

Negotiating the Crossroads: Civic Engagement in the 21st Century

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Just as families have stories that help hold them together or tear them apart, so, too, do communities, states and nations. These stories guide and shape the way we live with each other. Since the 1950's, marginalized and disaffected citizens have challenged America's prevailing stories by finding a voice to tell their own stories. The civil rights movement brought African-Americans and other minorities closer to full participation in civic life. Grass-roots organizers and activists helped put issues of housing, economic development and health for poor people on the table. Powerful advocates helped propel environmental concerns onto the public agenda. Women and gay people fought to be legitimized and included as full-fledged citizens. These efforts have irrevocably redefined for the better who is included in America's stories and the concerns that provide their focus.

By challenging prevailing stories through resistance and confrontation, these movements have also created new demands and costly consequences. Many more people with a stake in public problems now demand a say in the political decision making process. Complex and systemic public problems are no longer amenable to expert or top-down solutions. Few people agree about the precise nature of the problems so few agree on solutions. Little in the way of shared vision or values encourages concerted action. Distrust and mistrust pervade the relationships between sectors, races, and other disparate groups and interests. Most of these groups lack the skills to work effectively with others. Adversarial politics, in which small groups of people or interest coalitions in a community attempt to overpower other groups or coalitions to achieve their ends, have failed to solve problems, failed to prevent the division of society, and failed to engage citizens effectively in public life. When adversarial politics works, it leaves communities and regions divided between winners and losers, *us* against *them*. When it does not, it leaves gridlock. Either way, the divisions between *us* and *them* tend to harden into immutable fact. As parochial interests take precedence, common ground becomes more remote.

Traditionally, all societies have used enduring stories as guideposts for dealing with social and political issues within their own cultures. Our contemporary, multi-cultural society often brings these stories into conflict. We Americans find ourselves at a crossroad or, more accurately, at a series of crossroads where many stories collide. How do we negotiate these crossroads? How do we create new, more inclusive and constructive stories? How do we find common ground in a world of constant flux, full of contradictory yet convincing stories? How do we move from conflict to what we have in common and from confrontation to dialogue? How can we create new stories that will help guide us toward solutions to social and political problems in American civic life? Without re-imagining the relationship of *us* and *them* and the adversarial stories about how civic change occurs, common ground will remain elusive.

Despite the confrontational nature of much of American politics, in some places citizens and local governments negotiate their way through competing interests and obligations in ways that offer hope. They create inclusive and constructive public processes that complement and work in parallel with the formal institutions of governance to reduce the divisiveness of adversarial politics to reach common ground. Citizens work together; that is, they collaborate by including both *us* and *them* in the engagement. They take the time to learn about alternative approaches to public problems and learn new roles for supporting them. Rather than using resistance and confrontation, they create forums where contending points of view can be legitimized and understood and use dialogue to facilitate the emergence of a broader consensus. These engagements build a stronger, more inclusive sense of shared identity that respects distinctive cultural and individual identities. Since each place faces different challenges and has its own political dynamics, no one model or process fits every community or region. General principles of collaboration shape each of these processes yet allow the flexibility to meet particular needs.

Working together offers the possibility of real progress on public concerns without dividing citizens one from another. A sampling of recent initiatives demonstrates the power of collaboration:

- Citizens in Missoula, Montana worked together to craft policies for land use and planning that help guide future growth. The City Council and County Commission adopted these policies through legislative action.

- In Denver, Colorado, the city raised millions of dollars through a bond issue to meet physical infrastructure needs. Without broad support from a wide range of stakeholders, a disastrous battle of special interests would have torn the package apart.
- Sitka, Alaska faces perennial problems disposing of solid waste because of its mountainous terrain, rainy environment, and lack of suitable landfill sites. A group of citizens and civic leaders developed an innovative set of strategies emphasizing recycling and off-island shipping to minimize the use of landfills. Stakeholders continue to work with the Assembly to implement a comprehensive waste management plan.
- In Maine, throughout the development boom of the 1980s, environmentalists, developers and state regulators battled over the proper mix of development and preservation of the state's natural resources. The Maine Environmental Priorities Project brought stakeholders from each of these groups together to identify and rank the state's most urgent environmental issues, develop recommendations to address them, and help implement new policies at local, regional and state levels.
- Joint Venture Silicon Valley addressed a wide range of needs including education, transportation, work force development, environmental issues and economic development. The long running initiative led to the creation of several new organizations and numerous partnerships to meet these needs.
- The Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal helps school districts and higher education institutions work together to simultaneously renew public schools and teacher education. Results include the establishment of numerous partner schools, enhanced professional and leadership development programs, and the development of state policies supporting these initiatives.

In each of these examples, stakeholders worked together in new and constructive ways. Civic leaders with newly developed leadership capacities convened citizens and helped facilitate their work. Stakeholders learned new skills for working together and for working with the substance of the issues or concerns. Skilled professionals using facilitation tools and consciously designed processes helped stakeholders define problems, create visions and decide what should be done. Credible information supported mutual learning and consensus based decision-making. The

influence and credibility gained through collaboration helped stakeholders hold implementing organizations accountable for action and real achievement.

These emerging stories of civic engagement offer a vision of a more deeply democratic society. When these engagements work, they lead to tangible and sustainable results, heal divisions between competing interests, and engage citizens thoroughly in addressing the problems that concern them. They build the capacity to negotiate future conflicts by creating the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate communication and cooperation for mutual benefit, building social capital rather than destroying it. By learning from these experiences, Americans can purposefully cultivate new stories of civic engagement and renew their trust and confidence in the democratic ideal.