

Building Healthy Communities

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Building Collaborative Communities is the first in a series of four research reports commissioned by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, a national program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, to address problems in smaller American cities. The project and its reports focus on issues of collaboration between public, private, and not-for-profit sectors in communities; profile urban issues in the context of strategies for systemic change; and suggest new models for strengthening communities. For more information about the Pew Partnership, visit www.pew-partnership.org.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Leadership definitions are continually evolving, but the lessons of the Cold War make it clear that old paradigms are hard to transform. The emphasis has for too long been on who had the most influence with whom, or what was the fastest way to achieve a personal goal. The removal of the Iron Curtain, however, has allowed citizens to realize their collective power. With the heady example offered by the East Germans, who toppled the wall dividing their country with their candle-lit parades and without any blood shed, communities around the world are assuming more responsibility for their futures.

Even in America, with our culture of open self-criticism and intense media scrutiny, we have not fully internalized our own message to the world: citizen leaders are critical to the democratic process. The most recent scholarship in leadership provides positive role-models, by emphasizing the functions of leadership as much or more than the historical, individual trait approach. Leading is no longer seen as something only an individual does, it now applies to groups, organizations, and even whole communities. As Norina Finley says in her paper "Leadership: The Collaborative Process" (The Journal of Leadership Studies, 1994, Vol. 1, No. 3): "The concept of leadership as a process that results in a relationship rather than as a function of a position or role...fits in with the leadership paradigm for the post-industrial era. Here all individuals as active participants in innovative organizations engage in a relationship as a process, as part of the organizational culture. (p 59)"

The Pew Partnership for Civic Change was designed to help create innovative community collaborations between government, business, non-profits, and citizens. Now that the projects have been underway for a year, those collaborations are emerging, while still expressing the need for citizen leadership skills and habits in order to build even stronger, more effective collaboratives. In light of this critique, we have established this leadership collaboration series to provide practical role models for the development of a true leadership community. To stimulate conversation about civic leadership, we have asked four authors of diverse backgrounds to address the topic of building new, civic leadership approaches within communities.

In this first essay, Bruce Adams describes the elements of a healthy civic community. Building on his background as an elected official, Adams approaches his topic with examples of how citizen leadership works. By carefully delineating the contrasts between productive and divisive communities, Adams lays a clear road-map for any community willing to invest in the effort of overcoming its internal turf wars. The succeeding three papers in the Leadership Collaboration series will examine other, different aspects of developing community leadership. Michael Briand discusses the role deliberation can play in creating new opportunities for communities. Jeanne Porter describes, in the context of South Carolina's Penn Center, ways communities can create diverse leadership cadres working toward common goals. Suzanne Morse concludes the series by exploring the importance of citizen involvement in change processes within their communities in order to create avenues for participation and action. We hope you find these four essays timely and helpful, and encourage you to use each booklet as a handbook to encourage both self-evaluation and change within your broader community.

Tonya M. Yoder
Editor

PREFACE

Twenty-five years ago I took a college seminar from Eric Goldman and read *Rendezvous with Destiny*, his history of the American reform era at the turn of the century. I learned people working together could make a real difference in their own lives and in the lives of others. I still believe that. But I'm not sure enough others do.

The 1994 elections showed a frustrated, mistrustful, and angry electorate. Americans are increasingly skeptical about the political process and disbelieving that positive change is possible. This is especially noticeable among our young.

Throughout our history, Americans' civic skepticism has served the country well. But now our admiral skepticism seems to have escalated into a dangerous cynicism. We are losing our traditional American faith that by pulling together we can solve our problems.

Building stronger, healthier communities means building stronger, more positive relationships—relationships crossing racial, ideological, interest group, and jurisdictional boundaries. In this essay, I want to show how the vicious cycle caused by negative relationships undermines our democratic foundations at the community level and how positive relationships among civic leaders can help build healthy communities and restore America’s “we can do it” spirit.

The Public Mood

Things don’t seem to be working. The public is in a sour mood. Gridlock predominates the political scene. Solutions are blocked, while problems fester. No one seems to be leading. Public cynicism and hopelessness grow.

Is this public cynicism justified? To a significant degree, yes. The federal budget deficit seems beyond solution. Poverty is increasing. Ideological partisans tie up action on major issues on Capitol Hill, as well as in statehouses and city halls. The bonds of community are fraying or broken in many communities across the country.

Conventional wisdom says Americans are apathetic about politics. They are so wrapped up in their individual concerns that they no longer care. They are either so busy with their lives or so frustrated with the system that they have no time for civic life. The Harwood Group, in a 1991 study prepared for the Kettering Foundation, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, disputes this belief. Based on a series of interviews with citizens across the country, Richard Harwood and his associates concluded “Americans are not apathetic, but they do feel impotent when it comes to politics.” According to Harwood, “beneath this troubled view of politics is an American public that cares deeply about public life.”

Whether one is as optimistic as Harwood about people’s desire to participate, it is fair to conclude that people are making informed judgments. They will participate, but only when they feel their efforts have a chance of making a meaningful difference. The Harwood Group research may indicate reinventing government reforms miss the mark somewhat. It is not enough to improve government performance. The challenge is to **reinvent community** to involve and engage citizens more successfully.

E. J. Dionne, Jr., of *The Washington Post* described the dilemmas we face in his insightful and aptly titled book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*: “Ideas matter, and...ideas, badly formulated, interpreted and used, can lead us astray. We are suffering from a false polarization in our politics, in which liberals and conservatives keep arguing about the same things when the country wants to move on.” As a result, according to Dionne, “Americans view politics with boredom and detachment. For most of us, politics is increasingly abstract, a spectator sport barely worth watching.”

Our American democracy is deeply rooted in community at the grassroots level. The public is against big, unresponsive government. A broad consensus is growing for greater reliance on local communities.

David Mathews, Kettering Foundation President, has observed: “Americans believe that the chances for change are best at the local level, in communities where they can get their hands on problems.” This is the America that works.

Many achievements across America are worthy of disabusing us of our cynicism and negativism. They are happening in businesses, churches, synagogues, and communities at a level below the national consciousness. Collectively they demonstrate accomplishments and creativity one would never imagine from reading national polls. Our national politics would profit from the positive community-building lessons learned at the local level.

My own experiences have confirmed the optimistic lessons I learned from Professor Goldman 25 years ago. In the 1970s, I worked for Common Cause mobilizing citizens across the nation to make governments at all levels more open and accountable. For the past eight years, I served as an elected local legislator in a country noted for its public participation and innovative government. From both experiences, I saw people of good will working constructively together for positive change.

The problem is not that nothing is working. The problem is that it seems nothing is working, because our views are affected by the many negative messages carried by the national media. We are bombarded on a daily, even hourly, basis with all that is wrong in the nation and the world. The communities that work, the people who are helped, the things that go right are treated as minor sideshows to the main event of doom and gloom. The positive actions happening every day in communities across the country have little impact on the negative national mood. If people believe things are not going well, they won't go well.

Evolving Models of Leadership

Ironically, at a time when we are told the public is apathetic and uninvolved, we have more people involved in political decision-making than we did 25 years ago.

The old model of community leadership was pretty simple. We left the major decisions to a handful of people. The political elites dominating local decision-making were typically a small circle of white business and political leaders. They met behind closed doors and decided where economic revitalization would take place, where roads would go, and who got contracts.

This model no longer works. Citizens now have access to more information to form their opinions. Our society is more diverse and our problems more complicated. The old model of five city barons deciding for us is not workable or acceptable.

Interest group politics thus emerged as the replacement for the power elite. The notion was that the public interest would emerge from a healthy clash of interest groups. This model is unsatisfactory. The interest group model underrepresented people in need. Interest groups proliferated and gained political sophistication, allowing them to tie the political system in knots. The resulting gridlock has greatly contributed to citizen frustration and cynicism.

Collaborative community leadership is the new hope. Involving leaders from various segments of a community builds a stronger, healthier community. John W. Gardner, Chairman of the National Civic League, writing about communities' challenges, urged the creation of "networks of responsibility" serving communities as "a constituency for the whole."

Building Strong Communities

We know a great deal about building vital communities. Numerous organizations and authors have tried their hand at describing the civic foundations of healthy communities. The writings of John Gardner, R. Scott Fosler, President of the National Academy of Public Administration, David Mathews, and journalists Neal R. Peirce and William Raspberry, among others, have contributed to our understanding of how communities work.

One of the most elegant and concise descriptions of the civic foundations of a healthy community was presented in a 1982 policy statement of the Committee for Economic Development (CED), an independent research and education organization of leading business executives. CED's civic foundations include:

- a positive civic culture encouraging citizen participation rooted in a practical concern for the community as a whole;
- a realistic and commonly accepted vision of the community taking into account strengths and weaknesses in identifying what the community can and should become;
- effective building-block organizations blending the self-interest of their members with the broader interest of the community and translating that dual interest into effective action;
- a network among the key groups encouraging communication among leaders of every important segment and facilitating the mediation of differences among competing interests;
- the inclination to nurture civic entrepreneurs—leaders whose knowledge, imagination, and energy are directed toward enterprises that will benefit the community, whether in the public sector, the private sector, or both; and
- continuity in policy, including the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, which minimizes uncertainty and fosters confidence in individual and group enterprises.

Most recently, Harvard University Professor Robert D. Putnam has added a particularly compelling argument that strong traditions of civic engagement are the hallmark of successful communities. Frances Moore Lappe and Paul Du Bois underscored the idea of civic participation in their book *The Quickening of America*: "Across virtually every dimension of our

society—from the classroom to the community, from the workplace to city hall—Americans are giving shape to a profound new understanding of the role of everyday people in solving public problems.”

Why Don't We Do Better?

Amid the wealth of information on how to build healthy communities, why are so many communities unable to resolve tensions, satisfy diverse constituencies, and solve problems. Basically, the transition from the traditional leadership model to a new model of collaborative community leadership is hard. It takes time and commitment from hundreds of grassroots leaders. We have learned many bad habits, and it is not easy to unlearn them.

Community-building in a totally different social, economic, and technological age is much harder than in the past. Because of economic uncertainties, many individuals are preoccupied with the demands of their workplace, leaving less time for community activities. Most families today need two incomes to maintain their standard of living. The world of “Ozzie and Harriet” is past, and it is futile to long for its return. Technology allows us more independence—a trend predicted to increase in the next century. Also, the transitory nature of our society means fewer people have deep community roots.

Journalists, interest groups, and politicians have done much to fuel public cynicism and make effective problem-solving difficult.

Conflict and controversy sell newspapers and attract viewers. In most communities, *gotcha* journalism reigns. All too often, our journalism emphasizes personality over policy, conflict over consensus, strategy and sensation over substance, and error over achievement. Instead of helping foster community convergence, news accounts too often polarize difficult situations.

Organizational imperatives lead interest groups to overstate their criticisms, adding to the overheated political rhetoric of our times. Zapping the emotions of those at the extremes of the ideological spectrum, interest groups polarize and paralyze the political process, fueling negative public attitudes.

In this atmosphere, it is not surprising that politicians seeking elective office play to the worst aspects of these negative public attitudes. As our political rhetoric becomes more simplistic, our community problems become more intransigent. Each extreme political statement is topped by the next, escalating the rhetoric and further debasing the political process. Too often, what candidates feel they have to say to get elected, directly conflicts with governing needs.

Taking Responsibility and Building Trust

As citizens, we should not duck responsibility for this state of affairs. As Pogo said: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Our politicians wouldn’t use negative tactics if they didn’t work so well. Who among us, to take another example, given just a few minutes before rushing off to work in the morning would read the analysis of the governor’s latest welfare plan rather than the story of the mayor’s dalliance? The stories our media give us might not be what we need, but they are very often what we want.

A. Barlett Giamatti, as President of Yale University, addressed our responsibility as citizens in his essay “Power, Politics and a Sense of History.” “If a society assumes its politicians are venal, stupid or self-serving, it will attract to its public life as an on-going self-fulfilling prophecy the greedy, the knavish and the dim.” Or, as Adlai Stevenson put it: “Your public servants serve you right.”

Our politics is not working better for people and our communities are not healthier because we aren’t working hard enough at it, and aren’t taking enough personal responsibility for it. We don’t devote much attention to our civic lives.

John Parr, President of the National Civic League, points out that reformers have traditionally focused on two legs of our democratic society—the government and the private market. The reformer’s main task has been to make the government leg perform better. Now, Parr explains, we know it is not sufficient to focus on government reform.

United States Senator Bill Bradley, in a recent presentation to the National Civic League on the deterioration of our civil society, described a three-legged stool where the private market leg and the government leg are longer than the civic leg. The stool is not stable. It is our responsibility as citizens to strengthen the civic capacity of our communities and lengthen the civic leg.

Tinkering isn’t enough. Certainly, each community needs a forum for business, civic, union, and community groups to come together on a regular basis to share concerns and work on creating and implementing the community’s vision. Of course, each community needs a leadership organization to prepare up-and-coming leaders for the challenges they will face. **Most of all, each community needs a fundamentally new way of thinking about how a community does its business—each community needs to make a commitment to build a new collaborative approach to community leadership.**

The challenge is for communities to recognize the pitfalls of continuing business as usual. We need to get beyond old myths and old ways to a whole new approach. We need to break the interest group model and change the media’s adversarial approach to community and national news. We need leaders able to reach across boundaries and work constructively for community change. Paraphrasing political scientist James MacGregor Burns, the leadership challenge before us is transformational, not merely transactional.

A healthy community focuses on the future and passes the lessons it has learned on to its young. Marian Wright Edelman, in her eloquent and moving *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*, charged us well: “It is the responsibility of every adult to make sure that children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life and to hear over and over that we love them and that they are not alone.”

Disenchanted with the tenor of public debate, citizens in communities across the country are expressing interest in developing civic capacity. The civic renewal movement is a national manifestation of the desire to reconnect people positively with politics, on both national and local fronts.

Each community and each citizen must clearly show it is no longer acceptable to give only lip service to the civic foundations of building healthier communities. It is not enough to talk about a new way of operating, and then revert to the traditional way of doing business when it comes time to act. Communities must act differently. We will never realize the high hope we have for our communities and our nation when:

- the business executive lecturing the leaders of tomorrow on the importance of making strategic compromises for the city’s long-term good, also tells city council if it doesn’t give her firm an exemption from a critical worker safety regulation she will move her firm out of the city;
- the environmentalist demanding an extra seat on an important water resources advisory committee also tells the news media the mayor’s choice for an additional business representative was selected only because of his campaign contributions to the mayor;
- the newspaper courageously editorializing against prompt city council action on a controversial public health issue in order for the community to have time for a thoughtful second look also publishes a reader phone-in poll on the subject that results in pressure on the council for prompt action;
- the citizen letter-writer complaining about high taxes and big government also makes unending demands for costly community improvements for the neighborhood;
- the reporter lecturing to journalism students about covering substance and not slanting stories also always calls the people who will give the nastiest, toughest, most polarizing quotes;
- the developer contributing to the affordable housing partnership also leads a civic association protest when the housing authority proposes low and moderate income housing in his upscale neighborhood; and
- the candidate running as the outsider to clean up politics also uses all the negative tactics of a seasoned political hack.

The key to acting differently is to build trust among community leaders that other community leaders will act in good faith. The problem is the enormous short-term strategic advantage to the person who does not accept the new style of collaborative community leadership despite the obvious long-term damage done to the community as a whole.

New collaborative approaches need to be recognized, celebrated, and valued. Those who support and use these new approaches should receive public credit.

Developing Collaborative Leadership is Important

In a community, few moves are made in isolation. John Gardner suggests we can better understand the paralysis in our political system by imagining a game of checkers. A bystander puts a thumb on one checker and says, “Go ahead and play, just don’t touch this one.” Another bystander puts a thumb on a different checker with the same warning. Others continue the cycle of blocking self-detrimental options. The organized interest groups don’t want to make the game unwinnable. They just don’t want their interests touched. Pretty soon a community has all thumbs and no moves.

Self-interest is not bad. Lappe and Du Bois put it nicely in *The Quickenning of America* when they said, “Self-interests include our passions—all the things we care most about.” It needs to be harnessed so it does not thwart the public interest. Unfortunately, our ability to frustrate each other has increased dramatically in recent decades. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has pointed out: our challenge today is to restore the balance between *unum* and *pluribus*.

When one player makes a selfish move for individual or organizational short-term gain, other players are forced to respond in kind. The downward spiral begins. Each negative move leads to another. Problems get worse, and solutions get harder. The outcome is predictably not in the long-term public interest. Healthy communities work hard to guard against this downward spiral. Unhealthy communities fall victim to it. As Nancy L. Berry, President of The Firethorn Institution, said: “Who among us has not imagined an American democracy made vibrant by the energies of citizens? While this dream seems utopian and far-fetched to some, to others it is both the dream of our past and the dream of our future. We offer a multitude of explanations for what stands in the way, but rarely question our fundamental beliefs about who makes democracy work.”

It is important to understand how a vicious cycle undermines healthy communities. The following scenarios show the importance of developing collaborative leadership as the way to address community problems.

Scenario 1: A prominent business in the community proposes a major expansion of its options.

Unhealthy Community:

The business has had a bad relationship with its neighbors because of land-use issues for decades. The local government strongly backs the business, as it is one of the largest employers in the community and renders considerable community service. The local neighborhood

association is very powerful with many of its leaders playing prominent roles in the community-wide civic movement.

The business tries to throw a political fastball past its neighbors, quietly assembling a team of consultants to prepare a proposal. Months later, the business holds a press conference and unveils a beautiful new complex twice the size of its existing building. The business announced it needs local government approval within three months or it will deem it necessary to move to a more business-friendly location.

The neighborhood association responds with a press conference denouncing this expansion plan, and opposing any business effort to expand. The neighborhood leaders say there is no need for more space and this is a dishonest effort by the business to build added space for speculative purposes. They say they will target any city council members who support the expansion for defeat in the upcoming election.

The slow growth representatives on the city council immediately issue press statements opposing the expansion. The pro-growth council members respond by saying the proposal must be approved immediately or the community will lose thousands of jobs and will gain a reputation as anti-business.

Media coverage is intense, focusing on combatants questioning the motives of their adversaries. There is little analysis of why the business might need to expand and the actual impact on the community's economy if the business left.

One city council member urges balancing the needs of the business with those of the local neighborhood. She suggests calling in a professional mediator to facilitate meetings between the two warring factions. She is immediately attacked by the Chamber of Commerce as anti-business and by the local environmental club as a sell-out to big business looking for campaign contributions. The business' proposal winds its way through the process with major battles and threats of lawsuits at every turn.

Healthy Community:

The ethic in this community is to share information. When the business decides it needs to expand, it approaches the local government and the neighborhood association and requests a meeting. At the meeting, the business lays out the economic reasons why it believes it is time for a major expansion. The neighborhood and government leaders ask questions about the data and the assumptions for future growth. The business agrees to meet again to provide additional information. After making certain all affected parties are at the table, all agree to a series of meetings.

At subsequent meetings, all involved parties are able to reach consensus on the real need (somewhat less than originally projected by the business) and agree on a plan satisfying the needs of the business while protecting the neighborhood. When the business holds a press conference to unveil the plan, neighborhood leaders are there to support the proposal. The plan

goes through the governmental review process with only a few minor changes and little community upset.

Scenario 2: The city council's research staff releases a study showing a rapid increase in the number of children living in poverty in the community over the course of the last decade.

Unhealthy Community:

A war of press releases breaks out as soon as the announcement of the study's results ends. Citizen groups, having received leaks on the report, are armed with press statements leveling blame and advocating prompt action.

Advocates for children attack the mayor and city council members, arguing their pandering to anti-tax groups has led to a failure to provide adequate resources to human services programs. The Taxpayers' League and the city-wide civic association say excessive taxation has run businesses and middle-class taxpayers out of the community.

The television news and the newspapers headline the war of words between the rival ideologies: "KIDS' CHAMPS CALL POLS CHUMPS" and "TAXPAYERS CHARGE COUNCIL IS ANTI-FAMILY VALUES." The substance of the report is largely ignored in media coverage.

The city council holds a public hearing on the report. The ideological brawling continues, with virtually no attention given to the substantive findings in the report. The government is paralyzed by the public and media reaction to the report. None of the legislative proposals supported by the different camps wins majority support on the council. Compromises are blasted by both sides.

Healthy Community:

The legislative research staff invites community group and government leaders to a pre-publication briefing and discussion. The authors explain their findings and recommendations. They answer questions and invite discussion. Participants agree this information is potentially explosive. The president of the city council suggests a commission be established to report in 60 days to the city council on what should be done to combat the increasing poverty among children. She assures broad-based, fair representation on the commission.

The press briefing goes smoothly, with the city council president announcing the formation of a citizens' commission to study the legislative research staff report. The commissioners agree a traditional battle of rhetoric will be a barrier to effective action. They agree to focus on the findings of the report and to attempt to identify shared values and outcomes before debating specific policy proposals. Sixty days later when its report is given to the city council, the commission is unanimous on a set of ten recommendations. Four other

recommendations had received majority support, but also strong dissenting views. The city council is able to debate rationally and to agree on eleven recommendations for action.

Prerequisites for Change

Our national political world will not be remade overnight. There is no national answer. We must face the challenge to begin building stronger and healthier communities. This must be accomplished community by community, conversation by conversation. The next decades will require significant changes in the attitudes of millions of Americans. Collaborative community leadership will gain acceptance one person at a time, when people talk about the possibility of a better way.

Change will only happen when people with different perspectives meet together and commit to work together to solve community problems. Most people spend most of their time meeting with people with whom they already agree. They seldom have the opportunity to try to talk through differences in a rational setting with their adversaries. They exchange attacks through the media and at public hearings, but seldom talk with and almost never listen to people with whom they disagree. The person they attack is usually an abstraction, a stereotype to them.

The hard work of community-building is getting people who disagree in the same room for constructive conversations. With the right leadership, they will find they have far more in common than in conflict. They will learn teamwork, and how to diminish unhealthy polarization.

Change will happen a leaders in the media begin to consider whether their coverage has swung to the negative and sensational, or away from the positive and important. Change will happen as leaders of business and community organizations cut back on shrill rhetoric and overreaching demands and begin to search for common ground and practical solutions. Change will happen when public policy gunslingers check their weapons at the door and give collaborative approaches a chance to work. Change will happen when citizens reject strong-arm leadership and value the convening, listening, and facilitating skills needed to break political deadlocks and solve problems. A Neal Peirce and Robert Guskind said, “The empowerment of people serves double duty. It is **the** critical vehicle for change, and...the overriding goal of any and all efforts to rebuild a city block, a neighborhood, or an entire community.”

Facing Community Conflict

Conflict happens. A healthy community acknowledges conflict and resolves it. My critique of our excessive adversariness is not an argument for premature consensus, phony bipartisanship, or split-the-difference politics that cuts off public dialogue or ignores important values.

In his 1857 *West India Emancipation Speech*, Frederick Douglass argued for the power and necessity of protest: “Those who profess to favor freedom yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.” We must not forget that some issues must not be compromised. Some barriers must be broken. Sometimes the parties to a conflict have such unequal strength that agitation is the only way to ensure equity.

I am not trying to abolish conflict. There is great value in healthy conflict. And the dangers of group-think are real. Conflict can inspire creative leadership. Where there are fundamental conflicts over values, they should not be ignored in a sentimental yearning for consensus. The problem in our communities today is not that we have conflict, but that we manufacture conflict and exaggerate differences to the point where it is very difficult to make meaningful change. Too often we abandon basic civility and cannot disagree without questioning the motives of our adversaries. Our standard as we debate should be similar to doctors’ Hippocratic Oath: “Do no harm.” Disagree, but don’t tear the community apart as you do.

It is essential to prevent the initial step of the downward spiral. This can happen either because none of the major players makes the first, negative move. Or it can happen because when one player flaunts the new collaborative approach for short-term advantage, the others cry *foul* and refuse to follow suit. Currently, if you don’t return the attack, very often you lose. This must change.

Richard Bradley, the President of the International Downtown Association, helped explain how to approach conflict in the context of community problem-solving. Bradley explains that he is not asking groups to disarm unilaterally: “Check your guns at the door. If at any time you don’t like what is happening in the meeting, you can reclaim them and leave with your guns blazing.”

A healthy community does not start a community conversation with solutions. It is human nature to oppose a rival group’s solution. To avoid solution wars and attack politics, it is best to begin by talking about interests, not solutions. Then even those who would disagree about your solution may conclude: “She does have a point.” As Parker Palmer, a Senior Advisor to the Fetzer Institute, said: “Let’s learn to think of community as a gift we have been given—and then embrace the hard work necessary to receive that gift. The work of community involves discipline and dialogue and accountability.”

The work of the people who help make the transformation from conflict to collaboration is not always understood or appreciated. During President Kennedy’s Administration, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall had a sign on his office wall: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall catch hell from both sides.”

The Healthy Community: Summing up

We are in transition from the old politics where a few people or a few groups divided up the spoils, to a new politics where many players representing diverse views are at the decision-making table. There will be some who are nostalgic for the days of the “Do it now!” mayors. But the old politics no longer works.

Citizens say they don’t like politics as usual, but too often they reward the practitioners of the old politics. We need broad public acceptance of what it takes to build a healthy community, making it no longer of strategic short-term advantage to do things to undermine community. To get to this point, we need a common understanding of what it means to build a healthy community and what it means to undermine a healthy community. Here is my list of the contrasts between the attributes of a healthy and an unhealthy community:

Healthy	Unhealthy
optimism	cynicism
collaboration	confrontation
focus on unification	focus on division
“we’re in this together”	“not in my backyard”
solving problems	solution wars
broad public interest	narrow interests
consensus building	polarization
interdependence	parochialism
tolerance and respect	mean-spiritedness
trust	questioning motives
politics of substance	politics of personality
challenge ideas	challenge people
problem-solvers	blockers & blamers
reconciliation	hold grudges
individual responsibility	me-first
renewal	gridlock
focus on future	redebate the past
listening	attacking
community discussions	zinger one-liners
diversity	exclusion
win-win solutions	win-lose solutions
citizenship	selfishness
empowered citizens	apathetic citizens
patience	frustration
healers	dividers
sharing power	hoarding power
“we can do it”	“nothing works”

In healthy communities, all key community leaders are aware that pursuing their narrow interests too hard at the expense of the broader public good will ultimately backfire.

We cannot have healthy communities when everyone is preoccupied with narrow self-interest. We must recognize we are part of something larger than ourselves. Few individuals will fare well if our communities do poorly. Building broad public recognition of the need for some individual sacrifices to advance the broad public interest is the challenge.

One hundred and sixty years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out the American genius is our capacity to join together in small groups to solve our problems. At the neighborhood crime watch organization level, we know this still works today. We each give a little of our time and the community as a whole benefits tremendously. Government does its part; citizens do theirs. As Jean Bethke Elshtain says in *Democracy on Trial*, “A modulated politics whose practitioners open their hands in gestures of anticipated fellowship to all persons of goodwill, white or black, rich or poor, offends those who want a totalistic and revolutionary politics. Hate is easy; arousing the regressive urges of one’s fellow men and women requires little more than a capacity for spite. What is difficult, what is the most daunting task of the political imagination is to fight the allure of hate, particularly when it comes to us in the name of revolution.”

Without an informed and tolerant public, interest groups and the news media can continue to block progress and fuel negative public opinion. With a more sophisticated public understanding of why some communities work and others don’t, our potential for creative, collaborative, and forward-looking leadership will advance. A more positive political environment will go a long way to attracting more positive people to community life in both volunteer and career positions.

Community-building is not a spectator sport. Nothing could do more to invigorate political life in America than to have tens of thousands of community leaders across the nation join the constituency for the common good and take the pledge the young people of Athens took as they became citizens: “...in all these ways we will transmit this city not only not less than, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”

SUGGESTED READINGS

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CITIZENSHIP: TAKING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Citizenship is not dead in America. A number of new efforts have emerged in response to the negative and cynical politics of our times. Here are several of the newest:

- The Alliance for National Renewal, an alliance of 100 organizations led by the century-old National Civic League and its Chairman, Common Cause Founder John W. Gardner, is committed to telling the stories of and helping to replicate positive innovations in local communities across the country. Phone: 800/223-6004.
- The New Citizenship Project, funded by the Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation, is identifying ways to do things better by local rather than national direction. Phone: 202/822-8333.
- The American Civic Forum, led by Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota, has issued a call for a new citizenship that puts citizens back in the process. Phone: 612/625-0142.
- A National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, initiated by the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a vehicle designed to foster conversations between Americans of all backgrounds on the diversity of race, ethnicity, and culture enriching our country, and about the values we share as Americans. Phone: 800/634-1121.

THE AMERICA THAT WORKS

There is an America that works. In community after community across the country, people are working together and solving problems. The Alliance for National Renewal is in the process of collecting these stories of successful community action. Here is a sample:

- In San Diego, California, a student activist organized the Alpha Project and helped 1,500 homeless people off the streets and into jobs.
- In Charlotte, North Carolina, the Observer published a list of community needs for two of the city's most crime-ridden neighborhoods and received 254 offers of help.
- In the San Francisco Bay area, Safe Streets Now trained 3,500 volunteers whose work helped close down 325 drug houses.
- In Pulaski, Tennessee, community leaders stood up to the Ku Klux Klan and organized a "Brotherhood" march to promote racial understanding. The march has developed into a week-long celebration.

From "A Guide: Alliance for National Renewal," available from the National Civic League, 1445 Market Street, Suite 300, Denver, Colorado 80202. Phone: 800/223-6004.

CIVIC JOURNALISM

Not all journalism is the negative, self-serving journalism the public loves to hate. Many have recognized a viable movement in what is being called “public, or civic journalism.” *Communications as Engagement*, a report prepared by the Millennium Group for the Rockefeller Foundation, described the movement: “Civic journalism thus engenders a media that is actively involved in re-engaging citizens in public life, in promoting and improving public deliberation, and in strengthening the connections between journalists and their communities. (p 16)” Two of the main purveyors of funding for and information about this movement are the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, directed by Ed Fouhy and the Project on Public Life and the Press, directed by Jay Rosen. The Pew Center for Civic Journalism focuses on media-based strategies by creating partnerships involving local newspapers, and radio and TV stations. The Project on Public Life and the Press, funded by the Knight Foundation, is a clearinghouse for information on the theory and practical applications of civic journalism. Lou Heldman, Editor of Florida’s *Tallahassee Democrat*, one of the papers involved in the Pew project, said his paper’s goal is to “[achieve] the state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make.”

- Pew Center for Civic Journalism (“Renewing Our Democratic Heart”), Phone: 202/331-3200.
- Project on Public Life and the Press—New York University, Phone: 212/998-3793.

COMMUNITY PROBLEM-SOLVING: A CASE STUDY

New approaches to community problem-solving work. Eight years of serving on a local legislative body in Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC, prove it. When I first ran for County Council in 1986, the town was deeply polarized on the growth issue. Business leaders argued Bethesda was the economic engine of the county and state. Residents felt overrun by massive development and traffic. The adversaries fought it out in the media and before the County Council. The political ethic was simple: those who yell loudest and fight hardest, win.

After I won the election, I decided to address the unhealthy political environment in Bethesda. I knew conversation was the key to building stronger relationships. The one thing I had seen clearly was that these people really did not know each other.

I invited a dozen citizens to meet with a dozen business leaders. I asked them not to talk about the growth issue. I said some of them liked the high-rise office buildings, others didn't. Some wanted further development, others didn't. I asked them to agree that we all had a stake in making what we had work the best it can. I told them there would be other days and other forums for dealing with Bethesda's future growth. The first meeting ended on a sour note, with one of the business leaders chewing me out in the parking lot. I swallowed hard and said: "I'm new here. Give me a chance. I believe in this process. Give me two more meetings. If you still feel this way, it's over." After the next meeting I saw one of the most radical residents and a hard-core, pro-business advocate talking about their favorite flavors of ice cream. I knew we had a winner then, because the two had built a personal relationship.

In the eight years the Bethesda Action Group (BAG) has now been meeting, the members have solved scores of modest-sized problems—from parking spaces, to traffic lights, to a grove of trees—problems and opportunities affecting real people in real communities.

As a result of the relationships begun at BAG meetings, we have Bethesda Evergreen, a tree-planting group, the Bethesda Urban Partnership, a private-public partnership for promotion and beautification, and an emerging arts and cultural organization. When the Bethesda long-term plan came to the County Council a year ago, the politics of Bethesda had changed so dramatically from the growth wars of the 1970s and 1980s, that the plan was adopted with minimal controversy.

With the simple insight that these warring factions really didn't know each other, and eight years of the hard work of building relationships across traditional lines by hundreds of community leaders, the political climate of Bethesda changed dramatically. Other unhealthy communities can make the same transformation.