

The

ORGANIZATION-FIRST

Approach

HOW PROGRAMS CROWD OUT COMMUNITY

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About The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation helps people in communities make good on their urge to do good. We seek nothing less than to spark fundamental change in American public life—to strengthen the conditions whereby people can tap into their own potential to make good things happen and join together to build a common future. The Harwood Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works within a long tradition of small, catalytic, and public-spirited organizations in American history that have sought to improve public life and politics.

About the Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions in this publication, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.



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Preface

This report echoes themes from a long line of Harwood Institute research efforts and initiatives and presents a conundrum for anyone who seeks to make a difference in public life. Just when leaders and organizations need to turn outward toward their communities, they turn inward toward their organizations.

The dominant focus becomes their own programs, strategic planning, fund-raising, internal board matters, branding, and other related activities. It is in this realm that leaders believe they can exert the most control and where they feel most confident in their abilities.

Other research and initiatives we have undertaken clearly show that the more leaders and organizations try to turn outward and focus on the communities in which they work, the more they reach for inward practices for guidance about what to do. The result is a cycle that binds them ever closer to a posture of inwardness.

And yet, it is within our communities where people live, where the aspirations and challenges we seek to address reside, and where we must marshal resources and public will to make a difference.

The work of The Harwood Institute addresses the fundamental issue raised in this report: what does it take to turn outward so we can create hope and change?

RICHARD C. HARWOOD

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INTRODUCTION

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation has spent years working to better understand how community engagement fits into the work of a wide range of civic and public organizations. We have written a number of reports on this topic, including many for the Kettering Foundation.

In this study, the Kettering Foundation asked us to examine a diverse set of intermediary organizations—those organizations that play a critical role in the dissemination of information, advocacy, technical support, funding, and “sector-bridging” rather than providing direct services to communities and individuals.

The foundation wanted to know how these organizations approach community engagement in general and deliberation in particular. In addition to these questions the foundation sought to learn:

- ▶ How intermediary organizations conceive of their relationship with the public
- ▶ What constitutes their notion of engagement and where deliberation fits into their work
- ▶ What names organizations give their engagement work, and
- ▶ What specific steps organizations are willing to take when it comes to this kind of work

Key Insights

It could be said that the essence of this report is a simple idea: organizations of different size, type, and scope of work face a common challenge in seeing the relevance of engagement to their work and, more importantly, their mission.

What is noteworthy is that despite their impulses and aspirations to undertake and sustain engagement, these organizations and leaders find themselves enveloped in a profound and airtight gestalt of inwardness, planning, and professionalism.

In short, what we learned is that engagement for these leaders is usually defined in terms of the needs and interests of their organizations, and not those of the community.

In addition to the pressure of inwardness, language also creates a barrier to change. For instance, when we spoke of “engagement” or “deliberation,” almost any activity an organization undertook involving convening leaders, facilitating discussions or gathering input was considered an apt example. In this case, language itself becomes a barrier to discussion let alone to pursuing a more robust engagement path.

While several of the organizations we followed seek to take a more community-oriented approach by looking at engagement from a community perspective rather than through an organizational lens, doing so is difficult and runs counter to the dominant trend in the field. The expectations, funding, incentives, and measures for organizations and their leaders are geared toward implementing programs, delivering services, and representing constituencies. For these reasons, community engagement in general—and deliberation in particular—is not a top priority for most organizations.

What we find is an organization-first approach to engagement, fueled by organizational pressures to look inward rather than to turn toward the community.

Note about Terms

In the context of this report we view deliberation—people coming together to consider issues and weigh choices and trade-offs—as one approach among others for civic engagement. In our discussions with organizational leaders, the definition of civic engagement encompassed community conversations, community meetings, informal conversation with the public and, for some of these leaders, may also have included activities such as volunteering.

Organization of the Report

This report is divided into four sections to illuminate why public deliberation is not integral to the work of most intermediary organizations:

I. Organizational Success Is Priority One. This section explains how and why organizations focus on their own needs and interests and why community-oriented engagement is rarely on that list.

II. The Organization-First Approach. This section outlines the engagement path described by organization leaders. We compare it to the natural rhythms of engagement that people experience, as revealed by previous Harwood research.

III. Deliberation Is Too Risky. In this section, we review the reasons why organizations shy away from deliberation as a form of engagement—and why they see it as too risky to undertake.

IV. Barriers to a Community Orientation. In this final section, we look at five common challenges facing organizations that want to shift from an “organization-first” orientation to community-oriented engagement.

In each section, we include boxes highlighting the perspectives of leaders involved in this research. These perspectives illuminate views that differ from the prevailing point of view in the report, or add nuance to insights revealed in a particular section. We also provide occasional insights from past Harwood Institute reports prepared for the Kettering Foundation.

Research Approach

This report is based on a multifaceted research approach. Beginning in 2006, The Harwood Institute entered into ongoing conversations and working relationships with 10 intermediary organizations and their leaders. Some of these organizations work at a national level, while others are state based and some are local. See the Appendix for descriptions of these groups.

The second phase of the research included in-depth interviews with 10 leaders of these organizations as well as a leader from a youth organization added for additional perspective.

Over nearly two years we observed the public work of the organizations and held numerous conversations about engagement with organization leaders. This report is based in part on these two years of observation and conversation.

The final phase of the research included convening leaders from six of the organizations for a daylong conversation to clarify our observations and test the insights emerging from this work.

Another Perspective Engagement Is Not for Us

While most organization leaders we interviewed talk about community engagement efforts from The Organization-First perspective, some leaders said their organizations have made the explicit choice not to do engagement work.

“There was a time when we thought we should do community engagement,” one leader of a constituent-based organization said. She went on to explain that her organization considered the idea because so many people talk about it as the “right thing to do. But over time we realized that’s not our role,” she added. “People [our members and ‘allies’] expect us to represent their views.”



Part 1

ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS IS PRIORITY ONE

The organization leaders we interviewed consistently expressed deep and passionate concern for the communities in which they work and for the people in those communities. But, for these leaders their intentions, aspirations, and operational foci are not necessarily in alignment. The organizations we examined defined and set priorities for engagement based on the needs of the organization. First and foremost in their minds was the health and vibrancy of their organizations. These leaders viewed engagement as valuable in helping advance their organizations' agendas. Engagement was seldom described as a core component of what it takes for a community to move itself forward.

Few of the leaders with whom we spoke would draw these distinctions. The distinctions only became clear over the course of our conversations and in relationship to The Harwood Institute's ongoing work with many of these groups.

Stability Comes First

The top priority for most of these leaders was ensuring that their organizations were well governed, managed, staffed, and funded. The national organizations we interviewed also focused on ensuring that their state and local affiliates were stable and self-sustaining. Stability as an organizational goal cannot be overemphasized; stability often defined success for many organization leaders.

None of these leaders saw community engagement as a core competency necessary to ensure organizational stability.

"My priority is to help our state organizations develop their core functions," said the leader of one national organization. Asked to name core functions, she replied, "Having a business plan to establish resources, 501(c)(3) status, board [recruiting], that sort of thing."

Another national-organization leader described core competencies for their affiliates similarly: "Board management, defined programs, fund-raising."

Internal operations are the predominant frame of reference for leaders of locally based organizations. As one leader of a local grant-making organization said, "My first priority when I got here was to make sure we have the right people on staff." He further explained that he had to do this before he could even think about engagement.

Organization leaders value sustainability, particularly stable funding, above all other goals. "I need to make sure that we and our affiliates are healthy for the long term," said one leader. "If some of our affiliates are not stable we need to help them close." He went on to explain that the key variable is an adequate funding base.

When asked what is required to build a stable organization, another leader said, "You've got to build up a cache of successful programs so you can keep funds coming in." Activities perceived to be beyond this scope do not warrant significant attention.

Role Defined by Programs, Services, and Constituents

Asked about the role they play in communities, most leaders describe the programs they implement, services they provide, and constituents they represent; few include engagement as one of the roles they play. As one organization leader said, “We’re a mission-driven, highly-focused organization. We can’t be all things to a community. We’ve learned that if we are going to succeed we can’t stray too far from our charge.” “We’re a program organization,” another leader explained, “We have a very specific goal. We work with communities that want to adopt our programs!”

Programmatic readiness is one of the main criteria that many of the organizations used when thinking about communities. Readiness is defined through an organizational lens—is the community ready to adopt the organization’s program or services? If a community is not ready, these leaders say, then there is little incentive to further engage the community, at least until the environment to implement their programs becomes more favorable.

Many organizations adopt a “program readiness” lens as a matter of survival. “We don’t have the time to be anywhere except where the community’s ready to go,” explained one organization leader whose group was going through a tremendous growth spurt and whose staff was feeling stretched thin. One organization leader reinforced this notion: “We don’t push communities too hard.” He explained that his organization’s strategy is to just “keep in touch” with people until the prospects for getting a program up and running looks good.

Still, there were some grant-making organizations that described their role in ways that transcended specific programs. “We learned that communities need to work on issues they care about not issues we care about,” said one leader from a national funding organization. But even these funding organizations often use specific issue and constituent parameters as a way to focus their work. “Our goal is to help people who historically have lacked power,” said the

same leader. She explained that their first priority is to help their target constituents address essential needs before they consider other types of engagement.

Improving the overall civic health of communities by developing new norms for public life, including increased public discourse, are not prominent on these leaders’ organizational agendas. Rather, they tend to think in terms of solving defined problems and helping specific groups of people.

Funding Reinforces The Organization-First Approach

Many of the organization leaders told us that their funding is tied almost exclusively to program expansion and implementation, so funding priorities often determine organizational focus. They

Another Perspective

Do We Even Like the Public?

One leader raised another possibility that may explain why many organizations are not keen to embrace deliberation. “Many of the people who work in the social sector don’t like the public,” she said.

She went on to explain that many people in the public and social sector are drawn to their work because of injustices they experienced or injustices they perceive others must endure. Further, the community or, at least, powerful members of the community, are perceived to have tolerated and even perpetuated these injustices.

“Why would you engage someone you don’t respect?” she asked rhetorically, expressing the perspective of people she knows who work in the public and social sector. She added that there is a mind-set among some service providers that the greater good is better served by denying a voice to those who perpetuate injustices.

develop staff as program managers, specifically because their funding stream requires them to deliver on programs. They reproduce programs across communities because funders say they want to replicate “successful initiatives” from one community to the next. “There are few grant RFPs [Requests for Proposals] for engagement or community building work,” said one organization leader. “It is very difficult to develop capacities [engagement] when funding is all about the delivery of programs.”

These financial incentives often narrow or define the role that organization leaders believe they can afford to play, or should play, in communities. As one leader put it, “We’re not really in a position to play a broader community building role. No one wants to fund us to do that.”

Organizations with a successful model feel additional pressure to further grow these programs—and to do it quickly. “We’re hot right now,” explained one leader representing a youth-oriented organization. “People want to fund us to come to their communities. The feeling in our

Another Perspective

What We Have in Common

One leader whose work focuses on education and school issues expressed a great deal of frustration with her experiences with engagement.

“What’s changing?” she asked. She described several experiences in which efforts were made to make plans for action but that, in her diverse and divisive community, engagement processes keep breaking down.

“We need to spend a lot more time understanding our commonalities,” she said. “All parents really do want the same things,” but, she added, you would never know it if you only listened to conversations at the meetings she attends.

organization is that we may not stay hot forever —so we’ve got to grow!” He concluded by saying, “I’m not sure if we’re a good fit in every community, but the money says ‘Go!’”

Some organization leaders even suggested that they feel bullied by funders to expand their programs and services whether or not a given community is a good fit for the program. One leader of a group working on health-care

Some organization leaders even suggested that they feel bullied by funders to expand their programs and services whether or not a given community is a good fit for the program.

issues said, “We don’t really even ask if our programs are right for a community. Instead, we ask, ‘Where do we think we can get our programs adopted?’” His organization was under a mandate from a key funder to reach specific expansion quotas, which became the ultimate priority for the organization rather than making an impact on the communities they serve.

No Swelling Demand for Engagement

Simply put, the organization leaders we interviewed do not feel pressure from their boards, funders, community leaders, or the public-at-large to do more work on engagement. As one leader explained, “How much are people really calling for an organization to bring people together? I don’t hear anyone saying, ‘We need an organization to do this!’”

But leaders do feel intense pressure to get things done in terms of their programs and services. This pressure comes

from both inside and outside the organization. “When we bring people (in communities) together their first question often is, how will this (program or service) make things better?” said the leader of an organization working in communities across the country. She later explained that her organization must demonstrate a track record of concrete results to gain credibility with the public. Another leader echoed this view, “What brings people to the table is solving problems or something very practical. That’s what it’s really about.” For this leader, and many others, engagement was not central to producing results.

Indeed, many of the leaders described how difficult it is to demonstrate a connection between community engagement and their impact in communities or on the issues people care about. “Until we can show impact,” said one leader, “no one cares. It’s just process.”

Facing intense internal and external pressure to deliver results, and with little demand for engagement, these leaders see engagement as a priority only when it is part of a larger strategy to advance the organization’s own agenda. Ultimately, engagement was seen as extraneous.

Leaders Are Evaluated by Accomplishments

The way leaders are evaluated further promotes their intense focus on their organizational needs and interests, even when both are out of sync with their community. Several leaders with whom we spoke explained that grant and board evaluations rarely include the quality of community engagement, or whether any engagement occurred at all. One leader said, “I’m not evaluated by how well I involve people. Keeping my job depends on what we get done.”

The few leaders who considered engagement to be essential to their work were hesitant to emphasize engagement within their own organizations. One leader who talked at length about how engagement is pivotal to the success of her work in communities, quickly added, “I would get fired if I told people I was doing engagement.” Another leader said, “Even when I’m doing engagement, I don’t necessarily tell people that’s what I’m doing!” And yet another leader added, “I’ll be frank; engagement is not something I’m going to go to the mat for. It’s just not worth it.”

The organization leaders we interviewed do not feel pressure from their boards, funders, community leaders, or the public-at-large to do more work on engagement.



Part 2

THE ORGANIZATION-FIRST APPROACH

*A few years ago The Harwood Institute produced a report for the Kettering Foundation entitled, **The Engagement Path**. In that report, we wrote:*

Citizen engagement is a big topic in America. We live in a time when many Americans have retreated from politics and public life, and many civic-minded organizations and public leaders seek to re-engage them. Such engagement is taking place through school districts and civic organizations, foundations and leadership programs, as well as elsewhere.

There is one bit of knowledge everyone should know when seeking to engage people in public life: there is a natural path to people's engagement. We call it the Engagement Path.

Based on our experience, there are five engagement steps for people—each step along the Engagement Path calls for different strategies from those who seek to engage people, and holds different possibilities for those who take

part. When talking about engagement, the organization leaders we interviewed describe a very different approach for thinking about engaging the public and communities. For them, the path to engagement follows a model more akin to project development and implementation. We call this path **The Organization First Approach**.

In this section of the report, we lay out **The Organization-First Approach** and compare it to the more natural path of engagement detailed in *The Engagement Path*. (See page 13)

Our research shows that pursuing **The Organization-First Approach** without regard for a community's rhythms deepens frustrations with public life and creates false hope.

Below we lay out the four elements that make up **The Organization-First Approach** to engagement and we contrast **The Organization-First Approach** with the elements that define how people engage naturally. (See page 13)

Research and Assessment

The first step most organizations take on their engagement path is pinpointing community needs and interests. This work often begins within the confines of the organization's office with staff members examining various data to help them identify critical community needs and best practices.

"We track a lot of data and see what's going on to make a difference," explained one leader. She went on to say that the benefits of tracking data "helps to create a focus" when working in communities. "We really believe in data-driven decision making," she said.

In these instances, data determine the definition of public concerns.

Often among the first steps in **The Organization-First Approach** are brief forays into the community to talk with community leaders and then possibly to extend the interviews to others in the community (usually more leaders). One leader described this initial work: "When we go into

a community we're all about engagement. We contact community leaders and ask them to be on a task force. We assign people to subcommittees to do need assessments (and other types of work). Then we bring together [service recipients] to find out what's important to them."

Leaders see this research and assessment step as critical for organizations to define how to tailor their work to a community—and what to emphasize in their effort to "educate" the community. This is especially true for organizations that work in several communities at once. One leader explained the importance of the research and assessment step in this way, "We begin our work with a needs assessment, asset-mapping, and gap analysis. We figure out what a community can do for itself and where they can use our help. This drives our decision making." It is critical to emphasize that this first step in *The Organization-First Approach* is to determine how an organization's existing programs can fit a given community.

Educate the Community

Many of the organizations we examined emphasize the need to educate the community as an essential aspect of engagement. Typically, this work is designed to illuminate why a specific issue is, or should be, important to a community, how the issue affects specific populations within the community, and how the programs or services the organization has to offer can be effective in addressing the issue.

The basic thrust of this step is to inspire community members to support a specific organizationally defined course of action, volunteer to help with a program, or encourage a variety of organizations to cooperate with one another. When talking about programs to educate the community, organization leaders often express the desire for community members to "buy in" to the organization's vision for action. As one leader explained, "We've done extensive research on how to address this need. We bring on board those who are ready [to work on this need] through a process of education." Another leader expressed a similar point of view. "There's no reason for communities to reinvent the wheel," he said.

"We've learned what works on these issues and we try to make sure people [learn our lessons]."

The most common approaches to education efforts are presentations and interactive discussions. Organization leaders indicate that they try to reach out to as many people as possible so that people can hear their message.

Another Perspective

The Community Must Be Self-Aware

One leader of a national organization outlined a different type of community engagement, or "community self-awareness," which she suggests is a prerequisite to any effective action in a community.

"If [a community] does not know itself, it is very hard for people to get things done," she said. She went on to explain that a community needs to understand why work progresses differently in some communities and neighborhoods than in others. And leaders of community organizations need to understand how their relationships affect their ability to get things done.

"If a community does not take the time to become self-aware," she said, "it is very easy for people to just blame one another when things don't go well."

One of the locally based leaders who works with this national organization said in her interview, "There is a whole lot of ego tied up in showing you've got it together and know how to get things done." She explained that the resistance she encounters to taking the time to understand what is actually going on in the community and that the effects of relationships among organizations are driven by how leaders look at themselves. In such an environment she said, "It's very hard to look at yourself" and become more self-aware.

Some of the education efforts we observed and heard described involved small steps toward engaging broader groups of people in communities and basing their work more on “dialogue.” “We’ve learned that our communications can’t be one way. We’ve learned that people want to tell us more about their experiences,” said one leader. Unfortunately, even these efforts sought input rather than engagement and were framed and circumscribed by the organization’s own agenda.

Implementation Planning

Most of the leaders with whom we spoke believe it is important to bring together key community members to help shape their work in the community. “We can’t just go into a community and say, ‘Build a Boys and Girls Club,’” said one organization leader. She went on to say that it is essential to understand what the community wants to do.

The goal of the typical planning process is to ensure that a core group of key community members are committed to a clear set of action strategies. One leader explained that when her organization engages a community, “We go over scientifically based research for a number of different strategies. Then we ask people, ‘Which of these strategies do you want to use?’” Importantly, this planning process is based on an approach in which people are asked to select from preset strategies concerning a preset initiative or program.

A secondary goal is to assign specific people or groups with responsibility for implementing different actions. Some organization leaders see this as their real bread and butter. “We’re perceived as a convener and facilitator,” said one leader. “We get the key players to the table so no one feels threatened. Then we ask how everyone can partner.”

While these efforts occasionally involve the general community, more often the organizations seek out

participation from key community leaders and service providers who themselves hold an organizational stake in the program or initiative. The leaders with whom we spoke expressed frustration with the success of broader community engagement, believing that involving the public requires more work, particularly in terms of outreach efforts.

Collaboration

The last step of The Organization-First Approach described by these leaders is collaboration. This step grows directly out of the implementation planning process and typically involves the same cadre of people from the earlier planning efforts. We found that leaders resisted including new people in community work after the planning phase has ended because it may lead to questioning of the plan and derail progress.

For these leaders, collaboration is critical because no organization alone can make a real impact on the critical issue facing the community. Through collaboration, leaders try to leverage scarce resources and reduce duplication of services. A common refrain we heard was, “We’ve got to quit competing with each other.” In this spirit, the relevant organizations and stakeholders gather to make agreements about which organization will do what, recognizing that all relevant players must do their part. “We try to validate the idea that all agencies need to do work,” said one leader. “We broker resources that are already out there. If resources are absent then we’ll try to provide them.”

Some of the organization leaders with whom we spoke also describe collaboration as the most difficult step of engagement. “It’s so hard to keep agreements,” one leader told us. “The players (in the participating organizations) change, people adopt new priorities. It’s really hard.”

HOW PEOPLE ENGAGE*

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	WHAT IT MEANS
Personal Realm	People are, so to speak, living their daily private lives. Conversations tend to focus on concerns that have a direct impact on their own lives or the lives of those close to them. The people they talk to are those whom they know and with whom they feel comfortable.
Nascent Talk	People begin to more explicitly connect personal and public lives. This step looks and sounds a lot like discussions we have with people every day, a mixture of gossip and conversation about an issue like health care or education. Conversations tend to be random and unstructured. People start a conversation one day, only to pick it up a number of days later, but are not usually motivated to solve problems or make decisions.
Discovery	People cross over from thinking about issues in a private sense to thinking in public terms. They gain a sense of possibility that did not exist previously and begin to see that common ground for action might be found on complex issues. They become vested in the process of finding a solution while working with others.
Deliberation	Engagement goes much deeper. People make choices and decisions, wrestle with values and trade-offs, and figure out what to do in the context of their aspirations. This step is a prerequisite to taking purposeful public action.
Complementary Action	A wide range of individuals and organizations take action, informed by deliberation. The actions are not necessarily coordinated—typically they are not—but are carried out with a shared sense of purpose.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS ENGAGE

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	WHAT IT MEANS
Research and Assessments	The organization determines community needs, often so it can tailor an already-existing service or program to fit into the community. Data analysis, community conversations, and interviews are the most common methods used for this process.
Educate Community	The organization provides people in the community with information, typically about a specific topic, issue, or program, to help people understand what the organization knows and embrace the organization's conclusions. Presentations are the most common form of education—some designed to be interactive.
Implementation Planning	The organization convenes people to make decisions about strategies and action plans and assigns responsibilities for program implementation. Meetings that include community leaders, service providers, and other stakeholders are the most common method of planning.
Collaboration	To reduce duplication of efforts and leverage scarce resources, the organization seeks to coordinate its efforts in the community with groups working on similar issues. Organizations are asked to make agreements about how to collaborate. Often, agreements must be revisited if the players change.

* The Engagement Path: The Realities of How People Engage Over Time – and the Possibilities for Re-engaging Americans, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation and the Kettering Foundation (2005).



Part 3

DELIBERATION IS TOO RISKY

Few of the organization leaders we interviewed considered deliberation—people coming together to consider issues and weigh choices and trade-offs—as an engagement strategy. We initiated discussion of deliberation.

When pressed, most of the organization leaders describe deliberation as an unwieldy endeavor with too many potential pitfalls. Even more problematic, many suggested that sponsoring deliberation would run counter to their role in communities.

When pressed to further examine the possibility of using deliberation in their work, most leaders' definition of the term grew so broad that it encompassed any time any group of people make a decision. Such a broad definition short-circuited further discussion of deliberation because many leaders simply said that they already include deliberation in their work by bringing groups of leaders together to plan and implement programs (back to The Organization-First Approach). Though even allowing for a broader definition, leaders still express concerns with deliberation and the *public*.

“Oh, You Mean Planning!”

For many of these leaders, deliberation is synonymous with planning and/or decision making, meaning that anytime community members make joint decisions they have deliberated. Indeed, the deliberative process most commonly cited focused on choosing how to tailor programs to a specific community and assigning implementation responsibilities to different groups or individuals.

One program-focused organization leader, described this perspective: “[Deliberation] is a critical part of our planning process before we launch our program in a community. We bring together the community leaders who are committed to the program and ask them how they want to do things in their community. This can require a lot of negotiation.” Or recall the organization leader who said, when asked about deliberation, “We go over scientifically based research for a number of different strategies. Then we ask people, ‘Which of these strategies do you want to use?’” His notion of deliberation was confined to people making decisions in a narrowly constructed conversation.

Can't Compromise Our Point of View

Many organization leaders feel an intense pressure to represent a particular point of view when they engage in community dialogue and therefore immediately place limits on any potential role the organization may play when it comes to deliberation. This is especially true for constituent-based organizations.

One leader of an advocacy-based organization explained, “Our job is to represent a specific viewpoint. By definition we can't lead a deliberative process. We can be at the table to represent the view of our members, but we can't lead the process.” This leader went on to say that if the organization took a neutral role in a deliberative process it would lose allies. “The people we work with would consider it a betrayal if we didn't stand up strongly for our views.”

Leaders of program-based organizations feel a similar pressure. Professionals who have worked on an issue for years have

often come to their own conclusion about best practices and are understandably invested both personally and professionally in those conclusions. To them, a deliberative process that ignores these best practices seems antithetical to the community's best interests. And worse still, supporting a process that might undermine the best practices their organization has spent time and resources to adopt would erode the organization's credibility among colleagues.

As one leader told us, "We know what works. The challenge is convincing the community what works."

Deliberation Clouds the Waters

Many of the organization leaders we worked with perceived deliberation as a distraction from the "real" job of getting things done and making progress. What's more, they said that deliberation can lead to great frustration.

Several of the leaders suggested that processes that bring large numbers of people together to set directions on an issue can open up a "can of worms" or undermine momentum toward action.

As one organization leader put it, "A lot of times when you bring people together to talk about an issue they want to take on the world. It's very unrealistic what people want to do. In the end, nothing happens and everyone is just more frustrated."

Another leader told us, "It is processes like [deliberation] that cause people to say, 'I'm tired of talk.' We need to stay focused so we can get things done."

Ultimately, these leaders did not want to open up spaces in which the conversation is neither controlled nor directed. Deliberation risks incorporating new variables and slowing progress toward a specific programmatic solution. Opening the process runs counter to one of the critical goals leaders seek from engagement: "We need to know that we're going to come out of [the meeting] with agreements for who is going to do what."

Inaction or Conflict Will Reflect Poorly on Us

"The political stakes go way up," said one leader of convening people to deliberate. He continued, "People who are important to [the organization] might not like the results." Indeed, many of the organization leaders we interviewed said that the potential pay-off from deliberation is far too low and the potential risks far too high for them to pursue.

Another leader said, "I've seen too many deliberative processes go awry. Either nothing happens or people become divisive. Either way, the organization that sponsored the process gets the blame. We can't afford to take that kind of risk."

Most organization leaders were not as explicit or blunt about the potential risks involved in deliberation. But most did say that deliberation has inherent risks, ones they typically would not assume.

Here are the types of "risk questions" organization leaders consider in deciding whether, or how, to be involved with a deliberative process:

- ▶ Can we afford to be associated with the outcome of the deliberative process?
- ▶ Can we commit to the choices people make in the process if we disagree?
- ▶ How will our allies or key constituents perceive us if we sign on to the outcomes of a deliberative process? Can we risk the potential of alienating them?
- ▶ Who will we have to work with in the wake of the deliberative process? Do we want to be associated with these groups?
- ▶ Will the process serve the organization's needs and interests?

More Work, No Funding

Another significant risk organization leaders associate with deliberation are the expectations that go along with sponsoring this kind of effort. They worried that sponsoring carries an implicit expectation for follow-up work—much of which may be beyond the mission of their organization, and most certainly beyond its capacities. “The organization

that sponsors deliberation is expected to take responsibility for implementing the ideas that come out of this process,”

explained one organization

leader. “It is sometimes

possible to get

funding to

Another Perspective

Embracing Political Risks

“Working on community issues is inherently political,” said one organization leader. “We’ve learned that we have to embrace that. We can’t avoid it.” A few organization leaders expressed this sentiment. The leaders who talked most about embracing political risks explained that their organizations had only recently reached this conclusion. They had worked for years on issues without the kind of success they wanted and, in order to make a breakthrough, a new approach was needed.

As one leader of a funding organization explained, “We realized that we had to take responsibility for issues rather than ask other organizations to take responsibility. Those responsibilities include asking the community to make a commitment. We also had to ask the community to make choices. And we had to ride herd on people to make sure that happened.”

This leader went on to say that all of these kinds of actions are inherently political. “At some point, you have to plant a flag and say, ‘We’re going to do this,’” she concluded.

do [a deliberative process],” said another leader, “but it is very difficult to get funding to do any follow-up work. There seems to be an expectation among funders that whatever the community comes up with we can do that work in addition to what we’re already doing.”

Even without the expectation that a sponsoring organization *will do the work* that emerges from a deliberative process, there is an implicit expectation that the organization *will manage the work*. Leaders said that while community members or other community organizations often do the legwork, the sponsoring organizations are expected to be responsible for managing the process. “Somebody has to keep on top of that,” said one organization leader. But, he continued, “We don’t have the people to keep on top of things.” Another leader said, “We need to stay focused on our own responsibilities. We can’t take on managing other people to do work.”

While the risk of taking on new roles and responsibilities dissuaded some from sponsoring deliberations, others would gladly follow up after a deliberative process but were unsure about how to do it. The end result in these cases is an anticlimactic moment, when everyone looks at one another and asks, “Now what?” Without a clear sense of how to proceed or a way to maintain the momentum, many see deliberation as a distraction or a burden.

The inherent risks and expectations that go along with deliberation lead many organizations to conclude that they can participate in such a process, but they will not sponsor it.



Part 4

BARRIERS TO A COMMUNITY ORIENTATION

For the reasons discussed in the first section of this report, most of the groups we examined were operating under The Organization-First Approach and few were positioned to engage the public using a community-based orientation. Indeed, the organization leaders with whom we spoke told us that they are usually encouraged by key stakeholders, including their board members and funders, to follow The Organization-First path: assessment, education, planning, and collaboration.

We asked these leaders to consider what it would take for their organizations and others around them to shift to a community-orientation for engagement. Here, we address the five most common challenges identified by these leaders.

1. Is Engagement Within Our Responsibilities?

How organizations answer this question drives how they will make decisions about their approach to engagement. Organizations that see their primary responsibilities as promoting an issue or a particular point of view, implementing programs, or providing services seem locked into The Organization-First Approach. On the other hand, organizations that view “community change” as one of their primary responsibilities are in a better position to approach engagement with a community-first orientation.

Recall the leader who described how her grant-making organization’s sense of responsibility changed its approach to working with the community and the public. “We used to think our job was done after we distributed money. Then we blamed the grant recipients if nothing happened,” she said. It was her organization’s internal shift toward accepting greater responsibility for community results—that is, seeing its job as related to the health of the community rather than merely granting dollars—that changed how they worked with and engaged with the community.

How an organization defines its community responsibilities and the subsequent impact on its approach to engagement was a key finding in The Harwood Institute’s report, *Engaging Citizens: The Success and Challenges of Three Public Agencies*, also prepared for the Kettering Foundation. In that report, our examination of three public agencies suggested that the way an agency defines its relationship with the public shapes its approach to engagement.

2. Do We Have Credibility?

Several organization leaders questioned whether their organizations have the standing in their communities to take a lead role in community engagement.

“People know us for our programs,” explained one organization leader. “They (community members) ask us what we’re going to do.” She went on to explain that people do not

look to her group to do engagement work. This sentiment was expressed by several of the leaders we interviewed.

Leaders wondered whether they have the credibility to lead engagement.

- ▶ **Expectations.** Is engagement a role people expect our organization to play? As one leader remarked, “People expect us to do what we’ve always done. If we were going to do more in the way of engagement it would take us time to have the credibility.”
- ▶ **Competency.** A second aspect of credibility relates to these organizations’ core competencies. That is, can the organization do a credible job of organizing, facilitating, and following up on engagement work?
- ▶ **Mission.** The third aspect of credibility raised by organization leaders relates to the role each organization has chosen for itself. For instance, organizations that have chosen to speak out on behalf of a specific constituency believe they have limited options in pursuing engagement activities. As one leader put it, “If we’re not representing our point of view, we lose credibility.”

Taken together, these concerns lead many to question whether they have the necessary standing to do engagement work. As one leader of an education-focused organization said, “I don’t know if we think we have the right to do this.” Another leader expressed a similar sentiment when speaking about her board: “There is quite a bit of ambivalence. People say, ‘It’s not our place.’”

3. Who Will Lead this Work Internally?

The leaders with whom we spoke listed several internal barriers to expanding their organization’s role in leading community engagement. A lack of funding was typically the first obstacle they mentioned; the lack of appropriate skills was second; for others, internal interest presented yet another barrier.

Another Perspective

The Community Must Be Self-Aware

“We’ve made a major shift in how we work with our community,” said the leader of one funding organization. She explained that previously her organization could have been described as a funding intermediary. “We would assess needs (in the community), raise and distribute money, and then do an evaluation at the end of the grant cycle to see what happened.” Regardless of the results of their efforts, the organization would basically repeat the same process the next year.

“No more,” she said. “We decided that we have to take responsibility for community results.” She explained that it’s not enough to distribute money. The shift away from distributing money to claiming greater responsibility for seeking to create an impact, changed how the organization works with, and engages, the community.

Now, the organization invests the time necessary to understand where community members want to focus their energies and what people are willing to do. Then, the organization funds research to clarify needs and identify practices to support the community’s agenda. But the organization’s work does not stop there. Once it was an organization that only distributed money and then watched from the sidelines. Today, the organization sees its role as helping to keep the community focused on the *community’s* agenda and developing nonprofit sector capacity to act on a scale that will make an impact.

According to the organization’s leader, the shift in the organization’s relationship to the community began with a change in mind-set, as it embraced responsibility for community results.

Leaders told us there is no line item in their budgets for engagement. Budgets, they said, are built to support program activities, so engagement efforts require leaders to “borrow” time, money, and staff from other budgets.

Describing his organization’s lack of engagement skills, one leader said, “We don’t have the people who know how to do this.” Another leader explained, “Running conversations is an art and we don’t have the people who have those skills. . . . We hire people to run programs.”

Another Perspective

Do I Have the Ego for Engagement?

One leader was quite frank in our conversations about different approaches to community engagement. Midway through the conversations she said, “This is not my style. I like to get things done.”

Many of the leaders we interviewed have built their reputations inspiring others to take action. They talk about experiencing a rush from accomplishing goals no one thought could be accomplished. Many times these achievements are reached by persevering when others had suggested the need for a different course.

The drive not to fail is an equally powerful motivator, which prompts some leaders to rush to action. As one leader said, “There is a whole lot of ego tied up in showing you’ve got it together and know how to get things done.”

Engagement—and deliberation in particular—does not always fit neatly with action-oriented leadership, which people are most accustomed to. Shifting gears to pursue engagement is difficult for some leaders. As one said, “The thing is [when we do engagement], I have to check my ego at the door.”

Lacking internal capacity, leaders saw consultants as the most realistic approach for securing the necessary community engagement skills. One leader put it simply: “We need consultants.” According to one leader who wanted to develop her staff’s engagement skills, “There aren’t grant dollars to support that kind of training.”

Beyond funding and skills, leaders point to a lack of interest in engagement within their organizations. And few of the individuals interested in engagement have the organizational support or standing to promote and sustain engagement as a core practice.

Even leaders with a person in a supervisory role who can effectively design and guide engagement efforts, often cite lack of staff and funds as a barrier to implementing engagement activities.

4. Where Is the Public to Engage?

Many of the leaders suggested that ever-increasing social mobility and fragmentation, as well as modern lifestyles and reliance on the Internet, make it harder to engage people in their communities. Some leaders describe an increasingly “elusive public.”

One leader asked rhetorically, “How do you engage people when you can’t make physical contact? . . . People work two jobs, they don’t go to their neighborhood schools, they pull into their garage after work.” Another leader asked, “I wonder if engagement is from the world of our fathers? People don’t have time for this now. It’s harder to dedicate time so they retreat away from community.”

Organization leaders in high-growth regions of the country attributed the difficulty in reaching people to the transient lifestyle in their communities. One leader described the trends in his community in this way: “Ninety-seven percent of people weren’t born in the state. Thirty-two percent have been here less than five years.” Others described similar statistics or scenarios for their own communities. These leaders wondered whether higher social mobility was

leading to civic indifference. “People are so mobile around here they don’t feel vested,” is how one leader put it.

Conversely, organization leaders working in communities with stagnant or declining growth found the public elusive for a different reason. “People in these communities have been through a lot. They can be a little jaded about whether [becoming engaged] is worth the effort.”

While some leaders remain doggedly determined in their efforts to find new or more effective ways to work with the public, frustration with a transient population or a population beset by stagnating growth led many to doubt whether it was realistic or possible to engage a meaningful number of people. Some leaders concluded that it was easier to stay focused on implementing programs than to invest the time, effort, and resources in trying to find a public that may never materialize. As one leader said, “You end up reaching out to people who you know will be there and who will stay there.”

5. Where’s the Proof?

Time and again these leaders returned to their need to be able to draw direct links between community engagement, action, and demonstrable results. For these leaders, the need to prove to funders, their boards, and others that their efforts yield measurable results undermined their willingness to explore further or different approaches to engagement.

“I can’t prove that (engagement) is a good return on investment,” explained one leader. Another leader added that the challenge in promoting engagement is that there aren’t good stories about how engagement leads to positive impact in communities. “We lack examples about how this might play out,” he said. “We encourage our chapters to get involved with the community, but we can’t tell them what the benefits will be.”

Still another leader said that organizations were evaluated strictly by outcomes, “People don’t really care about process. They only want to know what you’ve done.” And, “Until we can show impact, no one cares. It’s just process.”

These leaders suggest that successful organizations may be the ones that are least likely to examine their engagement approach. As one leader said, “I run up against it all the time; people say, ‘There’s no need to change what we’re doing.’”

Conclusion

The inability to find productive ways to overcome these barriers prompts organizations to look inward to adopt solutions and practices that they feel will gain internal support, they can control, and they are confident in implementing.

It is not that this focus on programs, strategic planning, fundraising, impact measurement, and other activities is unnecessary; in fact, quite the opposite could be argued. Each of these elements is essential to a healthy organization.

But what if the unintended consequences of such an inward focus take organizations farther from the very communities they seek to serve? What if the programs and initiatives they seek to implement are actually disconnected from people’s everyday aspirations and concerns?

Indeed, what if the very incentives and structures that are used reward such inwardness to the exclusion of turning outward to communities and people?

The Harwood Institute’s experience is that it is possible to create pathways for organizations and leaders to turn outward; in fact, we know it is. Our work with public broadcasting stations, United Ways, community foundations, social service agencies, newspapers, and many other public-spirited organizations and leaders demonstrate what it takes to turn outward and be effective in making a difference in public life.

Afterword

This is a sobering study worth serious attention by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as foundations and advocacy groups, and the host of communities that depend on them. NGOs have long been the backbone of American civil society and a wellspring of political and social innovation. Yet these findings suggest that our nongovernmental institutions are being colonized by governmental ways of doing business. They are becoming bureaucratic. Government agencies are bureaucratic because their job is to control or regulate and to impartially administer services, but the ways they go about carrying out their duties are not compatible with the functions of nongovernmental agencies, which have different missions.

This study finds these intermediary funding and service agencies increasingly focused inward on their own organizations, preoccupied with routines like planning, and enveloped in an ethos of professionalism. If this trend continues, they will not be effective incubators of civic innovation and, consequently, they would be far less beneficial to a democratic public. The irony is that this colonization is occurring because NGOs and their boards are intent on demonstrating their usefulness to the public, which they believe can be accomplished by showing measurable results. In short, the research indicates that these organizations are focused on their own success. Given this notion of success, they rely on such things as fixed priorities, uniform procedures, and replicable programs. Bringing people together to identify and address their own problems was not a priority for the organizations studied in this research.

This trend runs counter to trends in communities that are wrestling with deep-seated problems, such as the achievement gap and the challenges of rebuilding after a natural disaster. In 2005, communities hard-hit by Hurricane Katrina appreciated supplies

of food and water and the help they received removing debris immediately after the storm. But later on, they became more concerned with developers taking over their towns or planning agencies bent on redesigning entire counties. In many cases, residents wanted to restore their community—its buildings as well as its way of life—and felt that they had to come together as a community to do that.

People who have a democratic bent don't want to be informed, organized, or assisted as much as they want to shape their own lives. They sense that they have to act together despite their differences. That is why they say they want to come together as a community to maintain their community. Unfortunately, they have had difficulties finding organizations that understand this agenda. No wonder, given what the Harwood study reports.

Whatever might be said of nongovernmental organizations, there is no question that they intend to serve the public interest; so why the reservations about engaging citizens? Some literature coming out of the World Bank may provide an answer. The World Bank is a development institution that is proficient in setting priorities, developing uniform procedures, and designing replicable programs—the very things NGOs have come to admire. Yet in evaluating the bank's success, David Ellerman, who spent 10 years at the institution, not only questions its achievements but also has an explanation for its less-than-impressive results. Ellerman believes that the World Bank has run into a “fundamental conundrum.” When people are genuinely helping themselves, outside agencies assisting them have a hard time demonstrating that it is their assistance that makes the difference. However, if the outside agency is guiding the local work, there is the tendency to foster a learned

disability and dependence on external resources. The intermediary organizations in the Harwood study face the same conundrum. The more they encourage people to come together to help themselves, the less they might be able to demonstrate their own impact.

What would it take for NGOs to risk responding to people who want to come together as a community? There is a strategy available to them, and it's promoting the practices that enable citizens to act together effectively—that is, to engage one another rather than just be engaged by institutions. For example, NGOs could be sensitive to the way citizens name problems. While citizens' names will often differ from the names of problems implied in the programs that institutions promote, recognizing them is crucial if citizens are to become engaged. Organizations could also pay more attention to the way citizens make collective decisions about the actions they should take in their own communities. That is why we asked the Harwood Institute to look into how intermediary organizations understand collective decision making through deliberation. Deliberative decision making allows people to avoid the polarization that often accompanies majority voting, bargaining, and negotiating.

Whether or not NGOs are supportive, citizens in communities like those on the Gulf Coast will go on trying to join forces and, in the process, deliberate over what they should do. Citizens have no other choice; when disaster strikes, they have to act together in order to survive. What isn't certain is what will happen to NGOs if they isolate themselves from this quintessentially democratic activity. Can they have the real impact they genuinely want to have if their work isn't aligned with the great work of self-rule?

DAVID MATHEWS, PRESIDENT

Kettering Foundation

Appendix: Description of Organizations

- ▶ A national organization with community based chapters working with parents and others to strengthen local public schools
- ▶ A national organization supporting a network of over 1,200 local organizations working to address the underlying causes of the most significant local issues
- ▶ A national organization working across the country to connect schools and community resources
- ▶ An advocacy organization, with affiliates across the nation, focused on promoting policies that protect both religion and democracy
- ▶ A national organization with local chapters focused on ensuring that children have the opportunity to enjoy safe and healthy play
- ▶ A coalition of private and public agencies serving vulnerable children in all 50 states
- ▶ A philanthropic organization that works nationally and with local sites focusing on policies and community support to address the needs of vulnerable children and community development
- ▶ A statewide community foundation
- ▶ A state-based network of partners focused on marshalling community resources and services to improve the lives of children
- ▶ A citywide network of organizations, people, and businesses committed to improving the quality of life in their city
- ▶ A local community foundation serving a small city, to improve its quality of life



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