THE NEW CIVIC LEADERSHIP[1]

By David D. Chrislip

In the early years of the 21st century political leadership in the United States is in danger of becoming an oxymoron. Neither the bravado of the charismatic hero nor the bombast of the partisan political leader can carry the day. Both are out of tune with the times. Whether deemed "successful" or not, current leadership practices do not match the challenges of a democratic society. When elected leaders win the zero-sum political game, the consequences are devastating. When no one wins, there is gridlock or stalemate. Rather than leading, political leaders too often divide citizens, erode civil society, and undermine trust in the democratic ideal.

The tradition of politics as a contest among interests has become increasingly destructive in the United States. Indeed, Peter Drucker describes the current situation in the U.S. as "battlefields between groups, each of them fighting for absolute victory and not content with anything but total surrender of the enemy."[2] This kind of engagement on public concerns has significant negative consequences. It cannot produce sustainable change because of fickle alliances and shifting majorities. It divides citizens one from another and alienates many from public life. It sets up future conflict on issues yet to come. No one can argue with the need to make progress in addressing complex public issues but the means used to do this have become unproductive and divisive. The way we decide is destroying civility and the fragile bonds of community that bind us together.

Rigid adherence to parochial or ideological positions has deeply polarized many communities as well as the Congress. In many places, cynicism and apathy characterize the civic culture offering little hope for working through these divisions. The capacity to advocate effectively does not serve for working through differences in a constructive way. Similarly, the evolving procedural republic of rights and entitlements has preempted the development of the social skills and an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity necessary to cooperate for mutual benefit. "The civic virtue distinctive to our time,'" political scientist Michael Sandel writes, "is the capacity to negotiate our way among the sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting obligations that claim us, and to live with the tension to which multiple loyalties give rise."[3]

And it is citizens -- and elected leaders when they will -- who must energize this mediating and negotiating function and provide leadership congruent with it. Put another way, leadership must come from new and diverse sources, and its practice must take a radically different form. What is known about successfully negotiating a way through tough public problems provides insight into this new form of leadership.

Despite the "battleground" 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 public processes that complement and work in parallel with the formal institutions of governance to cut across the divisiveness of interest group politics. These efforts complement and work in parallel with the formal institutions of

governance. They actively inform and invite public officials to participate if they so desire. They do not oppose them. Sometimes they are partly sponsored or initiated by public officials. More often citizens with diverse perspectives and interests start them when they want to achieve more constructive and long lasting solutions to public concerns. These initiatives are pragmatic, heuristic responses to real problems in communities energized by frustration with existing divisiveness not by communitarian optimism.

Sitka, Alaska, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Missoula, Montana have more in common than one might think. In the last decade, the mainstay of Sitka's economy changed rapidly from resource based -- primarily timber-related industry and fishing -- to tourism and health care. Charlotte's sudden emergence as an international financial center fueled population growth and urban sprawl that were inconceivable just ten years ago. In Missoula, population growth within the constraints of mountain topography changed land use patterns in unimagined ways. In each place, the usual battles between those thriving on the changes and those threatened by new development polarized citizens. A growing desire to find the common ground that will support future development in ways that do not destroy quality of life and civility provides the common thread connecting these three regions.

The failure of traditional ways of addressing public issues spurs this search for common ground. In the fall of 1998, Sitkans voted overwhelmingly against a proposal to build a deep-water dock to accommodate large cruise ships near the downtown area. The town's elected leaders and business people expected easy passage because of the shifting economic base. But citizens were more concerned with Sitka's quality of life than its economy and voted 2 to I against the dock. The failure of the ballot proposal left elected leaders and citizens deeply divided and distrustful of each other.

In response to these challenges, one organization, the Island Institute, became a catalyst for transforming Sitka's civic culture. Instead of taking issues head-on and looking for magic answers, the institute worked to build the capacity of the community to address them in constructive ways. A series of interviews with citizens from different parts of the town provided a picture of a community torn by division and distrust yet with an emerging desire to look at new ways of moving ahead. Building on this energy, the institute conducted a number of community workshops to help people learn more about collaboration. Out of these workshops, a growing number of citizens from throughout the community began to use their credibility and influence to initiate collaborative processes to address Sitka's problems with solid waste disposal and tourism. Wary elected leaders may be compelled to engage by the growing interest in these efforts and the credibility of those involved.

Charlotte can trace its interest in finding its way through its thicket of problems to the increasingly obvious negative impacts of growth and sprawl. Traffic clogged freeways, a shortage of trained workers and serious environmental damage outpaced economic benefits of the boom. A region made up of 14 counties and dozens of jurisdictions with competing needs and interests challenged the capacity of civic leaders to address these

issues. Neil Peirce's analysis of these problems in 1995 led him to recommend the formation of a regional citizen-based collaborative to address regional challenges (Peirce is a nationally known journalist writing about regional and urban issues).

Following Peirce's recommendation, four influential regional organizations -- The Foundation for the Carolinas, Charlotte Observer, Carolina's Partnership and the Urban Institute at the University of North Carolina Charlotte -- created a new organization -- Voices and Choices -- to help the region escape the paralysis of parochialism and develop a vision of a sustainable future. In 1998, Voices and Choices used scenarios describing possible futures as a starting point for creating visions and strategies. More than 500 people from throughout the area participated. Action teams formed around six key areas to build partnerships and develop specific action plans.

These teams took their plans to decision-makers across the region in January 2000. The plan identified 150 action steps necessary to achieve the vision and established a process for implementation over the next two to three years. Complementing the work of Voices & Choices, a civic leadership development program established in 2000 helps build a critical mass of citizens with the skills for collaborative action.

Infighting among developers, timber interests, and environmentalists has plagued Missoula, Montana for years. Hamstrung and held hostage by competing factions and interest groups, elected leaders had scant control over these battles. Little could be done to manage or shape the forces that were threatening Missoula's greatest assets -- the physical beauty of the mountains and the high quality of life enjoyed by its citizens.

This impotence stoked Missoulians greatest fear -- stalemate -- and helped move them to action. Spurred in part by its visionary mayor, Daniel Kemmis, the city council and county commission put together the Growth Management Task Force (GMTF) made up of elected leaders, business interests, and neighborhood groups. The GMTF used its broad credibility to convene a larger stakeholder group reflecting the perspectives and experiences of the region to wrestle with the conflicts.

The eight month process began by creating scenarios highlighting the future challenges the city could face. The scenarios allowed citizens to confront the possible impacts of outside forces and to understand the consequences of their own actions or inaction. One scenario, *Status Quo Vadis*, and its tale of continued gridlock, inaction, and deterioration galvanized the group to put together a vision of how they would like to see Missoula's future development. This experience led to a series of recommendations defining land use management tools and planning processes consistent with the vision. Finally, the city council and the county commission had the coherent plan and the political backing needed to take concerted action. Because of the credibility of the group doing the work and the thoroughness of the process, elected leaders enacted the recommendations of the stakeholder group with little modification. The process led to real results as it reinforced the civic culture.

These experiences highlight several emerging lessons about how communities address public problems in constructive ways. Each community must begin by identifying and acknowledging the challenges it faces. Obscuring real challenges hinders future action (The use of scenarios in Charlotte and Missoula helped expose future challenges). Citizens need to take the time to learn about alternative approaches to public problems and learn new roles for supporting them (Sitka's capacity building work and Charlotte's civic leadership development efforts helped citizens learn to work together). 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 while tailoring them to meet particular needs (Voices and Choices designed an extended process to address Charlotte's specific regional challenges while Missoulians used a short, intensive engagement to reach agreement). Stakeholder groups must build links to the wider community and to organizations that will implement the work (Voices and Choices created a network of new partnerships to engage citizens and implementing organizations).

Four critical roles must be played in these public processes. First, stakeholders must become a "constituency for change" capable of holding implementing organizations accountable for moving to action. Without this, supposedly collaborative efforts waste time and precious political capital. Second, a community needs expert information in order to address its concerns. Experts provide stakeholders with the information necessary for making good decisions but do not drive collaborative processes. Third, people with extensive knowledge of collaboration help design and facilitate these initiatives. Fourth, a few strong, facilitative leaders in the stakeholder group convene, catalyze and sustain these collaborative efforts.

Strong, facilitative leaders come from the community or region itself and share a vital concern for the issues at stake. Some are present at the start while others emerge as the process evolves. Sometimes they hold strong positions about the issues but trust the collaborative process to reach appropriate conclusions. They provide the motivation and leadership to help people work together. No one from outside the community or region can play this role.

Collaboration cannot work without a few strong, facilitative leaders in the stakeholder group. These collaborative leaders promote and safeguard the process by keeping stakeholders at the table through periods of frustration and skepticism, acknowledging small successes along the way, helping stakeholders negotiate difficult points, and enforcing group norms and ground rules. They articulate the incentives for collaboration and serve as catalysts for moving to new more inclusive ways of working together. They use their credibility to bring other leaders together to accomplish the initiating and convening work necessary to start a collaborative process. They ensure inclusion of usual and unusual voices reflecting the broader community, help design a constructive process and define the educational and informational needs of the initiative.

These leaders provide a key link to formal decision-making bodies and implementing organizations using their credibility to move recommendations to action. This can take

different forms. Sometimes recommendations from a collaborative process provide the conceptual framework for coherent public policy considering the true complexity of the issues. Elected leaders understand in a deeper way what needs to be done and, so, have a more comprehensive and visionary basis for action. Elected leaders use the credibility of the stakeholder group and its work to provide the backing they needed to take politically risky actions. At other times, the stakeholder group uses its collective influence to negotiate with elected leaders or other implementing organizations in order to move its recommendations to action. The group understands that by its makeup and the processes it uses, it has sufficient credibility to work with other powerful organizations to create new partnerships that achieve real results. Rather than just another interest group, the stakeholder group becomes "a constituency for the whole" that can speak credibly for the larger community or region.

Strong facilitative leaders in places like Sitka, Charlotte and Missoula transform the notion of leadership itself. They are insistent yet not domineering, compelling but not heroic, credible rather than powerful (in the traditional sense), concerned with process as much as content, and much more behind the scenes than on center stage. They rely on newly learned leadership behaviors and practices: how to get people to the table and keep them there, how to subsume one's desire for a specific outcome or solution and trust the work of the group, how to encourage and support the participation of others, how to help others solve problems without having to know or provide the answer, how to acknowledge and celebrate the successes of others without taking credit, how to lead as peer rather than as superior. Exemplifying this form of leadership poses far more challenges than the heroic practices of the past.

This is not, as some think, leadership without vision. Rather it is leadership with a vision of a different kind. It is a vision of a more deeply democratic and constructive way of making public decisions. When this kind of leadership works, it leads to tangible and sustainable results, heals divisions between competing interests, engages citizens deeply in addressing the problems that concern them and builds the capacity to negotiate future conflicts. The experience of working together creates the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate communication and cooperation for mutual benefit; it builds social capital rather than destroys it. The task now in the United States is to learn from these experiences and cultivate a new form of leadership in citizens that can mitigate the current divisiveness in the public arena and rebuild trust and confidence in the democratic ideal.

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1. Adapted from an earlier version published in Kellerman, Barbara and Larraine R. Matusak, eds. *Cutting Edge: Leadership 2000*. College Park, MD: James Macgregor Burns Academy of Leadership, 2000, pp. 18-24.
2. Drucker, Peter. "The Age of Social Transformation." *The Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 1994.
3. Sandel, Michael. "America's Search for a New Public Philosophy." *The Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 1996.