like opportunities to learn from one another. Drawing high marks are those gatherings in which people can hold strong views without others contesting what they say. A meeting where participants felt that "we all listened to everybody else's opinion" was also one prompting them to say that "we all got something out of it." And getting something from the exchange is critical. When citizens are facing a difficult problem, they have little patience with discussion for discussion's sake.

Some news organizations share with citizens an interest in how problems are named and issues framed. Aware of a frequent discrepancy between conventional naming and framing and the way the public sees issues and choices, journalists have looked to the community for people's perspectives. They understand that, if citizens don't see their concerns reflected in media stories and if they aren't trying to make choices, then there is little reason for them to read or listen to the news. The work of these journalists is called public, or civic, journalism.

Their organizations might be open to comparing frameworks with those of civic and educational groups or even to a non-binding exercise in joint framing. There have already been cases where news organizations have done stories around publicly framed issues. Community groups have then used the frameworks to structure deliberative forums, and journalists have reported the results. Rather than indicating who said what in the forums, follow-up stories have focused on the outcomes. Where this has happened, communities and news organizations have moved beyond a relationship based on seeking and providing publicity to one based on mutually reinforcing efforts to make issues public.

For more results of the research on public deliberation, see the Kettering Foundation's *Making Choices Together*. You can also find a wide range of issues framed for deliberation in National Issues Forums (NIF) books. Kettering and other research organizations prepare these books in order to understand public thinking on issues of nationwide concern — issues like education, crime, welfare, and health care. NIF books have been used for more than 20 years by thousands of civic and educational organizations that want to learn how deliberative publics deal with tough decisions in their communities. The Kettering Foundation also has material describing the method it uses in naming problems and framing issues. To order NIF books, contact

Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company
4050 Westmark Drive
Dubuque, Iowa 52004
(800) 228-0810
orders@kendallhunt.com

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The Potential in a Deliberative Public

One of the most overlooked opportunities in politics lies in the ability of a diverse group of people to become a public through repeated deliberation. Deliberation is public-making in that it connects people who don't necessarily like or trust one another and who have different and perhaps even conflicting interests — connects them to the extent that they can speak and act together in informed and powerful ways.

Talk That Makes a Difference

Those who try to strengthen their communities by creating more deliberative forums inevitably hear someone say, "I am tired of talking; we need action." Actually, talk is not so cheap. Nor is it the antithesis of action. To the contrary, *talking is a form of acting*. To talk fear is to frighten. To talk reconciliation is to reconcile. Communities that can't talk together can't work together. Deliberation is a distinctive way of talking, which can produce distinctive results.

Generating Public Knowledge/Finding Common Ground for Acting

While the aim of deliberation is to move toward decisions about purpose and direction, it doesn't necessarily end in agreement and it doesn't simply document disagreement. Nor is it a consensus-building technique. Deliberation helps locate the area between agreement and disagreement, which might be called "common ground for public acting." We discover the dimensions of this common ground when we learn, through forums, what people are and aren't willing to do to solve problems, what costs and consequences they will and won't accept, and whether they share a sense of direction.

Some would say that knowing where common ground for acting is located is *public* knowledge because it is knowledge of the public that only the public can create. While our choices should be informed by facts, facts don't tell us what information means to others or what we should do as a community. (Questions of what should be are moral questions, which can't be answered with information about what is.) In order to know how to act together, we have to supplement facts with the understanding we can gain only from one another.

Changing Popular Opinion into Public Judgment

Public knowledge is the beginning of public wisdom, or sound judgment, about how to act. On the basis of outcomes of NIF deliberations across the country, Kettering has been able to document the shift from initial opinions and reactions to more balanced and shared judgment, which noted survey analyst Daniel Yankelovich calls "public judgment." To be sure, the effects of deliberation are not instantaneous. One experience in a forum won't do any more than one trip to a gym. Yet, over time, many people move through what Yankelovich characterizes as the stages of "working through" difficult issues — from uncertainty and denial, to anger and blaming and, finally, to reflective judgment. Communities benefit from understanding where people are in this process because each stage has its own requirements. And they are better served if the decisions they make are influenced more by public judgment than by popular opinion.

Developing a Public Voice

As public knowledge grows, as opinion matures into judgment, and as common ground for acting increases, the public is no longer an abstraction or an amorphous body; it acquires a discernible and informed voice. In communities that have a number of forums, outcomes are sometimes reported by local news media. An annual national telecast called *A Public Voice* shows the effects of deliberation on issues important to the country as a whole. The program calls attention to the differences between what people say on talk shows and in so-called public hearings and what they say after deliberation.

Dealing with Conflict

To repeat what was said earlier, deliberative dialogue doesn't necessarily result in consensus. A public voice isn't one voice; it is the voice of many citizens thinking aloud. Deliberation doesn't eliminate conflicts, certainly not those that grow out of opposing convictions rather than differing material interests. These conflicts can tear a community apart; moral positions can't be negotiated away. But it is precisely in the face of such tensions that deliberation can make one of its most valuable contributions to democracy.

Forums are opportunities to talk *through* issues, not simply *about* them. Just as there is no escaping contradictory pulls and tugs and no escaping the constraints on what we can do, there is no way to avoid the feelings generated by choice work. Even so, we can talk together in ways that help us recognize that the conflicts are not so much between us as opponents as they are among all of us and even within us individually. Making a difficult decision can be a shared moral struggle. Recognizing that helps us work through the strong feelings that inform any such process. Participants in deliberative forums don't change their opinions on issues so much as they change their opinions of other people's opinions. Emotions are tempered by mutual understanding, even when there is serious disagreement.

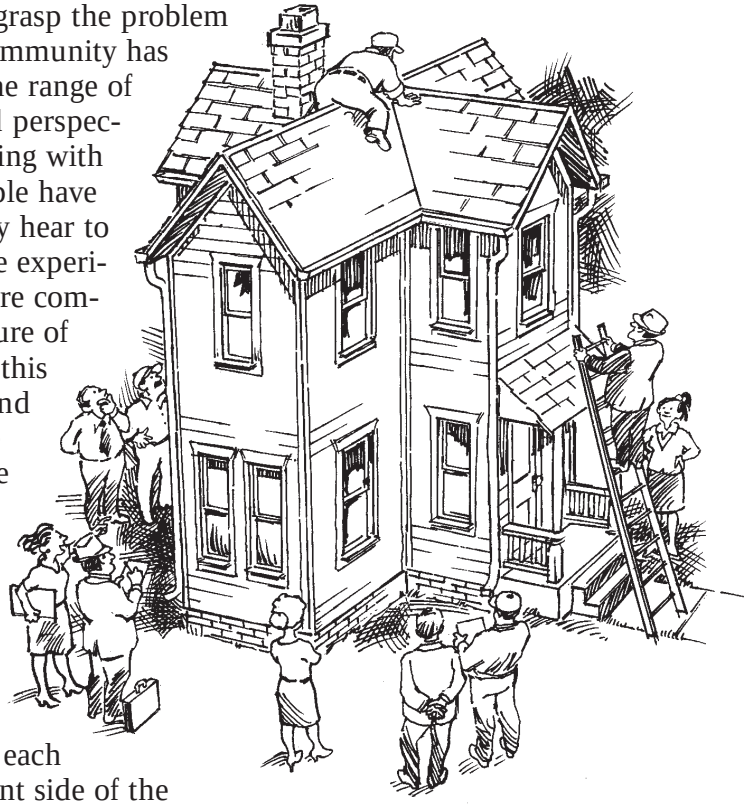
Deliberative Dialogue and Public Acting

Deliberating together in order to make a decision about how to act together changes not only the way people talk but also the way they relate to one another. And ways of relating in decision making carry over into ways of organizing action. Specifically, relationships formed in deliberation can give action public qualities: they can enhance the ability of one effort to complement or reinforce another, they can lower the costs (in time and energy) of transacting civic business, and they can generate the "capital" needed for renewed action when circumstances demand it.

Forming Public Relationships

Relationships formed in a deliberative dialogue are products of the way people come to understand the problem they are dealing with and the way they understand one another. These relationships create new possibilities for acting collectively.

In order to grasp the problem it is facing, a community has to be open to the range of experiences and perspectives citizens bring with them. And people have to use what they hear to integrate diverse experiences into a more comprehensive picture of reality. Imagine this situation: You and your friends are standing outside a building, trying to determine whether to repair it or tear it down. You could separate into subgroups and put each one on a different side of the building to inspect it. When you were ready to make a decision, each person would report on the side he or she had faced. Some might have seen an entrance in good order, others a deteriorating back wall. Although the group as a whole could vote on which point of view to accept, the result would merely reflect which side had been seen by the largest number of people. Alternatively, you and your friends could exchange views, consider what each of you had seen, and then integrate your perspectives into a composite. You could blend many angles of vision into something new — a picture of the entire structure. By synthesizing many perspectives, you would all see the whole afresh. Integrating views would produce a more accurate image of what the building is really like. This seems to be what happens in a deliberative dialogue.



The synthesis can occur because deliberation encourages participants to listen carefully and empathically to others, even those with whom they disagree or whom they don't like. When they do, communication flows easily and moves laterally, not from the top down.

Public deliberation can broaden a community's understanding of the difficulty it is facing. As the scope of the problem becomes clear, more people and organizations can find roles to play in solving it. Even if they don't agree on a common objective, people may come to see their differing interests as interrelated and interdependent. And a sense of direction may emerge.

Creating the Conditions for Public Acting

It isn't difficult to see how ways of relating in making a decision can be helpful in organizing civic action. Drawing on many experiences sets a precedent for making use of diverse talents and resources in a civic venture. Talking with one another eye-to-eye, or laterally, translates into working cooperatively, shoulder-to-shoulder. Enhanced communication in a forum can carry over into enhanced communication in civic work. A sense of direction and an appreciation of interrelated purposes promotes complementary, mutually reinforcing initiatives from different groups in the community. In sum, deliberative decision making can give community action a distinctive character.

To understand how actions that look alike can have very different characters (just as identical twins can have different personalities), consider this hypothetical case: In Oakdale, a generous benefactor built a park, which is maintained by the city's recreation department. It is beautiful and well cared for; people enjoy it. In neighboring Todd Town, a park grew out of a community decision to promote more interaction between children and adults. Citizens built it themselves, drawing on and combining their diverse skills and resources. Short of funds, the city government helped out by turning over land acquired in an urban redevelopment project — in exchange for a promise that several civic associations would provide playground supervisors. Pleased with the new facility, the community decided to organize a baseball team. In their first season the Todd Town Tigers lost every game, but all the kids — actually, more — played the following summer.

The park in Todd Town is called a *public* park, which is exactly what the park in Oakdale is called. In fact, the park in Todd Town is

almost identical physically to the one in Oakdale. Yet it has a different character, which would become evident if you were to hear Todd Towners talk about how they acquired the facility. It is appropriate to call the action taken by people in Todd Town "public" because their efforts had qualities characteristic of a democratic public — they were open, inclusive, uncoerced, cooperative, and self-directing.

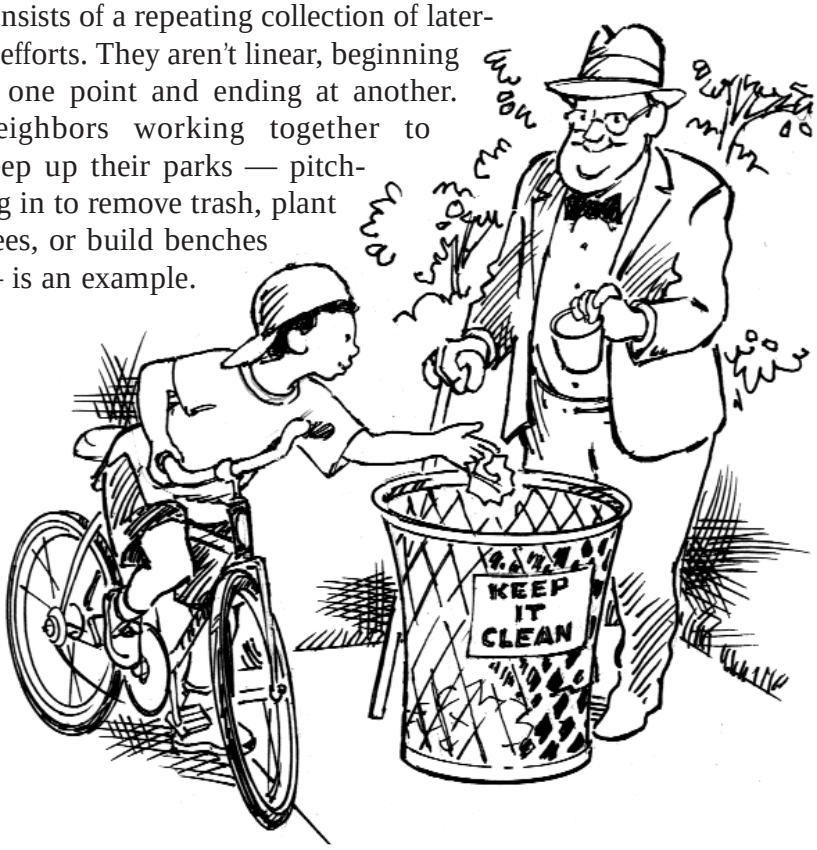
Actually, it would be more accurate to think of what happened in Todd Town as public *acting* rather than public *action* because there were a number of actions that occurred repeatedly. Public acting is a habit of ongoing cooperation among a large, diverse body of citizens who work both with each other and with institutions. They focus on the well-being of the community as a whole more than on particular issues. Their many actions draw strength from the array of capacities in the public, which are alloyed the way metals are combined to make a plate that is stronger than any one of its elements. The more diverse the actors and the more varied their talents, the stronger the acting. The many initiatives that make up public acting aren't merely amassed; they also reinforce and complement each other. Consequently, the whole of the effort is greater than the sum of its parts, making it highly effective.

> While Todd Town is imaginary, a very real Toddtown, in Alabama, recently celebrated the opening of a new community center created through the efforts of its citizens. According to a story in the *Clarke County Democrat* (July 3, 2002), one family contributed the land, a mobile home dealer donated the building, a local minister provided the air conditioning, and others did the electrical work and plumbing.

Economists would say that public acting is also efficient in that its transaction costs are low. Transaction costs are those expenses associated with human interactions. In an economy, they include the costs of getting people to work together. Obviously, the lower the expense involved in giving orders, settling disputes, and the like, the more productive the economy will be. Transaction costs have been shown to be as much a determinant of productivity as the factors usually cited — the cost of labor, capital, and technology.

In a community, transaction costs are determined by habits of working together or not working together. (These habits may also affect the transaction costs of businesses located in the community.) Habits of self-directing, mutually reinforcing cooperation lower both civic and economic costs. After World War II, observers recalled that the trains in both England and Italy had run on schedule. In Italy, they had been on time because Mussolini had ordered them to be punctual; in England, they had been on time because that was the convention. A custom of self-directed acting lowers transaction costs.

Public acting differs structurally from governmental or institutional effort, which usually involves just one action — a program is created or a law is passed. Institutional ventures are uniform, linear, and usually coordinated by some administrative agency. The fire department establishes rules for exiting a building safely. It sends an inspector around from time to time to supervise a safety drill. The exchanges are vertical — from officials down to citizens or, in some cases, from citizens up to officials. Public acting, on the other hand, consists of a repeating collection of lateral efforts. They aren't linear, beginning at one point and ending at another. Neighbors working together to keep up their parks — pitching in to remove trash, plant trees, or build benches — is an example.



Cities and towns where there is little public acting — where everything that is done has to be highly organized and planned in detail — miss the initiative and inventiveness that allow them to be optimally effective. What's more, institutional action often fails to produce results when it isn't reinforced by public acting. Consider the way a good neighborhood watch program helps the police department do its job. Because official interactions are vertical while public 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 political action. (If it were not for the threads crossing one another in the fabric of our clothes, our elbows would come through our shirtsleeves.)

Of all the distinctive characteristics of public acting, none is more important than the ability to generate its own resources for renewal. Public acting produces a form of capital — social or public rather than financial — that communities can draw on when they need to continue acting. Go back to the Oakdale/Todd Town case and imagine what would happen if a tornado destroyed both parks. The people in Oakdale would probably look for another benefactor. Those in Todd Town would likely organize to rebuild their park. They would draw on the public capital generated in building the original park. Public capital consists of relationships formed during the course of working together, habits of interacting, and the memory of a particular way of solving a problem. The more public acting there is, the more the public capital that is generated.

Public acting isn't the product of an administrative plan, nor is it spontaneous or magical. It develops when people create the conditions that promote it. Communities can begin to establish those conditions by naming problems in public terms (so people will get involved) and by identifying a range of options for responding (so people can begin to make choices about how to act). The conditions become even more favorable when there is a deliberative forum where people can deepen their understanding of the issues, as well as of one another, and where they can make decisions about purpose and direction.

Another Way for Citizens to Relate to Officials

A deliberative public has the potential to improve unproductive relationships with government officials and leaders of community institutions. Deliberation gives citizens things they can bring to the table — essential public judgment (which officeholders can't get from any other source) and the capacity to reinforce institutional actions with public acting. As indicated in Chapter 3, there are some situations where officials are open to working with a deliberative public — for instance, when limits have to be faced and there is no consensus on how to make trade-offs. Several communities (Panama City, Florida, is an example) report that officeholders are taking advantage of what a deliberative public has to offer by regularly sitting in on forums.

Citizens have to be aware of the obstacles officials sometimes face when they do listen to the public — obstacles in the media, in the ranks of fellow officials, and in interest groups. The media may criticize officeholders for not taking strong positions, for listening rather than acting. They may have trouble working with other officials who think they are too candid with citizens. And they may be attacked by interest groups for deliberating openly rather than negotiating directly with them. Special interests have also objected to naming problems in public terms rather than around their preferred solutions.

People not in office who don't appreciate these problems may fail to help officeholders who would genuinely like a more fruitful way of working with them. Yet, if the often counterproductive relationship between the public and its institutions is to change, citizens will have to reach out. Those in deliberative forums have a powerful vehicle at their disposal — a kind of talk well suited to promoting a different way of relating.

Deliberative forums create settings for better exchanges than so-called public hearings — provided, of course, that citizens let officeholders really participate, not by making speeches or taking positions, but by joining in the exploration of a range of options and their potential consequences.

Imagine an official who attends a forum on the condition that he or she be allowed to see how citizens deal with tough choices before

explaining how the "forum" of the legislature, city council, or school board has dealt with the same trade-offs. Imagine a setting where citizens don't ask officials, "What are you going to do for us?" but instead draw them into their deliberations by saying, in effect: "Here are our experiences with this issue, here are what we see as the conflicts among the options, and here is how we have tried to resolve those tensions. Now tell us what your experiences are, how you see the conflicts, and which direction you would take in light of them." Conversations like these would certainly change the relationships between citizens and officeholders from what they are today.

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The Power of Political Ideas

Changing the way a community goes about its business requires a change in the prevailing mind-set about politics. Conventional thinking produces conventional results, and at times a community needs something else. Notions of how things get done aren't easily changed, but they are learned and can be modified over time.

Standing in the way of a concept of politics that has citizens at its core is a widely shared perception that, while citizens may have to act in order for the political system to improve, they can't — most don't have the required time, will, or information. From this perspective, encouraging people to become a public will lead only to hasty decisions and unruly protest. Even citizens themselves, who believe that only they can bring about fundamental change of the political system, sometimes despair of their ability to act because of doubts about fellow citizens.

Different Experiences, Different Ideas

What prompts Americans to reexamine the conventional wisdom, to consider the possibility that people are willing and able to become responsible citizens? Kettering research has found that those who have participated regularly in some form of public work tend to have more confidence both in other Americans and in their collective ability. They learn what is possible in politics from the experience of common work. Citizens in communities that have held deliberative forums for more than a decade report that deliberation has changed individuals, civic organizations, even their communities. They say they don't practice politics the way they did previously because the

public is back in their mental picture of how things get done. This new perspective begins to take shape when people realize that participating in forums has changed them personally; that convinces them that deliberation may be able to change the community as well.

As one of the most comprehensive studies of deliberation concludes, "People learn that they are capable of understanding complex issues, saying reasonable things about them, and reaching reasonable judgments about what to do." When people deliberate, they see that there is no faceless "them" to blame, that problems arise out of conflicting motives and actions. Deliberation prompts people to realize that they have contributed to many of their communities' problems. And that leads them to conclude that they must also have the power to help solve these problems.

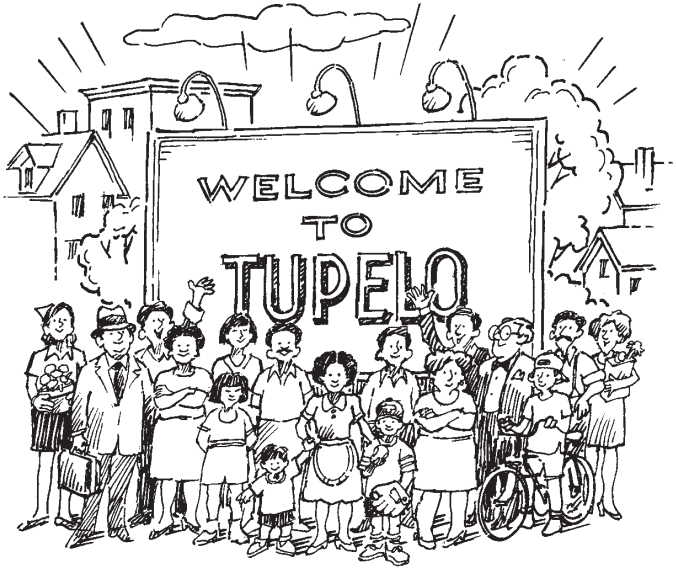
The Mind-Set of High Achievers

Of all the experiences that give Americans confidence that they don't have to be helpless victims of the political system, none is more powerful than discovering that they are public beings and recognizing that, rather than being "out there," politics is an integral feature of everyday life. Many of the participants in NIF deliberations have had this experience. They have found that what others consider a phantom public is, in fact, real and tangible. And they have learned how to create public space (which doesn't necessarily have a street address) by arranging opportunities for ongoing deliberation.

These insights can eventually come together to form a different mental picture of how politics might work. When enough people in a community have a new image of political possibilities, the change can be profound. Here is a case in point:

Tupelo, Mississippi, was once the poorest town in the poorest county in the poorest state of the union. Small (its population is now about 30,000) and located in rural Lee County, Tupelo had no special advantages: no large body of water, no nearby metropolitan center, and no government installation with a large federal budget. Until 1980, there wasn't even a four-lane highway within 75 miles. Today, it is a progressive community with a per capita income close to that of Atlanta, and its prosperity extends into the surrounding area. During one twelve-year period, Lee County added over a thousand new industrial jobs and even more service positions annually.

According to Vaughn Grisham Jr., who has spent the better part of his career studying Tupelo, a large portion of the people there have a strong sense of community (of what they share) as well as a willingness to take responsibility. The citizenry owns the town's major civic projects; participation levels are high. Tupelo has a rich array of organizations and networks that provide opportunities for people to define and redefine their problems and make decisions about how to act. In fact, small-group decision making about what citizens can do to improve the place where they live seems to be one of the practices that has given Tupelo its distinctive character.



Of course, Tupelo isn't a perfect town. The local development foundation has been compared to the political "bosses" who controlled local governments at the turn of the last century. Some prominent citizens don't believe in public participation and think decisions should be in the hands of a small elite. Most, however, are convinced that the upper tier of leadership has to create even stronger ties to rank-and-file citizens because, as the town grows, new people and new problems create new challenges. On the whole, Tupelo has enjoyed a flourishing public life, which has been able to reproduce itself decade after decade.

You might ask whether the strong economy isn't the reason for this town's strong public life. Obviously, each reinforces the other. But, when Robert Putnam investigated a similar question in his study of prosperity and good government in north central Italy, he found that the quality of civic life rather than the economy made the differ-

ence, that the area was not civil because it was rich but rich because it was civil. The people of Tupelo would agree. They say their prosperous economy has been the result of community development; their economic strategies have been public-making strategies.

Grisham found a distinctive mind-set in Tupelo, which is expressed in a series of "guiding principles," among them: "Never turn the work over to agencies that don't involve citizens"; "Build teams and use a team approach"; "See everyone as a resource."

Community-Changing Perspectives

Here are some additional community-changing precepts:

The Public Has Untapped Capacity

John McKnight, a student of community organization from the Chicago area, helps explain why it is so important to see people as assets rather than only as needs. If communities are viewed as the sum of citizens' capacities, involving the public becomes an effective strategy rather than merely an acknowledgment of people's right to participate.

McKnight contends that everyone, even those with limitations, should be seen as a glass half full, not half empty. Labeling people with the names of their deficiencies (i.e., their needs) causes us to miss what is most important to them — opportunities to "express and share their gifts, skills, capacities, and abilities." The only way communities can become stronger, he believes, is by harnessing the sum of everyone's abilities. That precept has evidently guided the citizens of Delray Beach, Florida, whose recent civic projects have sought to "err on the side of inclusion." These projects have succeeded because they haven't left a lot of people on the sidelines.

Power Is Innate and Renewable

A community's perception of power is also a crucial element of its collective mind-set. Power is typically seen as control over scarce resources or as authority, that is, a legal license to act. Particular people and institutions are thought to have power, while others are seen and, worse, see themselves as powerless. That leads to the widely shared belief that those without power can be empowered only by the

powerful. Yet, as Mary Parker Follett pointed out many years ago, power granted by others isn't genuine power; no one can really empower someone else because true power — the ability to act effectively — grows out of people's unique experiences and talents.

Another view recognizes the power that results from people's ability to band together to do shared public work. This kind of power originates in personal commitments and in the promises people make to one another — to come to a meeting, to join in building a park, to protect the lake on which they have homes. Citizens generate this power, and it is renewable.

Seeing power as innate leads to the conviction that "local people must solve local problems," which has been another guiding principle of high-achieving communities. Their citizens have also said, "We are the solution," echoing an old song of the civil rights movement: "We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For." These expressions are affirmations of responsibility, evidence of people owning their problems.

Leadership Is "Leaderfulness"

Ideas about leadership are another important part of a community's mind-set. Both communities that work and those that don't may have able leaders. What stands out in places like Tupelo is not so much the qualifications of the leaders as their number, where they are located and, most of all, the way they interact with others. Forget any suggestion that strong publics don't have strong leaders — they do. Nothing happens spontaneously; some courageous souls always have to step out first. Leaders, however, can be as vigorous in public-making as they are in demonstrating personal courage.

Astonishingly, Tupelo has ten times more people providing leadership than other communities of comparable size. It is "leaderful," with everyone expected to provide some measure of initiative. And its leaders function not as gatekeepers but as door openers, bent on widening participation. They also insist that others take ownership. Vaughn Grisham quotes one of Tupelo's strongest leaders, who was always saying to fellow citizens, "If you want a better community, you will have to do the work yourself."

Traditional leaders are often preoccupied with protecting turf or status and maintaining strict control over who is permitted to act. Those in leaderful communities are busy marshaling resources for change. They have a comprehensive outlook and a long time frame, which keep them from rushing to action in order to defuse one crisis after another. They have been described as crosscutting, or generalized, because they are concerned with the community as a whole and keep their focus on the larger picture. With so many providing leadership, these leaders are not clearly distinguishable from other citizens. There is no leadership class set apart from "followers."

A Story of Change

One compelling story of fundamental change comes from Chile. It begins with a successful plebiscite calling for free elections in a country long ruled by an authoritarian regime. The plebiscite represented a momentous political victory, won against overwhelming odds. The "campaign manager" for the effort was the owner of a small business. Recalling what had happened, he said the campaign had been designed not to change a government but to change a "community" (that is, the country).

The reformers rejected the goal of overthrowing the administration in power because they knew that one revolution would inevitably lead to another. The challenge was to create a political climate where revolutions weren't needed. Those who wanted immediate action were obviously very critical of this objective. But it became a shared goal following lengthy deliberations in which participants made life-and-death choices.

Changing a country is a tall order. The strategy was to start with a series of small steps, which would allow people to reflect and learn from their experiences. The reformers filed thousands of human rights suits in the courts. They seldom prevailed, but their primary purpose was not to win lawsuits; it was to show the need for a higher standard of justice. Numerous political parties were organized. They all ran candidates in the elections, who were rarely successful. Again, the real purpose was not to win elections but to create a conversation about what the country should be.

In filing lawsuits and organizing election campaigns, citizen organizations and nongovernmental institutions learned to work together. Churches, unions, and universities reached out to each other, and new boundary-spanning organizations were created. The objective was to build a civil infrastructure for the country. In the view of the reform leaders, having numerous civic organizations was not enough; they had to be linked to each other in a civic network.

The campaign leaders were under no illusions; they knew their work would be difficult and would take time. Even winning a plebiscite that mandated free elections didn't guarantee success. The reformers understood that building a new political community would be a continuing challenge.

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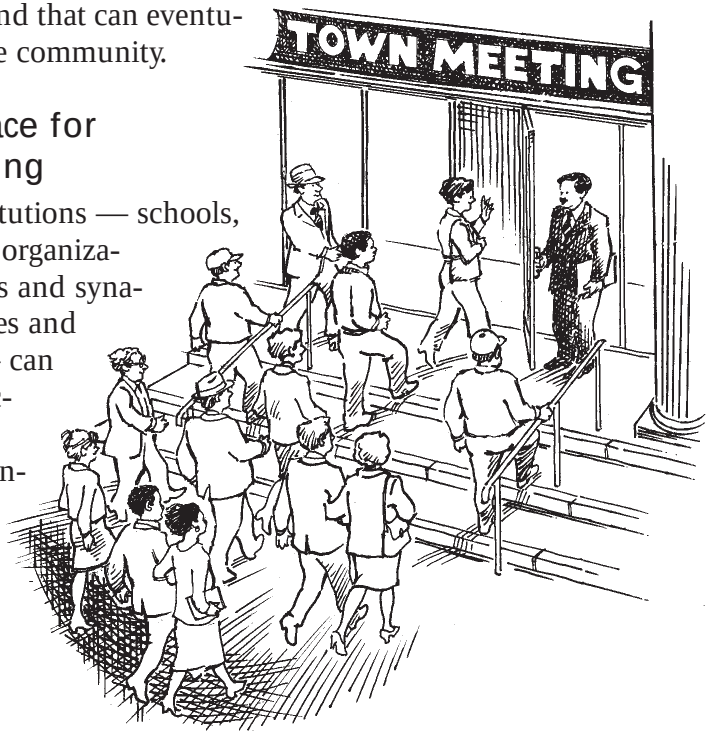
What Can We Do?

While communities in the United States aren't faced with replacing a military dictatorship, many are looking for strategies to bring about fundamental change. How might they begin to strengthen the public so that citizens have more control over their future and so that civic life has the qualities people value?

Given what research has shown about the power of small-group decision making in deliberative forums to open the door to change, they might start by creating opportunities for citizens to make choices together on the issues that concern them most. Changing the way people talk can change the way they relate to each other and to their problems — and that can eventually change the community.



Provide Space for Public-Making

Many institutions — schools, libraries, civic organizations, churches and synagogues, colleges and universities — can provide public-making space. This is an essential part of a community's civic infrastructure,

which is as important as its physical infrastructure — roads, utilities, and the like.

One of the distinctive features of a high-achieving community is the amount of effort that goes into building civic infrastructure — finding places to do public work and creating channels of intracommunity communication. At the ground level, numerous ad hoc associations (local development councils, neighborhood alliances) open doors so that people can get involved. Although conventional wisdom assumes there are no voluntary organizations in areas where people are consumed with day-to-day survival, John Kretzmann and John McKnight found more than 300 of them in economically impoverished areas such as the Grand Boulevard community on Chicago's East Side. Elsewhere, informal associations like those Alexis de Tocqueville found in the nineteenth century provide space for public deliberation. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, for example, a loose alliance of civic, educational, and religious organizations convenes the community to deliberate on one or two issues annually, and has been doing so since 1981.

The next tier of the infrastructure consists of formal civic clubs, leagues, and nongovernmental organizations, which usually have offices with signs on the doors, staffs, and budgets. Some of these groups serve as umbrellas, or boundary spanners, encouraging communitywide exchange, developing a sense of interrelatedness, building networks, and promoting resource sharing. The mission of boundary spanners has been described simply as "connecting people." One such organization in Arkansas convened assemblies of citizens to work on issues ranging from education to economic development.

Unlike blue-ribbon commissions and coalitions, boundary spanners also differ from advisory committees, partnerships, and advocacy groups:

- Membership is not necessarily large, but it is open. It is inclusive and diverse but nonrepresentational. Though everyone surely has particular concerns, people don't participate as delegates from an area, group, body of interest, or point of view.

- The focus is broad, not on specific issues but on the well-being of the community as a whole.

- The time horizon is long. Relationship builders put a premium on patience and staying power.

- Problems are viewed as complex and interconnected. These organizations don't respond with narrowly focused projects; having a comprehensive outlook helps them resist pressure for quick fixes.

- Building community capacity and strengthening civic infrastructure are seen as legitimate outcomes, or "results."

- Involvement is personal. People usually get a chance to "do politics" in a hands-on fashion. Staffs are small to nonexistent, and citizens do most of the work.

Boundary-spanning organizations play many roles. They are reservoirs for collecting political will as well as channels for moving civic energy from one issue to another and from one group to another. By bridging historic divisions, they build a civic infrastructure that strengthens the political fabric of the community.

Become a Learning Community

The spirit in which community change is undertaken seems to be as important as what is done. Time and again, Kettering researchers have heard about a promising new venture, have called to find out what happened, and have learned that "there were some disappointments and we quit." In other cases, communities teach themselves to fail intelligently, that is, to use their experiences to decide what to do next. Since they are learning, the prospect for long-term change is favorable. A spirit of experimentation and learning seems to be critical to sustained effort.

As might be expected, there are obstacles to developing such a spirit of experimentation and learning. One is a preoccupation with measuring success; another is the common practice of copying model programs from other cities and towns. Just as rushing to fix the most obvious problems interferes with changing a community, so does imitation.

This is not to say that people can't learn from looking at what works elsewhere; high-achieving communities are constantly studying others. They are voracious learners, like students who read everything the teacher assigns, go to the library to see what is there, and then bring two new books to the next class. Yet they don't search for

models to replicate. Some community leaders warn that "imitation is limitation." It interferes with the civic learning that is essential to a community's success in adapting to changing circumstances.

Politics as usual often precludes such civic learning. Community leaders may take months to study issues and make decisions among themselves yet allow the public little opportunity to learn. They spend their time amassing facts that will convince people of the merits of their proposals, and they put their energies into doing a "real selling job." It seems obvious that less-informed people aren't going to arrive at a decision more quickly than the best informed. Perhaps civic leaders who use this strategy assume that citizens will readily accept conclusions reached by those in positions of authority. If so, it is an assumption worth reconsidering.

Learning to Redefine Problems

Citizens in a community that has organized itself to learn come to see their problems in a different light. For example, many economic development programs have begun by trying to attract industries to a given area because the community problem is initially defined as a need for jobs. Later, however, after much reflection, some civic leaders recognize that they really want greater prosperity, not just more jobs (which may or may not bring prosperity).

Still other communities — Tupelo is an example — have learned that the community itself is an economic resource. Even though they may not be aware that patterns of social interaction (transactions) are a major determinant of prosperity, they understand that, if the community works as a community, so will the businesses located there. They redefine their economic problem as a need for community development.

Relearning Interests

Conventional politics makes much of self-interests, as well it should. Although we might like to believe that these can be displaced by a nobler common interest, they usually aren't. And maybe they don't have to be. Not all self-interests are selfish; and, what is more, self-interests change over time. As our sense of self evolves with experience, so does our self-interest.

In the process of making choices, for instance, citizens often reconsider and broaden the definition of their self-interests. Studies have found that, when faced with a difficult decision on a complex issue, people don't try to simplify the matter, as is usually assumed. They do just the opposite. They expand their focus and look for connections; they reexamine many of their concerns as they take into account their varied experiences. This is the way they learn.

As one participant in community choice work explained, "You begin to see your interests as broadening in relationships with other people, particularly as you begin to have serious conversations and you begin to identify with other people's experiences." When others have been asked what stimulated them to broaden their interests, they have told similar stories — of a neighbor who shared her concerns about water rights, of a young person who asked tough questions about the environment, of a relative stranger in a public forum who added a different perspective on a matter that many participants considered inconsequential.

Draw on the Work of Others

There are workshops on deliberative forums and related topics at Public Policy Institutes (PPIs) across the country, where you can meet people with a public perspective on politics. Log on to the National Issues Forums website (www.nifi.org) for an up-to-date list of these institutes and then get in touch with one near you to find out whether its curriculum suits your purposes.

There are a number of recent studies of different ways to understand communities. Those cited below were used in preparing this publication.

The second edition of David Mathews' *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) describes public politics in some detail, and a new chapter reports on the role of deliberative forums. The book also examines the historical and philosophical roots of America's experiment in self-government.

Real-life stories of public-making, such as the one about the floating-homes community on Lake Union, are told by Harry C. Boyte in *Community Is Possible: Repairing America's Roots* (New York:

Harper and Row, 1984). Boyte and Nancy N. Kari introduced the concept of "public work" in *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

The classic reference on "wicked" problems is Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169. Ronald Heifetz characterizes different types of problems in *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994).

For more complete accounts of the effects of public deliberation, see Doble Research Associates, *Responding to the Critics of Deliberation* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1996), and Steve Farkas and Will Friedman, with Ali Bers, *The Public's Capacity for Deliberation* (New York: Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation, 1995). Daniel Yankelovich explains the difference between public opinion and public judgment in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991). His latest book is *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

Vaughn L. Grisham Jr., in *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999), describes the public life of a town that used small-group decision making to begin the process of changing itself. For a discussion of public capacities, see John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, Ill.: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, 1993).

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Words Worth Keeping in Mind

We can "do politics" by the way we live every day in our communities, by the way we perform our jobs, even by the way we talk at the coffee shop. But, have no doubt, choice work is challenging and public work is hard.

Those who do the work of citizens often tell us about some quotation they have found useful in keeping them on track. They find encouragement in the statements of those who have faced similar challenges. Among the most frequently mentioned is this response of Thomas Jefferson to critics:

> If we think them [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

The struggle to live democratically has a long history. One of the most eloquent commentaries on the meaning of democracy dates from the fifth century B.C., when Athenian statesman Pericles explained:

> Our constitution . . . favors the many instead of the few, this is why it is called a democracy. . . . Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for, unlike any other nation, [we regard] him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, . . . and instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any action at all.

America's Revolutionary generation had a similar vision when it decided that the colonies should sever their ties to England and become an independent nation. Reflecting on the many months devoted to making that fateful choice, John Adams seems to have understood the distinction between popular opinion and public judgment:

> Time has been given for the whole People, maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their Judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing it in News Papers and Pamphletts, by debating it, in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private Conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the 13, have now adopted it, as their own Act.—This will cement the Union, and avoid those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned, by such a Declaration Six Months ago.

No statement of determination to ensure that the American creed remain democratic is more compelling than Abraham Lincoln's at Gettysburg:

> We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The connection between democracy and community was posited by John Dewey:

> Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighboring community. . . . Whatever the future may have in store, one thing is certain. Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.

Dewey's insights were amplified by Mary Parker Follett. She argued that our instinct for democracy is rooted in a desire for wholeness and mutual support:

> We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness; we get wholeness only through reciprocal relations, through infinitely expanding reciprocal relations.

Nearly everyone quotes this assertion of Alexis de Tocqueville:

> The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.

But no one has understood the doubts and frustrations that citizens have to overcome better than Margaret Mead, who wrote these words of encouragement:

> Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Kettering Foundation