Engaging Citizens: Meeting the Challenges of Community Life

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**INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY CHALLENGES**

For more than a decade, the Kettering Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, has been studying how the public can get back into the public’s business—beginning with the communities where they live. This is an updated report on what the foundation has learned, largely from communities that have been trying to engage their citizens.

Readers who have seen earlier foundation publications, such as *For Communities to Work*, will notice some refinements and shifts in emphasis.\(^1\) New studies have also been incorporated. But this report is still addressed to communities that are concerned because too many citizens are distant from, perhaps even alienated from, local politics. The research speaks both to those who are impatient with just talking and want immediate action in their community and to those who believe action isn’t possible without first improving the way citizens relate to and work with one another.

These dual objectives, to act on difficult problems and to change the process by which communities work, are interdependent, not distinct, goals. Yet they can ignite a debate between “process” and “action.” The obvious relationship between the way a problem is approached and success in solving it gets lost. This report emphasizes the interdependence of process and action.

The first thing the foundation learned since its last report on community politics is that the people who might use our findings aren’t blank slates. They are occupied with their own vexing problems. If Kettering research is going to be helpful, we recognized, it has to be put in the context of what citizens struggle with every day. So prior to this report, researchers at the foundation sat down with a variety of community groups to listen to what concerned them. We heard from organizations promoting economic development, from community consultants, and from citizen-based associations. We also took into account what was happening in related fields like community medicine. And we heard from citizens who didn’t appear to be engaged with their communities at all.

Many of the basic problems we heard about were similar, whether they occurred on the Gulf Coast or in the Midwest and whether they were in cities or rural areas. Nearly everyone we talked to, for instance, complained about the kind of evaluations they were required to do. They struggled with the discrepancy between what their experiences had shown was important and what they were supposed to measure and report to external agencies. Other discrepancies also bothered them. For example, community leaders reported that professionals and citizens weren’t always on the same page when it came to identifying local problems or deciding on a course of action.

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\(^1\) *For Communities to Work* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2002).
Nearly all of the people the foundation heard from were concerned about the future of their organizations. Those in associations whose mission was to be facilitative or catalytic felt special pressure to become advocates and take sides on issues. This was particularly true for organizations created to improve race relations; they were asked to endorse various projects or take partisan positions. When they insisted on staying outside politics as usual, their usefulness was questioned and support from the movers and shakers in the community fell off. Every group, regardless of its mission, worried about maintaining viability in the face of the natural ebb and flow of civic energy. As someone observed, community associations are constantly dissolving and reforming like beach sand, which is always present, yet always changing. While realizing that this ebb and flow was natural, civic leaders wanted their own organizations to continue and not be totally dependent on them personally. They feared that if they stopped convening meetings, citizens would stop working.

A great deal of the conversations at Kettering were about citizens. The perceptions of organizational leaders varied. Some felt citizens needed and wanted to be led. These leaders were frustrated by the difficulty of getting others to understand the complexity they saw in issues. Other leaders placed a great deal of faith in what they believed was Americans’ innate common sense, yet they differed on the role citizens should play. Citizens were important to some of the organizations because they could put pressure on officials and government agencies. (These organizations considered government to be the proper body for organizing social progress.) Citizens were valued in other organizations for their ability to take collective action in their own right as well as through governments.

Although the community leaders we met with had different ideas about what citizens are supposed to do, nearly all were looking for more effective ways to engage people. And nearly all reported being challenged by other leaders who thought it ill advised as well as unnecessary to involve more than a few key stakeholders. These critics thought that polling and focus group research were the best ways for “involving” the citizenry at large.

Reservations about the public weren’t always expressed outright but sometimes lurked behind community debates over action versus process. Those who argued that talk was cheap and that the community needed to act more decisively on its problems had little patience with getting ordinary citizens to come to meetings. They saw the meetings as process rather than substance, a point of view that sometimes reflected serious reservations about the ability of citizens to act in the best interest of all. Since the ability of citizens to govern themselves has been challenged since Plato (and probably before), these reservations aren’t likely to go away. If citizens aren’t considered necessary political actors, efforts to involve them will always be dismissed as mere process. The crux of the dispute is about what kind of action is needed and who has the power to get things done. Some community leaders look for a more productive way to talk about what citizens should and can do rather than debating process versus action. They consider that debate to be ill-framed around false choices and would prefer to look at the nature of the problem to be
solved. That would allow people to determine whether the community as a whole needed to be involved in a solution or whether a few people and one or two institutions were all that would be needed. Some problems, such as repairing streets and bridges, don’t require citizens to act. Others, such as dealing with violent youth gangs, probably can’t be solved by a few professionals and a few institutions because these problems have multiple causes.

Difficulties in working with officeholders were another troubling issue for community leaders. If officials believe that they, not citizens, are the ones who should take care of local problems, then they aren’t inclined to do more than listen to complaints. When community leaders suggested that people can and should solve some of their own problems, their advice was rejected. Even officeholders who are willing to support citizen participation through mechanisms like visioning, we were told, have been disappointed that participation drops off sharply. The reason, community leaders explained, was that once the participatory projects ended, officials took over the reins on the assumption there was nothing else citizens could do. Consequently, participation dropped off, and despite being consulted initially, citizens felt disenfranchised.

Probably the most common complaint of community leaders was the difficulty in getting a diverse group of people to turn out for their meetings. They reported that only the same handful of people tended to show up. This lack of response was particularly troubling to those trying to promote economic development on a regional basis, which requires participation from people scattered throughout a large area. Even when a represented group met and agreed that the focus should be on a region and not just their community, people tended to define “region” as an area of about a 15-mile radius.

More troubling than the difficulty of getting citizens to their meetings, many community leaders cited conflicts and lack of trust as major obstacles in their work. They said that problems weren’t being solved because individuals and groups couldn’t deal with their differences, which were often over questions of what should be done rather than technical matters. Yet we also heard encouraging stories. One organization reported that, when it was able to get people to join together in attacking a common project, those involved talked openly and candidly among themselves. They developed effective working relationships.

Just getting folks to talk together, in the view of some community leaders, was a big accomplishment. Others quickly added, however, that people soon get impatient; they want results. Nearly all of the organizations reported being pressed for immediate solutions to what they knew were problems that couldn’t be solved in a few months. As one observed, those who think there are both short-term and long-term approaches to fundamental problems are mistaken. There aren’t any short-term solutions, she said, only long-term ones. Someone else added that their community spends most of its time recovering from the failures of shortsighted solutions.

In addition to hearing from community organizations and organizers, the foundation has spent years listening to citizens who talk together as citizens. From their perspective, the
challenges of engagement look different. The people we’ve heard from weren’t as concerned about having meetings they could attend as they were about having opportunities to make a real difference in combating the problems that troubled them.

Most Americans have a deep sense of civic duty. Yet they are frustrated by their inability to have a significant effect on the issues they worry about. And they don’t necessarily feel that the institutions created to serve them (schools, government agencies) are responsive. Some people have lost any sense that they still own these institutions or are responsible for what happens to them. If they can’t make a difference, citizens reason, they cannot possibly be held responsible. The same reasoning applies to local governing bodies; people feel outside the decision-making process. Even local civic organizations might not offer ways to make a difference. People said that some of these organizations weren’t focused on the everyday problems they cared about, and they didn’t involve them.

Americans don’t just feel estranged from institutions; some have doubts about their fellow citizens as well. If they step out to solve a problem, they aren’t sure that anyone else will join them. Although the response to national disasters suggests otherwise, there may be a basis for these doubts. A recently published study, Hope Unraveled, found Americans retreating from civic life unless there is a crisis. Though a bit ashamed of retreating, many don’t see any alternative. Desperate to regain some measure of control over their lives, they seem to be moving into close-knit circles of family and friends where they will be with people they can count on. At the same time, these Americans recognize they should—and perhaps could—reach out to others. They are alarmed by what they see as growing social fragmentation, extreme individualism, and the erosion of a sense of community. As one woman in Iowa said, “people . . . have desires and goals for themselves, they don’t have dreams and goals for the country.”

**Self-Rule and Public Work**

Kettering and other research has found that citizens usually become engaged in their communities by being drawn in, bit-by-bit. They start by doing things that are directly related to their personal concerns. Even though they may believe they have the right to rule themselves, they only learn that they have the capacity for self-rule from the experience of acting together with others.


Also see United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Volunteering in the United States, 2005*, [http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm) (accessed April 19, 2006) and Stephanie Boraas, “Volunteerism in the United States,” *Monthly Labor Review* 126 (August 2003): 8, which shows that one out of every four men and one out of every three women have volunteered for some kind of religious, civic, or educational project. But the rate of volunteering has not changed significantly since 2002.
Self-rule doesn’t assume, however, that people can rule themselves without government, just that the government isn’t the sole instrument for organizing social progress. Self-rule is not direct democracy or any other type of democracy; it is the foundation of democracy. The term is consistent with the literal meaning of “democracy,” which is “rule by the people.” Our Constitution says that “We, the People” are the sovereign power in the country, a power not delegated to the state once the government was created. Sovereignty is defined by the strength or power to act—to decide, judge, and institute change. The power to act makes it possible to rule. It follows then that the sovereign public must do the kinds of things that monarchs once did if self-rule is to be more than rhetoric. Self-rule requires citizens to make collective decisions and join forces to act on those decisions.

“We, the People,” collectively, in all of our diversity, are the public described in this book. *Engaging Citizens* is about how the public exercises its sovereignty, not just individually as volunteers, but collectively. We become a “we,” a sovereign public, by doing the work of citizens, which has been called “public work.” The foundation’s understanding of how the public forms in a community is something like this: Imagine a group of people playing baseball. The work of playing baseball makes the group into something they weren’t as individuals, a team. The individuals only become a team by playing together. That is very similar to the way a public is created, by citizens joining in collective efforts.

In a book titled *Self-Rule*, Robert Wiebe tells the story of how public work, the work done by not just for citizens, came to define democracy in frontier America—despite the ruling elites’ preference for a republic and not a democracy. Nineteenth-century self-rule grew out of barn raisings and town meetings; it was a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics. Settlers on the frontier had to join forces to build forts, roads, and libraries. They formed associations to combat alcoholism, care for the poor, and elect representatives. They also established the first public schools. Their efforts were examples of public work.

You can see public work going on in communities today. One of the simplest forms of collective action is citizens organizing to clean up their streets. Public work on a larger scale protects the environment, builds housing for the homeless, and organizes efforts to rescue victims of unexpected disasters. The ability of citizens to produce things from public work gives them the power to be sovereign.

Watching this work has enabled the foundation to realize that the public can be seen as a dynamic force not just a static body. Thinking of the public as more like electricity than a light bulb helps focus attention on the necessary sources of energy for democratic politics. A dynamic

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force is more than a constituency, market, or audience. Citizens, from this perspective, aren’t just individual consumers; they are producers.

Seen in this way, the challenge for community organizations that want to engage citizens involves more than gaining their consent. If all citizens did were to consent to actions taken in their name, “We, the People” would be no more than a persuaded populace, which wouldn’t have the power or political will needed to sustain American self-government. Certainly citizens should listen to reasoned arguments and collect information, yet in the end, they have to make decisions among themselves and act on those decisions. Only that gives the people’s choices moral force and results in public work. Being sold on what others have decided doesn’t have the same political effect—it doesn’t create reservoirs of political will and energy. Furthermore, citizens are more disposed to take ownership of what they have participated in choosing than what has been chosen for them.

This emphasis on citizens making their own decisions isn’t meant to disparage the efforts of officeholders and community organizers who have to present their plans and convince people to support them. That is their job. But they should bear in mind that when people buy what is being sold, they don’t necessarily own it. They are likely to blame whoever manufactures what they have bought if something goes wrong. Although nothing happens in a community unless someone takes the initiative, that doesn’t mean that the only thing Americans have to do is sit back and wait to be convinced.

**Wicked Problems That Take a Community to Solve**

Despite the words in the Constitution and the history of what citizens have done to rule themselves, reservations about involving the public remain. Communities that want greater engagement have, however, a more immediate and practical counterargument to make. Certain kinds of problems can’t be managed unless the public acts—and keeps on acting. A public that can act effectively is needed most when communities face what some scholars have called “wicked” problems. A problem is wicked when the diagnosis or definition is unclear, the location or cause is uncertain, and any effective action to deal with it requires narrowing the gap between what is and what ought to be—in the face of disagreement about the latter.5 Poverty is an example. The achievement gap in schools is another, as is racial conflict. These problems take advantage of a diminished sense of community and then further loosen the ties that bind people.

Wicked problems are more human than technical and are so deeply embedded in the social fabric that they never completely go away. They are as tricky as they are aggressive. Each symptom exposes another problem in a never-ending chain.

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Given these characteristics, conventional strategies of goal setting, planning, and evaluation aren’t enough to overcome wicked problems. When problems are wicked, a shared understanding of the approximate nature of what people are confronting is more important than an immediate solution. In fact, dealing effectively with a wicked problem may depend on not reaching a decision about a solution early on. The ability of citizens to exercise sound judgment in the face of uncertainty is more critical than the certainty of experts. Civic commitment trumps a professional plan. Coping with these problems requires sustained acting that doesn’t begin at one point and end at another, but, instead, continues in a series of richly diverse initiatives.

The Path to Civic Engagement

Up to this point, this book has tried to show that public work is a vehicle for civic engagement and not just the product of that engagement. From here on, there will be reports on studies of why people decide to become involved in public work and how that work is done. The emphasis will be on how the public work that begins in everyday life can be integrated into community politics. Readers will not find on the pages that follow more of the many techniques, processes, or methods used in community organizing and conflict resolution. The foundation’s research suggests that there is another way to think about politics, but in its organic rather than more familiar institutional form. We will be describing the politics that begins with what citizens do with other citizens in the “polis” or community where they live. We realize that people usually associate politics with elections, legislation, and government programs. But we think there is more to politics than this.

The Politics That Don’t Look Like Politics

The public work that citizens must do in their communities is political work, yet in its earliest stages, it doesn’t look anything like politics. People become civically engaged in very personal ways that take considerable time and move in stages. Community organizations can benefit from taking this progression into account and building on it.

On any given day, someone takes the first step to becoming involved in community matters by talking to family and friends about an event or incident that bothers them. Then they try to find out whether anyone outside this close circle is also worried. For example, a woman might talk with her neighbors about drug paraphernalia she saw in the street. It might be a short conversation, probably over her backyard fence. At the next stage, conversations like this one become more structured when they are carried into churches and civic groups. Later still, town meetings might be held on what should be done to keep drugs out of the community, and people

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might decide on a strategy. Some of the things they decide could be carried out by ad hoc groups or civic organizations. Government agencies would probably be asked to play a role as well. If these sorts of problem-solving initiatives result in public work being done on problems, then a public begins to form in the community, a citizenry with the capacity for continued collective decision making and action.

As just said, political participation usually begins on a very personal level. Americans worry about *their* jobs, *their* health, *their* children’s education. And they keep coming back to these primary concerns, which remain political touchstones. When people are asked to consider an issue, the first thing they usually ask themselves is, does this problem affect me or my family?

The next thing that happens when people try to find out if anyone outside family and friends shares their concerns is that they begin to have conversations in the places where they routinely gather. They move in and out of a great many discussions, which are random and unstructured. Much of what they say may sound like small talk—with a lot of quaint stories thrown in. People are just mulling over what they hear or perhaps testing for a response: What did you see? What do you think it means? Does it worry you? At this point, they aren’t ready to make decisions; they are still checking out the situation, and that takes time. Community organizations may get impatient with this mulling over. They may mistake it for lethargy when it’s more like gestation; trying to rush people could be a mistake.

As people gather more and more information, it might seem that they would become confused, that a deluge of facts and opinions would overwhelm them. We haven’t found this happening. While citizens can certainly be overwhelmed, something else seems to be going on. People are trying to make connections among problems. While organizations break down problems into manageable projects and professionals focus in on discrete phenomena, most people don’t do either. They experience the combined effects of interrelated problems in their everyday lives, and so they try to find out how the different pieces fit together.  

For example, when drugs are the problem, they are never the only problem. People consider everything from the quality of family life to the condition of the economy to the effectiveness of the police force. They don’t simplify issues; they try to see how they are interrelated. And when they do, they enlarge the definition of the problems they are facing.

If people realize that they share similar concerns, they feel connected. Our research doesn’t show that people have to see the same problem in the same way, however. In fact, they seldom do because their circumstances and experiences aren’t the same. Yet, if citizens realize they all have a stake in solving a problem, albeit for different reasons, they are disposed to form alliances. They may recognize that although their interests are different, they are interdependent. On

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the other hand, when people fail to see these interrelations or to make these connections, they tend to feel isolated and unable to make a difference.

Engagement deepens if people come to see an old problem in a new light. The insight helps them imagine solutions that otherwise are elusive. Such revelation is often sparked when people hear from those with experiences different from their own. This added perspective reorients them, and the insights increase their confidence that progress is possible. If people don’t come to those insights, they remain stuck in a rut, saying the same things to the same people.

Commitment is the ultimate expression of engagement; it occurs when people come to the conclusion that they themselves have to do something about their problems. They realize that blaming others doesn’t accomplish anything, and they get tired of waiting for someone else to rescue them. Citizens may also discover that they are implicated in their problems and that they are ultimately accountable. When people own their problems, they are ready to take on the difficult work of deciding what to do about them.

Although owning problems paves the way for deciding what to do about them, people don’t proceed step-by-step in making decisions as they would in going up or down a staircase. Decision making moves back and forth as citizens retrace the earlier steps to becoming involved. People revisit the question of whether something truly valuable is at stake, they probe beneath the surface of issues for related problems, and they look for connections with others. They weigh various options for acting against the things they hold dear; they deliberate.

FROM CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TO PUBLIC WORK IN SUGGSVILLE

In order to paint a picture of what engagement actually looks like in a community, we created a composite town—called Suggsville—that is based on actual cases the foundation has studied. This composite has been drawn from places where conditions were less than ideal in order to reflect the difficulties in public engagement. The story of Suggsville isn’t intended to prove that the political strategies used there are invariably effective or that what happened is typical of most communities. The events drawn from the case studies were selected to illustrate what political concepts look like in ordinary circumstances. The objective is to make terms (such as “public space”) that will be used in succeeding chapters less abstract.

Suggsville is rural and poor. Once a prosperous farming community, the town began to
decline during the 1970s, as the agricultural economy floundered. By the 1990s, the unemploy-
ment rate had soared above 40 percent. With little else to replace the income from idle farms, a
drug trade flourishes. A majority of Suggsville’s children are born to single teenagers. The
schools are plagued with low test scores and high dropout rates. Everyone who could leave the
town has, especially the young adults who are college educated. Making matters worse, the
community is sharply divided: rich and poor, black and white.

As in other communities facing similar problems, the citizens of Suggsville are worried
because their property values are dropping, their careers are affected, and their children are going
to schools with fewer and fewer resources. After church services and in the one grocery store
that has survived, Suggsvillians discuss what is happening with friends and neighbors. People
make small talk and mull over what others say.

Then, outside agencies, including several universities, set up programs offering social serv-
cices, job training, and other assistance. Little changes, however; consultants complain that when
they leave, Suggsville goes back to business as usual.

One university group, however, believes that the problem isn’t having the right program; it’s
having the right strategy. They decide that the best thing to do is to back off and try to put wor-
rried, frustrated people in touch with one another. Some citizens are receptive; they are ready to
talk to more than family members and friends. Even though outside agencies are available to call
on for assistance, Suggsvillians, driven by their frustration with the lack of change, are increas-
ingly open to the thought that no one is going to solve the town’s problems for them. Citizens are
more disposed to band together for their collective well-being—although no one is willing to
abandon his or her other particular interests for the good of all. This disposition doesn’t gel into
anything tangible initially. But it is about to.

Determined to remain in the background, the group from the university helps organize a se-
ries of meetings so Suggsvillians themselves can assess the town’s situation and figure out what
can be done about its problems. (Scholars would say that convening the meetings was providing
a “public space” in which people can do the work of citizens.) The university’s invitation for the
residents of Suggsville to meet and talk about the commu
nity draws the predictable handful.
People sit in racially homogeneous clusters—until the chairs are rearranged in a circle and they
begin to mingle. After participants get off their favorite soapboxes, tell their own stories, and
look for others to blame, they settle down to identifying the problems that concern almost every-
one. Economic security is at the top of the list. The first suggestion is to recruit a manufacturing
company to relocate in the town. No one rejects the suggestion; it stays on the table, but another
member of the group points out that every other town is competing for new industries and that
some development authorities recommend a grow-your-own business strategy. A few, those who
still feel strongly about recruiting a new industry, leave the meeting and go to the state office of
economic development for assistance. The majority of the group, however, continues to discuss
what might be done in the short term to support local businesses. Several people mention a restaurant that has opened recently; it seems to have the potential to stimulate a modest revival downtown. Unfortunately, that potential isn’t being realized because unemployed men (and youngsters who like to hang out with them) are congregating on the street in front of the restaurant and drinking. Customers shy away.

At the next town meeting, the attendance is larger, and people begin to talk about what can be done to save the restaurant. The police chief argues that the problem is obviously loitering and proposes stricter enforcement of the relevant ordinances. Others hesitate, not because they think the police chief is wrong, but because they have different concerns, which they think contribute to the loitering problem. The group begins to see connections between what first appeared to be isolated problems. For instance, one woman suggests that the loitering is symptomatic of a more fundamental issue—widespread alcoholism. A man proposes that a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous be established. Where will it meet? Someone offers a vacant building free of charge.

As these conversations go on over time (one meeting never accomplishes much of anything), the definition of the problem continues to expand as people make connections between what is happening in front of the restaurant and other things occurring in the community. And as they put their concerns on the table, they begin to identify what is most important to the welfare of the community. A great deal of the comments are about what is happening to children; some believe there are too many youngsters with too little adult supervision and nowhere to go after school. Several community members respond with offers of things they are willing to do if others will join them: organize a sports program, provide after-school classes, expand youth services in the churches, form a band. The group continues to lose those who want immediate action to set the town on a new course. But as more projects develop and citizens call on other citizens to join them, new recruits begin coming to the meetings. Rather than settling on one solution, citizens mount an array of different initiatives that are loosely coordinated and consistent with the sense of direction that has emerged from the meetings.

As the meetings continue, several people return to the argument that while encouraging local businesses is fine, it will never provide enough jobs to revive the economy. Suggsville still has to attract outside investment, they insist. Others quickly point out that the center of town, especially the park, has become so unsightly that no one of sound mind would consider the town an attractive site for a new business. Even though some see little connection between the condition of the park and recruiting industry, no one denies that the town needs a facelift. Suggsville’s three-member sanitation crew, however, has all it can do just to keep up with the garbage collection. Do people feel strongly enough about the cleanup to accept the consequences? Will they show up to care for the park? The response to similar calls has varied from substantial to minimal. But this time, after one of the forums, a group of people commit themselves to gathering at the park the following Saturday with rakes, mowers, and trash bags. And organizing to clean up the park
begins to accomplish more than removing trash. The work contributes to a stronger sense of community.

During most of the meetings, the recently elected mayor sits quietly, keeping an eye on what is happening. The forums began during his predecessor’s administration, and the town’s new leader feels no obligation to the participants. In fact, he is a bit suspicious of what they are doing. No one makes any demands on the town’s government, although some citizens think it strange that the mayor hasn’t offered to help with the cleanup. Nonetheless, before Saturday arrives, the mayor sends the town’s garbage crew to the park with trucks and other heavy equipment to do what the tools brought from home can’t. Some members of the town council suspect that the meetings will result in just another pressure group. Others think citizens should identify needs and then step aside so that local agencies can take over. No one is exactly sure what the relationship should be between the civic group and the elected officials, yet the two usually manage to accommodate one another despite the lack of clarity about who is responsible for what.

Over the next two years, the ad hoc group that came together to clean up the park organizes into a more formal Suggsville Civic Association. New industry doesn’t come to town, although the restaurant holds its own. Drug traffic continues to be a problem; but people’s vigilance, together with more surveillance by the police department, reduces the trade. The crowd loitering on the streets melts away. The public school isn’t directly involved in any of the economic development projects, yet it benefits from the changes in the civic environment. A new summer recreation program becomes popular with young people, and teenage pregnancies decrease a bit, as do school dropouts.

Once the association becomes an official body, time that has been spent on projects is occasionally drained away by internal disputes. The organization’s principal function becomes designing ways to address new problems that would engage citizens and stimulate public action. When a controversy is brewing or an emerging issue needs to be addressed, people turn to the association for help before the situation becomes more serious. As might be expected, some of the projects don’t work. Fortunately, in most cases, association members adjust their strategies and launch more initiatives. Perhaps this momentum has something to do with the way the civic association involves the community in evaluating projects—and the community itself. The association convenes meetings in which citizens can reflect on what they have learned, regardless of whether the projects have succeeded or not. Success isn’t as important as the lessons that can be used in future projects.

Attendance at association meetings rises and wanes depending on which problems are being addressed. Some citizens are put off by the association because it refuses to get drawn into local election campaigning or endorse special causes. They think that trying to build stronger working relationships among the townspeople is just too loosey-goosey and ignores the tough problems.
Others who had attended the early meetings are less interested in forming a new association and see more possibilities in bringing what they have learned from the discussions into existing organizations. They want the school board, for instance, to spend more time listening to the way citizens describe the problems in education because they remember how many different takes there were on economic development. Furthermore, rather than trying to get everyone to attend large meetings, they work on building ties with organizations that have resources they need but don’t have. The schools, for instance, need help from other local agencies, such as the police and health departments. Creating networks among civic projects seems more important than getting up to scale on any one project. For instance, several people in the dairy business offer to open their barns to children so they can learn about animal life. They also want to get some farmers involved who grow corn for the cows to eat—another basic lesson in agriculture. One person even proposes that the children could learn about producing methane from the manure if they could enlist the help of chemists. Those who support these projects see them as a way of building a network among citizens who are serving as teachers, even though they are not in classrooms.

Suggsville wouldn’t make anyone’s list of model communities; still, the town has increased the capacity of its citizens to influence their future. Asked what the two years of civic initiatives produced, one Suggsvillian said, “When people banded together to make this a better place to live, it became a better place to live.” The citizen making this observation didn’t mean that everyone had suddenly united; differences remained, but the differences weren’t organized so much around narrow or exclusive concerns. People differed over what was most valuable to the future of the community; they didn’t weigh priorities the same. Yet, to varying degrees, most recognized the importance of certain essentials to community well-being, such as economic security, safety, and respect for individual autonomy.

The Practices Used in Public Work

No one used the term, but public work was going on in Suggsville, and a public was forming as the work proceeded. The next sections will identify the specific tasks or practices that are involved in this work and the means by which people become involved in it.

In one sense, the story of Suggsville is the story of a single, ongoing deliberative forum that lasted for years. In another sense, it isn’t primarily a story about how people talked about or understood their problems; it’s a story about how citizens acted on those problems. As such, it’s a story about power and politics, but about a different sort of both. Citizens are the political

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actors as well as the officeholders. Suggsville didn’t do away with conventional politics; it just added a more public form of politics to the mix.

The story highlights what made Suggsville distinctive. This includes the way the agenda of the citizens’ initiative was focused on a broad issue (economic security) and not a narrow problem (loitering). It is also significant that the deliberations in the meetings did not result in a consensus but rather a general sense of direction, which was served by a variety of projects that were different yet compatible. As people expanded their definition of the issue they were facing, the enlarged definition that emerged from the deliberation stimulated a number of responses from different quarters. And the response mobilized a number of community resources that might not have been utilized otherwise.

The pages that follow are not filled with advice on how to do what the people in Suggsville did. This is not a how-to book of best procedures to follow. It is a book of ideas; it offers ways to think about the public that might spark new and more effective strategies for engaging citizens in the sort of public work that went on in Suggsville.

Any type of work can be broken down into tasks. Painting a house, for instance, involves selecting colors, scraping and priming the surface, and applying the paint. Public work is no different; it is carried on through interrelated and complementary tasks. These tasks can’t be just mechanical routines, however. They have to generate the civic energy, political will, and commitment that keep citizens moving forward. That is why the tasks in public work are what the Greeks called “practices” as opposed to mechanical techniques. Practices (such as playing a musical instrument) are intrinsically satisfying; they generate their own energy or motivation.

At least six practices are essential to doing public work in a community. They are particular ways of giving names to problems, framing issues to lay out the choices for dealing with them, making collective decisions, committing resources, acting, and learning from action. All of these practices were employed in Suggsville, and no one thought there was anything unusual about them. The terms that Kettering uses for them, however, aren’t usual and need some explanation.

Take the matter of describing a problem that needs attention. People do that in conversations while waiting for a bus or sitting in local restaurants. These conversations revolve around ordinary questions: What’s bothering you? Why do you care? How are you going to be affected? Kettering wanted to find a term that would capture what was going on politically when people were trying to identify a problem. We have called it “naming.”

Recall how the citizens of Suggsville found several ways of describing the problems affecting the restaurant; the descriptions ranged from loitering to alcoholism to children without supervision. These names captured people’s experiences and the concerns that grew out of those experiences. For many of the citizens involved, naming the problems was the first step toward becoming engaged.
As people become comfortable with the description or name of a problem, they raise more questions: What do you think we should do about the problem? What did the folks in the neighboring community do? Citizens try to get all their options on the table so they can consider the advantages and disadvantages. Kettering would say that these conversations create a framework for addressing the problem. A “framing” collects and presents options for acting on a problem.

Once the options for acting are on the table, a decision has to be made. And that can be done in any number of ways—by voting, by negotiating a consensus, or by deliberating. If decision making is done by citizens weighing the possible consequences of a decision against what is deeply important to people, Kettering would call that “public deliberation.” The term may sound a bit strange, even though it is used to describe what juries are supposed to do. Outside juries, you can hear deliberation taking place as people ask one another: If we did what you suggest, what do you think would happen? Would it be fair? Would we be better off? Is there a downside? If there is, should we change our minds about what should be done?

To make deliberation less abstract, consider this story. Before there was e-mail, conversations often went on in the lobby of the local post office. Glenn Frank, a journalist, recalled the “original and independent . . . thinking” that went on in these “free-for-all discussions.” Although people might wear ready-made clothes, their views, Frank said, were “personally tailored.” And as they laid “their minds alongside the minds of their neighbors,” they “made up the public opinion of the village.” That was public deliberation.

After people have deliberated and settled on a general direction for moving forward, actions have to follow. In Suggsville, that happened when people pledged their support and promised to show up for projects. In the Kettering lexicon, this is “making commitments.” Implementation results in “public acting,” a term Kettering has used to describe a particular type of collective effort that continues over a long period of time and employs the varied resources that citizens have at their command.

Acting is typically followed by some type of assessment or evaluation. Some communities are intent on measuring their impact in hopes of convincing skeptics that their efforts have, in fact, had a demonstrable effect. Others are also interested in what they can learn from the totality of their efforts. In addition to measuring immediate effects, they want to evaluate their performance as a community. When what the community learns about itself is part of the assessment, and the citizenry itself is doing the evaluation, Kettering would say that collective or “civic learning” is going on.

What you have just read is a brief overview defining terms, so we need to go into much more detail about the practices citizens use in public work. The first three practices are crucial because they provide a foundation for the other three.

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Naming Problems in Terms of What Is Most Valuable to Citizens

The initial task in public work is identifying or describing the problems that need attention. Who gets to name these problems and the terms used to describe them are very important because they shape everything that follows. Naming problems can be done in many ways, but when the descriptions reflect people’s experiences and deepest concerns, a routine activity is transformed into a public or democratic practice. The door to politics opens to citizens; everyone becomes a stakeholder.

Public terms are distinctive in that they capture invaluable intangibles. Crime can be described in statistical terms, yet people value safety or being secure from danger. And safety can’t be quantified. Recall what happened in Suggsville. The police chief wasn’t wrong when he described the restaurant’s problem as loitering, but his name didn’t address other concerns about why the loitering was occurring, and it didn’t give Suggsville’s residents much of a role in solving the problem. Because of the forums, however, citizens were able to add names that were meaningful to them. They weren’t competing to see which name would win. Suggsvillians described a problem in ways that captured a number of concerns. People didn’t choose one name and discard all the others.

Naming a problem in public terms isn’t simply describing it in everyday language. The names that people give problems reflect concerns that are deeply important to most everyone. We all want to be free from danger, secure from economic privation, free to pursue our own interests, and treated fairly by others—to mention a few of these primal motives. Our collective or basic political needs are similar to the individual needs that Abraham Maslow found common to all human beings. They are more fundamental than the interests that grow out of our particular circumstances (which may change). And they are different from our values, which also vary.

Some individual needs are quite tangible (food for instance); others (being loved) are intangible. The same is true of the collective needs that motivate us. In one community that was facing corruption in high places and egregious crimes on the streets, the citizens asked themselves what they valued most. Virtually all said that, more than anything else, they wanted to live in a place that made them proud. Pride is an intangible aspiration rarely mentioned in planning documents or lists of goals. Yet the need to be proud of this city was a powerful political imperative.

We should emphasize again that naming problems in public terms doesn’t result in a one-dimensional description. Many names are used because there is always more than one concern at stake. That was evident in Suggsville when the names for the problem multiplied. Economic security was the first name for the town’s problem, but then people added others like promoting family and community stability. Different names reflect the different things people hold dear when they consider their collective well-being.

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Public names facilitate public work because the names encourage people to own their problems, and owning problems is a potent source of political energy. Notice that when citizens in Suggsville added their own names for the problem of economic well-being, they tended to implicate themselves in solving their problems. People could do something about the alcoholism that was threatening both families and the social order. And they could do something about the children who suffered when adults took little responsibility for their well-being.

Professionals, on the other hand, name problems in ways that mirror their expertise and the solutions their professions provide. That is one of the reasons that civic organizations have found that professionals and citizens are often on different pages. Even though nothing is wrong with professional names, they don’t normally take into account what citizens experience. For example, people tend to think of drug abuse in terms of what they see happening to families and how it influences young people, not in terms of police interdiction of the drug trade. Professional names are certainly accurate; in fact, they are so accurate that they create the impression that no other names are possible. When that happens, people don’t see their worries reflected in the way problems are presented, so they back off. In addition, professional descriptions may give the impression that there is little that citizens can do. The names political partisans use to describe problems can have the same effect. Battles over the right name threaten to ignite conflicts that many people believe are counterproductive.

Perhaps the most valuable insight that comes from people naming a problem in their own terms is the realization that citizens already know something about the problem. They know how the problem affects what they consider valuable. This insight, that we can draw valid knowledge from our collective experience, is self-empowering. As the saying goes, we may not know how to make shoes, but we know if the ones we have on pinch.

Public naming helps people recognize what is really at stake in an issue. And when that happens, citizens are more likely to join forces. Naming problems in public terms can set off a chain reaction leading to collective decision making and action.

When Americans name problems in terms of their own experiences, they may also realize that they are already participating in politics—the politics of solving problems. They don’t have to be rallied or enlisted, and the political world is less like a far-off planet inhabited exclusively by officeholders and policy experts.

**Framing Issues to Identify All the Options**

As problems are being named, various options for dealing with them are usually put forward. And as was said earlier, when all of these options or approaches to a problem are laid out, they create a framework for decision making. Issues are constantly being framed in communities by the media, officeholders, and civic organizations. These frameworks may or may not help citizens make sound judgments. Sometimes an issue is framed around a single plan of action to the
exclusion of all others. That kind of framework tells citizens to take it or leave it. Another common framework pits two possible solutions against each other and encourages a debate between advocates. Neither of these frameworks promotes the kind of collective decision making that leads to public work. Public decision making is better served by a framework that includes all the major options (usually three or four). When such a framing occurs, it becomes the second of the democratic practices.12

The everyday question, “If you are that concerned, what do you think should be done?” starts the process of creating a public-friendly framework. People usually respond by talking about both their concerns and the actions they favor. Typically, the concerns are implicit in the suggestions for action.

Each concern usually generates a variety of proposals for action. For instance, in a poor neighborhood hit hard by a rash of burglaries, most people would probably be concerned about their physical safety, which is surely a basic political motive. Some might want more police officers on the streets. Others might favor a neighborhood watch. Even though each of these actions is different, they all center around one basic concern—safety. In that sense, they are all part of one option, which might be characterized as protection through greater surveillance. An option is made up of actions that have the same purpose or that take a community in a particular direction.

In the kind of neighborhood just described, there are likely to be worries other than physical safety. These might include concerns about economic deprivation and declining social responsibility. Each would generate its own proposals for action. As in the matter of safety, reviving the economy would stimulate a variety of proposals. So would restoring a sense of social responsibility. Each cluster of actions, centered on its own underlying concern, would make up an option for dealing with the overarching issue, which might be something like “neighborhood revitalization.” The different options put together create a framework for decision making.

When all the options, including their downsides, are included in a framework, it creates a basis for the kind of fair trial that engages citizens. For the trial to be fair, each option also has to be presented with its best foot forward, yet with equal attention given to its drawbacks.

Take the issue of protecting the American family. When people consider all of the pressures on today’s families, many focus on the importance of the institution of marriage and lament the high divorce rate. These same people may also feel strongly about parental responsibility. And most of them probably worry about what is happening to children when they hear stories of abuse or lack of medical care; they believe in protecting the young. So on just this one issue,

12 For more on framing, see the Kettering publications What Citizens Can Do and Making Choices Together.
people value several things: marriage, parental responsibility, and the well-being of children. Each of these concerns suggests a different option for acting on the problem.\footnote{This account of what happens during deliberations on how to save American families was based on the outcomes of National Issues Forums (NIF) on that issue. (NIF is a nonpartisan, informal network of locally sponsored forums for the consideration of public policy issues.) See Doble Research Associates, \textit{The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm?} NIF Report on the Issues (National Issues Forums Institute, 1996). For more information on National Issues Forums, see http://www.nifi.org.}

Playing out the example, imagine a community that wants to strengthen its families in the face of increasing juvenile violence, child neglect, teenage pregnancies, and divorce. Lacking the money to respond to all of these problems, the town council would identify the interventions most likely to be effective. The council might also listen to the way citizens name the problem and frame the issue.

If citizens were to frame the issue by identifying options, one option they might see immediately (because of strong feelings about marriage) would be to try to reduce the high divorce rate. An action consistent with this option would be to use the town’s budget to set up a marriage-counseling center. The downside, however, might reflect another widely held conviction about the importance of privacy. Some people would probably say that marriage is a private relationship; governments should not intrude.

A second option that citizens might put on the table could grow out of concerns about parental responsibility. Actions consistent with this option might range from using council funds for courses on parenting skills to instituting mandatory jail sentences for parents who fail to supervise their youngsters. Once again, though, a parent-centered policy might trigger the same objections as a marriage-centered policy—government intrusion into private life.

Still another option could follow from the conviction that children have to come first; they must be protected from the things that put them at risk, such as violence and drugs. This option might be implemented by offering anger-management courses in the schools or by assigning more undercover police officers to arrest drug dealers. Or the council could focus on street gangs and get tougher on youth offenders. The downside? All of these measures are controversial for a variety of reasons. For instance, some people would object to using schools for purposes other than teaching the basic academic subjects. And there would surely be differences of opinion over putting young people in jail.

This is not to suggest that a framing done by citizens would be free of disagreements if issues like this one were presented fairly by showing the pros and cons of each option. As was said earlier, deliberative politics resounds with different opinions, but these differences don’t replicate those that characterize partisan politics. Everyone may share many of the same concerns yet weigh them differently. What is even more important, people not only differ with other citizens but also differ within themselves because they have more than one concern. For instance, on the
issue of strengthening families, those who are concerned about privacy and wary of government intervention may also have strong feelings about the need to hold parents responsible. When citizens face issues squarely, they can’t escape the pull and tug of the things they value most.

Public framings have to capture these tensions and set the stage for sorting out what is most valuable to people in a community—not valuable in the abstract, but valuable in specific situations. The real world context is critical and has to be considered in the framing. Is it more important for the town to care for children than to go after irresponsible parents? What is actually happening in the community? Knowing that there are already a number of agencies with effective programs for young people but that cases of parental neglect are increasing would certainly influence people’s decisions.

**Deliberating Publicly to Make Sound Decisions**

In the community concerned about family stability, the town council could have decided which policy to adopt on its own. Or it could have negotiated a settlement with stakeholders like the local social service agencies. Decision making is a routine political activity, and on some questions, elected representatives should decide. On other matters, the decision making needs to include the citizenry, especially when wicked problems require civic as well as government action. When citizens are involved in decision making, it can become the third of the basic public practices.

Involving citizens can take many forms; however, some stop short of meeting the requirements for self-rule and some overshoot the mark. Typically, including citizens means that community officials listen to their needs or hopes for the future. But people don’t participate in determining how their needs are going to be met or how their wishes are going to be realized. And the matter of what they can do themselves through their collective efforts never comes up. In other situations, efforts at involving people are based on a misconception of the role of citizens. They are asked to make financial or technical decisions that can only be made by competent professionals. Citizens aren’t experts in these matters, but they have the ultimate say on matters of purpose and direction. That is why issues for public decision making are framed around questions of what is most valuable, not around specific technical solutions.

Community decision making becomes open to citizens when they have opportunities to address the always tough questions of what *should* be done. Even the most reasonable people will differ over such questions. The type of decision making that is designed to deal with these morally charged disagreements has been called “deliberation” or moral reasoning. As noted, public deliberation turns community decision making into a democratic practice.

Expanding on the definition given earlier, deliberation is weighing the likely consequences of various approaches to a problem against all that we consider truly valuable. It increases the probability that a decision will be sound by helping a community determine whether the actions being
considered are consistent with what people consider most important for their collective wellbeing. Although we can’t be certain we have made the right decision until after we have acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate costs and benefits, to ask how high a price we would be willing to pay in order to get what we want. In the community that wanted to strengthen families, citizens had to weigh protecting children against their reservations about government interference in private life. They had to decide which was more important.

Deliberation doesn’t require any special skill; it is a natural act. Citizens deliberate on personal matters all the time with family and friends. And people are attracted to deliberative decision making because their experiences and concerns count as much as professional expertise and data. About the only difficulty the foundation has seen with explaining deliberation to citizens has occurred when it has been overexplained. When that happens, people get the impression that deliberation is a special process requiring highly trained and skilled moderators, which is obviously the opposite of a public practice. The perception that deliberation is a special technique to get people talking to one another also loses sight of the necessary connection between decision making and action; deliberation becomes detached from the political work of self-government.

Another concern about public deliberation has been that it is, in fact, public. That is, deliberation assumes that citizens can be well informed, even though political issues may deal with some matters for which most people have little expert information. Such information is unquestionably important, and opportunities to deliberate have prompted people (including students) to be more diligent in reading news articles and going to the library.

There are, however, other considerations that must inform political decisions, which lie outside expert knowledge. There is more than one kind of knowledge, particularly for the questions citizens face, which can be answered in more than one way. Knowing which answer is best for a community requires a knowledge that can’t be found in books alone because the questions aren’t just about facts. People have to determine what the facts mean to them as a community. Since these questions are ultimately about what should be, people have to create the knowledge needed to respond. In other words, public knowledge has to be socially constructed. A more accurate term for this sort of knowledge would be “practical wisdom,” or sound judgment, which citizens create as they reason together. Deliberation, the ancient Greeks explained, is “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.”

Campaigns to educate citizens should take note. What the public needs to know—and the way a citizenry goes about knowing—are different from what professionals know and the way they go about knowing. Providing factual information is no substitute for the talk people must do to teach themselves. Making sound decisions requires the exercise of human judgment to determine whether there is a consistency between the proposed actions and what is valuable to people.

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Expert knowledge is necessary, though not sufficient for making sound judgments on public issues. Factual information, along with personal experience, provides the necessary context for making decisions. And they must be taken into account if we expect to make our decisions to serve the best interest of all.

**Public Deliberation as Politics**

As communities holding issues forums have discovered, public deliberation is a different way of doing politics, not just a different way of talking (although talking is a political act: to talk fear is to frighten, to talk reconciliation is to reconcile). That insight, the foundation has learned, is critical to understanding civic engagement and public work. Consequently, in reporting our findings, we think it best to stop this discussion briefly and elaborate on what deliberation does, before going on to describe the other three practices.

Public deliberation is not just a prerequisite to public work; it is part of the work itself, so much so that some have called it “choice work.” Choice work helps counter the polarization and moral conflict that can lock the gears of the political system. And this form of collective decision making can deepen the understanding of problems in ways that stimulate fresh approaches, engage new civic actors, and inform officeholders about what is and isn’t politically permissible.

To be sure, nothing in the foundation’s research shows that public deliberation will invariably have any of these effects. It is no miracle cure for all that ails the body politic; yet case studies show that it has been useful in a number of communities. Here are some of the reasons why.

*To Move a Community beyond First Reactions and Popular Opinion*

The warning “act in haste, repent at leisure” applies to communities as well as individuals. The first job of public deliberation is to help communities get beyond first impressions to more shared and reflective opinions, or what some call “public judgment.” Public judgment is not the same as popular opinion, which is often contradictory and shortsighted. Deliberation combats knee-jerk reactions, misperceptions of the problems at hand, and a failure to understand other people.

Are Americans willing to accept the consequences of a popular course of action? No one can know until people have faced up to the cost and the long-term effects. Deliberation can help them do that. Suggsville’s deliberative forums certainly moved the community beyond the first

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15 Michael and Suzanne Osborn described the politics involved in “participative communications” in *Alliance for a Better Public Voice* (1991). This book was designed for educators in speech communication and published by the Kettering Foundation.

16 The term “public judgment” was coined by Daniel Yankelovich in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991).
reaction to the restaurant’s difficulties—arrest the people loitering—to a more thoughtful and inclusive analysis.

**To Work Through Moral Disagreements**

Differences over what is most valuable or what *should* be done are moral disagreements. These are inevitable in politics, yet they can lead to polarization and even violence. Elections won’t make the disagreements disappear. And negotiations may fail when partisans refuse to negotiate away deeply held convictions. While deliberation doesn’t lead to a unitary form of democracy devoid of conflict, it does take into account all the things that people hold dear when problems are named. By recognizing what people consider valuable, it helps communities deal with the intense feelings that are generated by moral imperatives. The sort of deliberation described here is more than a purely rational exercise in critical thinking; emotions are involved. When we are confronted with a difficult decision, we usually begin by either denying that there is a real problem or blaming our troubles on somebody else. Tensions arise when what we need to do to solve a problem threatens the things we hold dear. For instance, an action that might make us more secure from terrorism could also require limitations on our freedom. Tensions arise not only among us because we have different priorities but also within us personally because we want to be both free and secure.

Deliberation should help us work through the anger and frustration that result, not to make the feelings go away but to reach the point at which we are in control of our emotions. “Working through” is an apt phrase because that is exactly what happens when we move from denial or blaming others to facing up to the tensions inherent in every public decision. Only then are we in a position to make sound decisions.

“Working through” is also an apt phrase in another sense—it moves the public along through natural reactions when being confronted by tough issues. Initially, people may not be sure that there is a problem serious enough for them to pay attention to it. Later on, citizens may know there is a problem but aren’t ready to acknowledge that they might be contributing to it. And later still, people may realize that they face a serious problem—they have to respond and are ready to make a decision about solving it. Forums have to take into account where citizens are in coming to terms with an issue. The nature of what has to be decided is different at different stages of public awareness.\(^\text{17}\)

As Americans proceed from recognizing a problem to deciding what they should do about it, many want opportunities to talk about the problems frankly—provided they can exchange opinions without being attacked personally. We have found that people are even curious about what others who aren’t like them think, and they look for opportunities to exchange opposing views.

Forum participants have given high marks to meetings where they could express strong opinions without others contesting their right to express their point of view. The job of deliberative forums is to foster that kind of political environment in a community.

**To Set the Stage for Community Problem Solving**

It would be impossible to estimate the number of bad decisions that have been made as a result of an incomplete understanding of a problem or a misperception of the people affected by it. Part of public deliberation’s political work is to develop a better sense of the problems a community faces as well as the people touched by them. That understanding can pave the way for constructive change.

When forum participants struggle over difficult choices, they often develop a clearer understanding of their fellow citizens. That’s critical because these same people are going to have to work together, and learning about the ways that different people experience a problem can improve the strategy that a community uses to deal with it. Repeated deliberations can also change people. Participants say they get a better handle on issues; that is, they are able to put issues in a larger context and make connections between problems. This helps them approach political questions more realistically. Self-interests broaden and connect; shared concerns become easier to see. Citizens begin to talk more about what they ought to do and come to see their personal well-being in a larger context.

Those who have participated in a number of deliberative forums report becoming more involved in civic activities, perhaps in part because of a better understanding of others. This mutual understanding, however, is a by-product of choice work; deliberation isn’t political therapy. People don’t deliberate because they want to feel better about themselves or their problems. They deliberate because they want to solve their problems.

In addition to having a shared sense of a problem and a better understanding of the people who are going to have to solve it, the exchange of perceptions in deliberation is crucial to developing new insights and reorienting ideas. One of the ways we get outside our own box is to use the perceptions of other people. A visiting scholar at the foundation liked to make this point by describing an imaginary bug crawling on a ball. Wherever the bug went, it saw endless space.

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18 These are some of the attitudes that the Kettering Foundation has seen reflected in the deliberative NIF forums. Chapter 12 of Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) has a more detailed description of this political discourse.

ahead. But if someone lifted the bug above the ball, it would realize that the space wasn’t infinite at all; it was really finite. Deliberation’s job is to get us off whatever ball we are on.²⁰

When people come to see their problems in a different light, they are usually able to identify new actors who can help solve the problems. And as an understanding of the scope of a problem grows, so does the recognition that other resources are needed to respond to it.

**To Make Progress When Consensus Is Impossible**

Even though deliberating may change people’s perceptions of one another or their appreciation of others’ potential as political actors, it won’t eliminate differences of opinion. People have remained at odds even after gaining a better understanding of why others held contrary views. But this is no small gain. Altering people’s perceptions of their fellow citizens and of the nature of the problems they face together can unlock a sense of possibility, which is a driving force behind progress.²¹

The deliberative forums that the foundation has seen have rarely ended in consensus. In a study of public deliberation, Public Agenda found that about half the participants (53 percent) changed their minds as a result of deliberative forums. Yet a much larger percentage (71 percent) had second thoughts about their opinions, even though they did not change their minds. And more than three-fourths (78 percent) said they encountered viewpoints different from their own and thought those views were valid.²² Recognizing the many concerns that people bring to an issue can keep a community’s focus from narrowing to one concern that trumps all others, which invites conflict and blocks progress. Although deliberation is not a means of conflict resolution per se, it seems to temper disagreements.

**To Inform Officeholders**

Public deliberations should enable citizens to make decisions about the work they should be doing. That has especially been the case when people have come to recognize when they are responsible for significant parts of their problems. Then they reason that, if they helped create problems, they must have some ability to manage them more effectively.²³

That said, the results of public deliberation could also be useful in guiding the efforts of government to useful ends. Forums can provide information that officials can’t get from any other source. Listening to the citizenry weigh options and struggle with tradeoffs can be insightful, and


²¹ The Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos*, pp. 11-14, 31-34.

²² Farkas and Friedman, with Bers, *The Public’s Capacity for Deliberation*, p. 17.

hearing citizens name issues can reveal the deeper motives and concerns they share. As people work through conflicts, they can discover what is truly valuable to them as a community. To be sure, watching deliberation is like watching wallpaper peel. It is slow and messy. And it doesn’t produce the quantifiable conclusions that polls do. Forums don’t lend themselves to firm conclusions about “what the public thinks,” but they can shed light on how the public is thinking. Understanding “public thinking” or how citizens go about making up their minds can be invaluable to officeholders. Being aware of the way citizens reason when faced with a difficult issue allows officials to enter into conversations knowing what people are thinking when they are actually thinking. Public thinking is different from the way professionals reason and political leaders make decisions. It isn’t a superior form of thinking; it is just another of the distinctive things that citizens do in their work.

Acquainting officeholders with public thinking doesn’t usually have a direct effect on legislation or policy, however. Expecting officeholders to do what deliberative forums dictate isn’t realistic because many forums don’t intend to dictate. Deliberative politics is not an alternative to representative government as some forms of direct democracy are. Most people who participate in deliberative forums are probably comfortable with the proposition that officeholders have to both represent their constituents’ wishes and exercise their own best judgment. Public deliberation is useful because it helps locate the boundaries of the politically permissible—what people will and won’t do to solve a problem. Those boundaries are useful to know, especially when officeholders think they have to cross them.

**Decision Making, Action, and Beyond**

Now to the remaining democratic practices used in doing public work. Naming, framing, and deliberating are of little consequence unless something comes of the decisions that citizens make. The next three practices, which have to do with making commitments, acting together, and learning as a community, are critical to realizing the full benefits of the practices that precede them. In fact, they carry the first three into the other work that citizens must do.

**Complementing Planning with Mutual Commitments**

Even in communities where citizens have deliberated over an issue and made decisions about what they think should be done, business as usual often takes over when it comes to implementing the decision. Citizens are pushed to the sidelines again. Institutions may acknowledge what people have decided in deliberations but then fall back on the familiar routines of institutional planning. As noted in the Introduction, some officials assume that once the people have spoken, it’s time for officeholders to follow up. Their plans don’t include provisions for public work.

Planning makes sense for institutions, but it isn’t the way citizens mount collective efforts. The reason is that the resources needed to implement institutional plans are different from those
needed to launch public work. If municipal agencies like the ones responsible for street repair or the water supply are called on to follow through on a community decision, they normally have the legal authority, equipment, and personnel to direct the task at hand. The democratic public, on the other hand, can’t command people or deploy equipment, and it seldom has any legal authority. So what is the democratic equivalent of planning? The fourth practice in public work is citizens making commitments to act and then reinforcing those commitments with covenants or mutual promises.

Nothing would have happened after the Suggsville forums if citizens had not stepped forward to suggest an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, start after-school programs for young people, or clean up the park. Making such commitments isn’t spontaneous or magical, nor is it done by institutional planning. People step forward because something valuable is at stake and because they see the possibility that they can act. Although citizens don’t always do what they intend, they are more likely to follow through when they have committed themselves in public.

Why do people organize patrols on crime-ridden streets when there is no financial inducement or legal obligation? After all, battling street crime isn’t just time consuming; it’s dangerous. Typically, most Americans can’t be coerced into cooperating. They do what they have pledged to do because their fellow citizens expect it of them. And the commitments are often reciprocal; one group promises another, we will do thus and so if you will do thus and so. Those are mutual promises or covenants. Such reciprocity builds connections between groups, something that has long been recognized as essential to effective political organizing. The more far-reaching the connections, the more diverse the resources they can bring to bear on a problem.

Public covenants may sound idealistic, but they work. They have their own kind of social leverage. One community leader explained the high attendance at his association’s meetings this way: “If you don’t show up, somebody will say something to you about it.” It isn’t uncommon for deliberations to be followed by mutual promises, either at forums or at subsequent meetings. In Sumter, South Carolina, for instance, teenagers held forums on what to do about drug abuse. The meetings prompted participants to commit themselves to prevention projects, which eventually helped some youngsters find jobs and make their way out of the drug culture.

Adding Public Acting to Institutional Action

Just as the public has its own distinctive way of moving from decision to action, it also has its own distinctive way of acting. Government agencies often act on behalf of the public, and people often act individually by volunteering for all sorts of civic projects. Both are beneficial,
but neither is the public acting. Public acting, the fifth of the practices, is made up of a variety of actions taken by citizens who are working together over an extended period of time. Recall the variety of initiatives that the citizens in Suggsville took.

Public acting is not only multifaceted but also mutually reinforcing. That is, the actions move in the same direction or toward the same goal. This shared sense of direction comes out of the deliberations that precede the actions. Public action is also coherent without being bureaucratically coordinated; Suggsville didn’t have a project manager to begin its revival.

The case for public acting, to be clear, is more than an argument for cooperation among citizens. Public acting has unique qualities, such as lower “transaction costs” (the cost of getting things done). When groups of citizens have identified overlapping objectives, as they did in the Suggsville forums, their efforts tend to mesh and reinforce one another. That increases productivity; the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Even though public acting requires a degree of coordination (everyone should show up at the park to mow grass on the same day), it isn’t administratively regulated and, consequently, doesn’t have administrative expenses.

Rather than substituting for official action, public acting supplements it. The potential of public acting to reinforce institutional action has already been recognized in the urban reform literature. For instance, Clarence Stone found that citizens in poorer neighborhoods formed alliances that accomplished far more than any institutions alone could.26

The payoff for citizens joining forces in collective action isn’t limited to the concrete products of public work. Working together, as one community organization pointed out, builds trust. When people work together, they get a more realistic sense of what they can expect from one another. This is political trust, which isn’t quite the same as personal trust and shouldn’t be confused with it. Political trust can be built among people who aren’t family or friends. Citizens are often strangers, and they need to know who they can and can’t depend on. Working together over time makes that obvious.

**Turning Evaluation into Civic Learning**

The sixth practice that is essential in public work is called civic learning. Like all of the other practices, it is a variation of a normal routine (evaluating actions taken), but it is distinctive. Civic learning isn’t the same as a traditional evaluation, although it can complement the outcome-based assessments that are often prescribed by funders. In civic learning, the community itself learns, and the learning is reflected in changed behavior. In other words, the unit of learning is the community, and the measure of learning is community change.

After a community has acted on a problem, the people involved want to know whether they have succeeded. It is only natural. Others are quick to judge. The press declares the results to be beneficial, harmful, or inconsequential. There are one-on-one conversations at the supermarket. Outside evaluators make “objective” assessments. The community, however, may not learn a great deal from chance conversations, the media’s conclusions, or the professional evaluations.

Even though helpful in many ways, conventional evaluations can undermine civic learning. Citizens are interested in knowing how well they worked together in addition to what they achieved. They have to unpack their motives and experiences themselves in order to learn from one another. The most unfortunate and surely unintended consequence of external evaluations can be to block this type of assessment; evaluators take over, and citizens have little opportunity to learn from one another.

In order to keep conventional assessments from blocking civic learning, it is important to keep the differences between the two in mind. The most significant one has to do with what is being evaluated. When a community learns, both the objectives of the civic efforts and their results have to be on the table for inspection, not just the results or outcomes. In civic learning, people may realize that what they first thought was most valuable turned out not to be as important as it seemed. That’s different from measuring outcomes against fixed, predetermined goals in conventional evaluations.

The citizens of Suggsville could have measured their success by counting the number of customers at the restaurant or the number of arrests for alcohol abuse. Some probably did. But members of the civic association had even larger objectives, which couldn’t be measured. They wanted to overcome the fatalism that had grown as the town went into decline. And they needed to know how well they worked as a group. So they asked themselves simple but profound questions: What are we learning? Are the things we are doing getting us anywhere? Are we creating the kind of community we want?

When communities learn, they rename, reframe, and decide again—after the fact. Then they make new commitments to act. They learn by doing. Deliberation is especially important; it teaches people after they have acted, just as it does before. The questions afterward are much the same—what should we do? Should we have done what we did? Was it really consistent with what we thought was most important? Were we wrong about what was important? Civic learning is all of the democratic practices rolled into one.

Before leaving this last practice, we should mention a question Kettering often hears from civic practitioners. It usually comes up after a fledgling civic initiative is underway. People want to know, how do we keep up the momentum? Democracy’s answer is by continuing to learn. Democracy assumes that people are ultimately their own sovereigns. They must decide what to do because there is no other sovereign authority that can tell them. The way a democratic citizenry figures out what to do next is by learning through experience.
Communities that approach their work as a series of experiments—and study those experiments to improve their performance—have an edge on communities that are so wedded to early success that they quit as soon as the results aren’t what they want. Communities that are in a learning mode have a better chance of staying the course.

This is the reason that civic learning can’t wait until the end of a project; it has to go on continuously. It sets the essential tone for public work by constantly inviting the public back into public business. Learning encourages people to make incremental improvements and not be dissuaded when first attempts don’t turn out as hoped. Even failure has its uses when people are learning.

Learning communities are like those ideal students who read everything assigned and then go to the library to find out more. These communities don’t copy a model, follow a case study, or use a formula. Imitation, they say, is limitation. Certainly they study what others have done, but they adapt what they see to their own circumstances.

**Not Six, but One**

All six of these practices are part of the larger politics of self-rule. As said before, they empower lone individuals by organizing them for public work. The secret of their power is that they aren’t stand-alone practices; they fit inside one another, the way the wooden matrëshka dolls from Russia do. When people lay out their options for acting on a problem, they continue to mull over the name that best captures what is really at issue. When they make decisions, they usually continue to revise both the framework and the name of the problem. People also anticipate the actions that will be taken and the commitments they may have to make. They recall lessons learned from past efforts. Deliberative forums are actually microcosms of democratic politics. Citizens don’t leave forums and move on to make commitments and act; they begin to do both while they are deliberating.

We mention this interrelationship because of another question the foundation gets from people who learn about democratic practices and want to use them in their communities. They want to know, where do we begin? Some groups start with naming issues; others begin with deliberation in forums. The practice they choose is not as important as recognizing that the practices are just parts of a larger whole, a democratic way of governing ourselves.

In their book on deliberative democracy, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that democratic practices like deliberation belong anywhere and everywhere—in civic organizations, in school boards, in tenants’ associations.\(^\text{27}\) There is no one right place to begin, but beginning in a democratic fashion is essential if the objective is to strengthen democratic self-rule. Jay Rosen,

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one of the foundation’s adjunct scholars, put the matter succinctly: The way communities enter politics has to be consistent with the politics they want to flourish.

As a practical matter, it is unrealistic to try to stop a community in the midst of solving a problem and ask people to start over by renaming the issue at hand. It is probably better to look for opportunities in what is already going on to change the regular routines of naming, framing, and so on, into democratic practices. A colleague at the foundation who lives in a nearby rural community faced with urban sprawl tried to identify these opportunities. The issue had already become polarized with developers on one side and preservationists on the other. Few would have joined her if she had tried to stop the meetings. Instead, she made comments that invited her neighbors to consider modifications in what they were doing—changes that would open the way to democratic practices. “Does anyone see another side to this problem?” she asked. “Are there other options we should consider?” “Almost everyone thinks we should do this, but are there any negative consequences we ought to consider?”

**Politics by the People**

When taken together, the six democratic practices used in public work tell a story about how citizens can go about governing themselves. This story of politics by people isn’t like the conventional account of how our system works, although it isn’t incompatible with it. Admittedly, this is a story about how politics should be; yet it is based on what has actually happened.²⁸

It is important to see the whole story being told here and not just consider the individual practices separately. In the first place, the practices lose their meaning when disconnected. Deliberation, for instance, can’t be understood apart from what happens before and after it. In the second place, seeing the whole story makes it possible to identify subtle but important distinctions between citizen-based and institutional-based politics. Obviously, the public is understood in a different way and plays a different role. And the tone of citizen-based politics is different, too. People have distinctive ways of dealing with one another because they are influenced by the necessity of working together to solve common problems.

**Different Rules**

The ways that people deal with one another when they are working on common problems impose what might be called “rules.” For example, take the work involved in making decisions

²⁸ This concept of politics has been called by various names: “citizen politics” and “deliberative democracy” are two of the most common. Some of the various stands on this understanding of democracy were captured in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. John Gastil and Peter Levine (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
about how to attack problems. In order to do this choice work, people have to weigh options for acting to determine how various options might affect the things that they hold dear. So in order to find out what is dear, people have to listen to one another very carefully. Listening carefully isn’t exactly a rule, but maybe that description will do for now if we say more about what we mean. Rules bring to mind standards of etiquette or civility, which is not what we mean. Good deliberative forums are too zesty to be polite; strong emotions are always part of the mix. And because of the importance of spontaneity, formal written rules won’t do either. We are talking about rules in the sense of pragmatic, situational, or work-inspired incentives for getting a job done.

If these so-called rules are followed consistently over time, they might become norms and be reflected in community attitudes. Initially, they are just the ways people have of interacting when they are doing public work. Anything people do together, whether it’s raising a barn in the old-fashioned way, playing a team sport, or operating a business, generates its own rules. The same is true in the case of the democratic practices. The rules give the politics of public work a distinctive tone or feel.

Kettering first became aware of these implicit rules after receiving reports on forums that dealt with highly controversial issues like AIDS and abortion. When forums begin with an agreement among the participants to work toward making decisions and not just talk about the issue on the table, the discussions are more likely to be deliberative. Securing an agreement on the objectives of a forum is an effective way to set standards of behavior. If someone tries to derail the deliberations, others will usually step in to bring the conversations back on track. The people who bring their groups back to problem solving don’t usually appeal to official rules but to the pragmatic, informal ones with comments like, are there other ways to see this issue? The intent of this question isn’t to be polite but rather to get all of the concerns into a framework that will promote deliberation.

Some rules are established early on when people work to find a name for a problem that incorporates their varied experiences and concerns. For instance, citizens have to consider experiences that are different from their own because these experiences have to be taken into account if the name is to mean something to most everyone. People won’t work together otherwise. Rules also develop around creating a framework of options. Americans are suspicious of framings that are weighted in favor of one particular course of action. So creating an acceptable framework imposes a standard of fair-mindedness.

Every task in public work has implications for the way people deal with one another—if the work is going to get done. The work of making difficult choices creates incentives to listen, to consider opposing points of view, and to judge fairly. And the work of securing commitments, acting publicly, and learning civically creates other incentives.
Of course, there have been forums where deliberation never took place because there was too little structure. Forum participants were just encouraged to talk and listen. No one suggested there was any work to do. At the other extreme, some forum organizers have worried that participants might disrupt the deliberations. That has seldom happened. Yet the worries have caused forum leaders to overstructure meetings. Apprehensive moderators have intervened after every comment, which blocks the person-to-person interaction that makes deliberation productive. Or they have imposed written rules of behavior, which can stifle an honest exchange of opinions.

Most of the rules of public work are actually just common sense. And they aren’t confined to what happens in public forums. Many of these rules are implicit in the attitudes, norms, or guiding principles of what have been called high-achieving, or smart, communities. Not perfect by any means, these communities have, nonetheless, been able to manage their difficulties exceptionally well despite limited resources. They have had staying power and a broad base of participation in civic initiatives.

Vaughn Grisham’s study of Tupelo, Mississippi, one of these high-achieving communities, provides examples of the larger rules that go beyond forums and grow out of the full range of public work. At one time, Tupelo was called the poorest town in the poorest county in the poorest state of the Union. Small (its population is about 34,000) and located in rural Lee County, the town 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 4-lane highway within 75 miles. By 2003, thanks to Tupelo, the per capita income in Lee County was second only to Madison County, where the state government payroll fuels the economy. During one 13-year period, Lee County added more than 1,000 new industrial jobs per year and even more service positions. The public schools have consistently been rated among the best in the region, and the citizenry owns them.

One might wonder whether a strong economy has been the reason for the robust public life in communities like Tupelo. Grisham’s investigation of the town’s progress, however, has shown that public work preceded and paved the way for economic growth. Robert Putnam had the same question in mind when he studied cities in north central Italy. He found that the prosperous regions weren’t civic-minded because they were rich, but rich because they were civic minded. Most people in Tupelo agree; Vaughn Grisham says they believe their prosperity has been the result of the way the community goes about its business.

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29 Suzanne W. Morse used the term “smart communities” in her book by that name: Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).


The first rule of business in Tupelo is that the public has to have a role in order for the community to solve its problems. This guiding principle was born out of experience. Public work in Tupelo began in small neighborhoods when people started making collective decisions and acting on them—using their own resources. Eventually, these groups joined forces to attack problems that affected more than one neighborhood. (The Tupelo story, by the way, suggests that the public is not one large mass but rather a conglomeration of small groups, each grounded in local problem solving but capable of joining with other groups to address larger issues.) As small groups of citizens in Tupelo began to act on local problems, their efforts eventually changed notions about what “the people” could do. The rules for collective problem solving lead to other guiding principles: See everybody as a resource; never turn the work over to agencies that don’t involve citizens; build teams.

Such confidence in the public might not come so easily in every community. Americans can be very critical of their fellow citizens. Taking issues to citizens or, worse, relying on their decisions strikes some as either naïve or downright dangerous. In one town, a woman who had initially advocated greater public involvement in education reversed course. Maybe that wasn’t a good idea, she said, “you have so many conflicting opinions about education and problems in general, and we’re certainly not experts.” Others have recoiled at the thought of airing issues in the community and asking people what should be done because they believe it will only give more power to the most vocal. Better to keep controversial matters quiet, a realtor advised, lest disputes erupt that would drive property values down. He couldn’t imagine the public marshalling resources and taking concerted action. Leaders with his mindset probably can’t be convinced that democracy will work in their communities. They don’t have confidence in the citizenry (and citizens may not have any confidence in them).

These reservations about Tupelo’s guiding principles may be one of the reasons the town’s achievements have been studied more than they have been replicated. Perhaps communities attempting to copy Tupelo have paid little attention to the practices of public work and the rules implicit in them. Or they may have concentrated more on what was done rather than how it was done and by whom. Tupelo has an automobile museum that attracts visitors, and it may have inspired local museums in other communities. But replicating Tupelo’s museum wouldn’t necessarily stimulate public work or import its rules.

The most basic rule of self-rule is that citizens have to choose what they do; they can’t be conscripted into public work. As logical as that rule is, it has been ignored, even in instituting one of the most democratic of all the practices—deliberative decision making. Having seen and enjoyed a demonstration forum, some people have gone out and immediately convened one in their community, forgetting that the first decision their fellow citizens have to make is whether they want to hold forums. Democratic practices can’t be used on people; they can only be used

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by them. How public work begins is crucial; citizens have to own their work every step of the way.

**New Sources of Political Power**

Politics done by the people instead of for them not only follows different rules of the game but also suggests different ways of thinking about political power. Power is usually associated with legal or positional authority and comes from having control over resources or people. Another way to think of power is the ability to join forces and form working relationships. This is power with, not over, and it is generated by democratic practices like deliberation.

Some people have power over others; some don’t. And those who don’t are seen—and often see themselves—as powerless. This perception leads to the assumption that those without power can be empowered only by the already powerful. But if one person empowers another, who really has the power? The power people truly own is generated when their experiences, insights, and talents are combined with the experiences, insights, and talents of others. “Others” is the key word here. Relational politics can shut out others if the power comes from the solidarity of the like-minded. That is not the kind of power generated by deliberative politics. One of the classic questions at the end of a forum is, who is not in this room that has to be here if we are going to deal with this issue? Not only is the experience of others essential to a full understanding of an issue, but also the resources of others are critical when dealing with the myriad facts of wicked problems.

The kind of relational power described here is an innate and renewable resource; citizens regenerate it when they use it to do public work because the work fosters new relationships. This self-reinforcing cycle continues and can expand, picking up energy as it goes along. New relationships make even more public work possible. And as people work together, they begin to see that they are making a difference. That opens the way to taking more ownership and responsibility, which, in turn, motivates people to do more public work. This may be one of the reasons high-achieving communities have considerable staying power.

Conventional notions about power have been changed, as they were in Tupelo, when citizens demonstrate what they can accomplish by combining their resources. No one has done more than John McKnight and John Kretzmann to show that people, even in the most impoverished communities, can generate their own power. These two scholars have documented what can happen
when communities consider the collective abilities of people and not just their needs. Power becomes the sum of the capacities of citizens.\textsuperscript{33}

Anyone who lives in a community impoverished by a weak economy and sees people ill, homeless, or otherwise burdened by problems not of their own making knows that individuals have serious needs. So it isn’t surprising that one of the standard tools in conventional politics is a needs assessment. But emphasizing needs, McKnight cautions, tends to have unfortunate political side effects. People lose a sense of what they can do. So he and Kretzmann created “capacity inventories” to identify untapped individual skills and underused community resources. McKnight insists that every person can be seen as a glass half empty or half full. Labeling people with the names of their deficiencies (that is, their needs) obscures the power that can be generated when citizens “express and share their gifts, skills, capacities, and abilities.”\textsuperscript{34}

Seeing power as innate and relational reinforced Tupelo’s conviction that local people must solve local problems. In an area of western Connecticut hard hit by plant closings, one citizen explained the need to claim local responsibility this way: “All workers have to realize that we’re responsible for our own condition. If we don’t devote some time to our unions, our political party, our church organization, and the laws being enacted, we’ll wake up and find ourselves with empty pension funds, bankrupt companies, disproportionate sacrifices, and a run-down community.”\textsuperscript{35}

Civic organizations that begin by searching for the one correct answer to a problem have sometimes discovered that there isn’t any one solution. Then people realize that they, themselves, with their commitment and energy, can be a large part of the answer they have been looking for. Two founders of a clean water project along the Tennessee River explained, “People have to provide their own hope. Nobody’s going to come along and make everything all better. It’s us. We’re the problem; we’re the solution.”\textsuperscript{36} This sense of responsibility is implicit in each of the democratic practices and should grow as people move from naming, to framing, to deliberating, and so on.

\textsuperscript{33} John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, \textit{Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets} (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, 1993).

One caution: recognizing capacities shouldn’t be confused with naming and framing issues around concerns and options. They are different. “Concerns” refers to things that are valuable, not problems or deficiencies.


\textsuperscript{35} Brecher, “‘If All the People Are Banded Together,’” p. 93.

Leadership from Everyone

Democratic practices also have special implications for leadership. Leaders are critical even in a democracy based on self-rule. Nothing happens spontaneously in a community; yet in communities that are adept at solving their problems, a great many people step forward. These are “leaderful” communities, meaning that everyone is expected to provide some initiative. The communities have redefined leadership by making it everybody’s business, not just the business of a few, and by not equating leadership with positions of authority.

High-achieving communities aren’t distinguished so much by the qualifications of their leaders as by their number, their presence throughout the community and, most of all, the way they interact with other citizens. Traditional leaders are usually intent on getting support for decisions they have already made. They may take months to study an issue and make decisions among themselves yet allow the citizenry little opportunity to do the same. Having agreed on a plan of action, they try to convince people of its merits with a barrage of supporting facts and attractive arguments. The authors of the plan may have deliberated over the pros and cons of various alternatives, but citizens haven’t. Even if these leaders succeed in selling their proposals, their communities will have only a persuaded population, not an engaged public with the political will to act on its own. Leaders in leaderful communities, by comparison, are skilled in fostering public decision making and work.

Traditional leaders in positions of authority are typically gatekeepers who control access to money and give or withhold permission for community projects. Leaders in high-achieving communities tend to be door openers who connect people and broaden participation. They look to the community for solutions, not just to an elite of other leaders. Vaughn Grisham is fond of citing the owner of the Tupelo newspaper, George McLean, who told citizens that if they wanted a better community, they would have to do the work themselves. McLean isn’t the only leader who has had this insight. In Kansas, another journalist, Davis Merritt, then editor of the Wichita Eagle, argued, “The only way . . . for the 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.”

Political Space without a Street Address

The politics that emerges from the six democratic practices has still another distinctive characteristic—its location. Usually, people have to go to specially designated places to practice politics: the voting booth or the jury box. Democratic practices, on the other hand, can begin almost

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anywhere: a coffee shop, a grocery store, even at someone’s kitchen table. Almost any of the places where people regularly gather can provide this public space. The ideal locations are those that are open to more than one congregation, class, constituency, or membership.

The importance of this space has been documented in a study by Ray Oldenburg. Festivals, Little League baseball games, soccer matches, neighborhood parties, and potluck dinners bring people together. They chat before and after church services; they talk at weddings and funerals; they sound off in bars and bingo parlors. Conversations in these social settings can lead to more formal deliberations, which may be why Oldenburg called these the “great good places” of a community.40

Not all of these social activities lend themselves to democratic practices, however. Those that do have particular characteristics. They allow people to get to know one another as citizens as opposed to being known only by reputation—that is, by social status, family background, or institutional position. And they encourage conversations about the well-being of the community as a whole.41

Public space can certainly be created by deliberative forums. That has been reported by more than 30 institutes or centers around the country dedicated to teaching democratic practices. Many of these institutes have put deliberation at the center of their work because of the space it creates. Institutes at Penn State, Hofstra, and the University of Pennsylvania, among others, specialize in helping communities that want to deliberate on educational issues. Nearly all of the centers use the guides in the National Issues Forums (NIF) series, and some also frame their own issues to stimulate deliberation.42

When the civic groups attending the institutes go back home, they have to find others who see problems that require public work. They often begin by naming these problems to capture the concerns of citizens. The center at Ohio State, for example, assisted Cincinnati in designing more than 150 local forums where citizens went from naming problems in race relations to deciding what actions they could take to reduce those problems. One of the outcomes of this project was the formation of a new citywide organization, Neighbor to Neighbor, which was responsible for following up on the forums. Similar projects at other institutes have provided building blocks for new civic architecture in several communities. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, for instance, an ad hoc association of more than 40 organizations has been sponsoring forums on NIF issues each

40 Ray Oldenburg, The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community (New York: Marlowe, 1999).

41 The Harwood Group, Forming Public Capital, p. 3.

42 For more information on public policy institutes, see the National Issues Forums Institute Web site at http://www.nifi.org.
year for more than two decades. These forums have given hundreds of citizens a chance to make collective decisions and act as a public.43

An institute in Iowa illustrates how these centers form and then create public space throughout a state. Established by a coalition of organizations that included the association representing teachers, the organization of school boards, and the state department of education, the fledgling institute, called Iowa Partners in Learning, began by organizing deliberative forums on issues important to the future of Iowa. A year later, the institute analyzed results from the forums and presented them to state agencies. Then Partners began assisting communities that wanted the public to be more involved in making decisions on local issues. New members joined the institute—the parent-teacher organization, the league of cities, the university system, and an agency for rural development within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Why the interest? Participants in Partners said they were looking for an alternative to confrontational politics—an alternative they found in deliberative politics.44

The community organizations served by these institutes didn’t necessarily have creating public space as a goal, even though many of their projects have increased opportunities for the public to do its work. Most organizations are motivated by their self-interests. Local libraries, for instance, want to encourage people to read about important issues, and deliberative forums help. Literacy programs use the NIF books not only to teach reading but also to draw their participants into conversations with other citizens. (Professionals in these programs believe literacy is not just a matter of reading in private; it is the ability to join in the political discourse of democracy.) Advocacy organizations use deliberative forums for different reasons. They want to attract people who don’t like to be lectured. Whatever the immediate goal, the net result of these organizational ventures has been to make ordinary space public.

**Aligning Regular Routines with Democratic Practices**

To sum up, the politics implicit in the six democratic practices is unique in every way, from where it takes place, to the type of power it generates, to the leadership it develops. At the same time, despite being unique, these practices can evolve out of ordinary community routines. Communities don’t need to import new techniques or develop special skills. The same is true of community institutions like schools and city councils. These institutions can align the way they go about their business with the way the public goes about its business, so the two can complement one another.

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43 For reports on actions that have followed deliberations, see *What Citizens Can Do* and *Making Choices Together*.

Admittedly, “aligning routines” sounds vague. But it is a way of thinking about a relationship, or a concept. The concept grows out of recognizing that even though leaders of community organizations are citizens, the work of citizens and the work of civic organizations are different. The idea of aligning is to carry on organizational routines in ways that make it easier for citizens to do their work.

Citizens name problems, frame issues, decide questions, implement decisions, act, and learn. Community organizations also name, frame, decide, implement, act, and learn. Every democratic practice has its counterpart in an organizational routine. Aligning organizational routines with democracy means to carry on the business of organizations in ways that strengthen the practices of citizens.

The first step in alignment is to be aware that citizens have their own distinctive ways of naming, framing, and so on. Organizations need to know the names that citizens give issues because the names reveal what is truly important to people. This information can improve expert diagnoses. Similarly, organizational framing of issues can be strengthened by knowing what is in a public framing. On the other side of the coin, sharing the names that organizations give problems and their frameworks with citizens might make people more receptive to the expertise that organizational leaders believe is often discounted. At a minimum, organizations can be sensitive to the ways that their names and framework for approaching issues can unintentionally shut out citizens. That happens when people don’t see their experiences and concerns represented in the way issues are presented.

**Self-Starters for Democracy**

Overcoming conflict, building trust, getting more people involved—all of the problems that community organizations struggle with—are only problems if the organizations believe that citizens are critical in making democracy work as it should. Everything in this book assumes that citizens count. But people are not born citizens: so where do they come to see themselves as political actors? It is in communities, one of our political philosophers, John Dewey, argued. That is where the public first finds and identifies itself. The reason is that communities of place are where most people encounter the problems that directly affect their lives. And communities are where people expect to make a difference in combating those problems.

Sharing Dewey’s conviction, local organizations try to invigorate community life by importing resources from outside: speakers, money, ideas. Doubtless, all of these imports can be helpful. But the most important resource can’t be imported—and that is the ability of people to form

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pragmatic, working relationships with others in different circumstances and with different interests.

The possibility that a democratic public has in its own resources the equivalent of the self-starter that Charles F. Kettering invented has profound implications for engagement efforts. That possibility spurred the Kettering Foundation to look for words that would describe an alternative to importing strategies for strengthening communities. We first hit on “elicitive strategies.” “Elicit” seemed on target; it means to “draw forth” something that is latent or potential. But what a mistake that choice of words proved to be! People twisted their tongues pronouncing “elicitive,” yet the idea was too important to lose. Our research convinced us that community life could be strengthened by using everyday routines and untapped civic capacities, rather than by bringing citizens to special meetings and introducing them to new information and techniques.

Then we remembered something J. Herman Blake said, based on his experience as both a scholar and community organizer: “Build on what grows.” In nearly every community, something is happening to turn conventional routines into public practices or to put the public back into the public’s business. The key, Blake insisted, is to find what is already trying to happen and build on it. That led him to coin this phrase that reflects the spirit of self-rule. It resonates with the civil rights song “We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For.”

The advantage of building on what grows is that projects can start small and in a number of places. This strategy also assumes that real growth comes in spurts, that two steps forward and one step back is normal. Self-rule can only be achieved incrementally, by trial-and-error. In fact, it is the experience of learning from trial and error that leads citizens to realize that they are, indeed, the ones they have been waiting for. That is the ultimate insight in engagement.
This report is based on a larger work, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, which was published in January 2006. Kathy Heil typed the manuscript; Paloma Dallas and Melinda Gilmore were responsible for editing; and Angel George Cross did the formatting.