

WORKING DRAFT

REVISED

Public Administrators and Citizens: What Should the Relationship Be?



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A KETTERING FOUNDATION REPORT

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Introduction

For more than a decade, the Kettering Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, has been studying the role that the public should play in a democracy and the relation of the public to the institutions of government. This report on the foundation's research is addressed to public administrators, particularly those responsible for public participation. It is also intended for elected officials who rely on a staff of professional administrators.

The report is being made at a time when Americans remain alienated from the electoral system and distrustful of major institutions, especially those of government. Some professionals have serious doubts about whether the public has anything to contribute to their programs and agencies beyond endorsements and tax revenue. Sensing this, people have become cynical about the efforts professionals make to engage them; citizens feel manipulated for many reasons; for instance, they don't feel they have any collective voice, even though individuals can complain and object. In fact, they think that squeaky wheels are the only thing administrators hear. Citizens also feel alienated because they don't believe that administrators value what they do. This cycle of mutual distrust dominates the political environment in which public administrators work. It is not an ideal environment, to say the least.

A 30-year veteran administrator in public health, Mike Pompili is quite candid about what is happening in his profession. "Things are getting bad," he says. Increasingly, partisan politics is creating more conflict, and administrators, who just want to do a good job, are caught up in the crossfire. In Mike's opinion, doing a good job means engaging the majority of citizens who aren't caught up in partisan rivalry and care more about solving problems than which side wins. He admits this is difficult because special interests are skilled at getting the ear of government agencies and elected officials.¹

The research that will be discussed here suggests other ways of thinking about public administration that have implications for engaging citizens and are about engaging the public as a whole. The major finding is that people have to engage one another before administrators can engage them as a public. This kind of engagement seems critical to breaking the cycle of mutual distrust. This report is about how otherwise unengaged individuals become members of a public that can take on the responsibilities implied in self-government. A case will be made that people become citizens by doing the work of citizens, which is work done *by* not just *for* people.² Public

¹ Interview with Mike Pompili by Bob Mihalek, November 17, 2006.

² Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

work, we believe, is the necessary complement to government-sponsored public works, which is work done *for* people but not *by* them. Administrators have self-interest in both kinds of work.

If everything depends on what citizens do with citizens, what are administrators supposed to do in the meanwhile? The Kettering Foundation makes no pretense of being an authority on public administration. But the ideas about the public in this report may give professionals some new ideas about how they can do their jobs differently—without taking on more work. We do not have any how-to advice and, therefore, there are not any examples of best practices based on our recommendations. What should be done to alter existing work routines, however, will depend on the creative imagination of inventive administrators. The foundation can, however, suggest some promising areas for experimentation.

What Public Administrators Say

Even though the Kettering Foundation's research has to do with the public and not public administrators, we have listened to professionals talk about their concerns for three years. We have heard from environmental regulators, city and county managers, access professionals, and professional consultants. Many of the problems were similar, whether they occurred on the Gulf Coast or in the Midwest and whether they were in cities or rural areas. We realize that administrators are called on to play a variety of roles, from regulatory to managerial, so we have concentrated on the generic problems identified in our conversations with professionals.

Whether administrators work in an agency, facilitate a program, or manage a city, they are aware that the lack of trust in government (mentioned earlier) is a major problem. They know that they have to build credibility in a cynical environment. The depth of the mistrust, professionals report, is significant. Although administrators have demonstrated their accountability through objective performance measures, people may not trust them. City and county managers also report that they have to worry about citizens who don't trust other citizens—leading to a lack of civility and an intolerance of opposing views.

In our conversations with professionals, opinions on when and how much to involve people is an issue that varied quite sharply. So did views about what citizens are supposed to do. Consequently, there was little agreement on exactly what the relationship should be between public servants and the public—perhaps because there are so many different concepts of the public. Administrators do agree, however, on some things, particularly the dangers of polarization. When issues become polarized, the governments that administrators serve can become immobilized by a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't controversy or by lengthy (and costly) litigation. Citizens back off when this happens, and that increases the difficulty of engaging the public, however defined.

Scholars of public administration have identified trends in the field that have influenced the way administrators see their role and their relationship with citizens. The once-popular notion

that people should be treated like individual consumers and given friendly, efficient service is said to be losing its hold. Of course, many still put a premium on providing good service, yet some city managers now describe their primary function as “building community,” although they aren’t sure that elected officials share this priority. There are other professionals who aren’t comfortable with this priority either. They believe they are hired to be efficient managers of scarce resources, arbiters of disputes, and problem solvers.

The argument that city managers should be more than problem solvers and build communities may not be as persuasive as it might be because the tasks involved aren’t as clear as those in mediating disputes and managing scarce resources. And this may be the case because notions of what a “community” is vary widely. A community can simply mean a geographic place or something far more. For those intent on community building, “something far more” is restoring civility, combating polarization, and establishing trust. Administrators value maintaining a sense of the common good and putting the best interest of all above personal interest. Consequently, the chief means of building a community are positive measures, such as festivals and informal get-togethers—any occasion that puts would-be adversaries on neutral ground. The nature of the conversation people have with one another is considered a key measure of community, so dialogues where people can listen to one another are popular. Techniques like visioning are also widely used, and administrators rely heavily on process consultants and meeting facilitators to introduce the techniques.

How professions define “community” has a great deal to do with how they view citizens. If public administration is basically about the efficient management of local agencies, then citizens are the people being served. Treating them as consumers makes sense. But if public administration is about community building, then citizens may have to do something other than be informed consumers. But what? The ideal seems to be a citizenry that is dedicated to the good of all and that models the civic virtues of social responsibility (e.g., respect for others). That is just the ideal, however, and it does not match the experiences administrators have with real people. They are more familiar with the “I-want-my-way-NOW citizens,” who are more conscious of their rights than their responsibilities. These folks are the people who band together in small, but vocal, clusters of partisan advocates. Many professional administrators see their job as keeping these partisans from capturing elected officials, who are vulnerable to the organizing ability of highly motivated activists. This may be one of the reasons (along with the history of their profession) that administrators are reluctant to think of their work as “political.” As is true of people in general, the word has a decidedly negative connotation for professionals.

In order to avoid partisans taking over public meetings, administrators feel they have to “get the right people to the table” and provide factual information to counter biased data. Modern public administration has built its reputation on being a highly trained profession with a command of relevant expertise. Putting out the “right” information seems to be exactly what

administrators should do in order to build a credible relationship with citizens. This is particularly the case when the issues involve technical or scientific considerations.

Getting the right people to the table in order to hear what is on the public's mind is a more difficult matter. It could mean consulting all the stakeholders or parties with a direct interest in an issue. Or it could mean reaching a demographically representative group. Reaching stakeholders usually isn't a problem, but assembling a representative group is. Persuading people to turn out for a meeting is difficult. And those who do respond, administrators say, are the same citizens who turn out for every meeting.

Pressure to involve citizens increased in the 1970s with the passage of numerous laws requiring citizen participation. The assumption behind these statutes seems to have been that if people were consulted, they would be more supportive of actions the government was taking. Administrators, as well as citizens, report that this is often not the case. After doing the careful planning that professionals do, administrators dutifully take their plans to the people who will be affected, but citizens often feel everything has already been decided. So citizen participation requirements have had the opposite effect from what was intended. People feel even more manipulated and distrust has deepened. Subsequent analysis suggests that what may have happened is that the participation measures favored the already organized citizenry, such as those represented by interest groups skillful at influencing the government. That has left unorganized Americans at a disadvantage in getting the ear of the government and intensified the feeling that particular interests are overwhelming consideration of general or common interests.

Furthermore, participation requirements have little to say about what responsibilities citizens have—if any. That placed all the responsibility on the shoulders of administrators who faced a barrage of demands and complaints. Professionals with responsibility for carrying out the participation requirements explain that agency heads are often unwilling to give more than lip service to involving citizens.

Disappointments with participation notwithstanding, many professionals like Mike Pompili still see a need to engage a representative group of citizens—to get them to the table—because they believe they are accountable to the community or public as a whole. They want to attract more than the “usual suspects.” The question of what people are supposed to do once they are at the table remains open, however. One answer, implicit in administrators' conversations, is that a sufficiently diverse group of citizens can represent the public as a whole even though these citizens may not have tested their individual opinions with one another or come to any collective conclusions. Pompili's engagement efforts operated under a different assumption, which is that citizens do, indeed, have to engage one another to produce an authentic public voice rather than an aggregation of individual opinions. He is more concerned about the authenticity of the voice than the number of citizens at meetings. From his perspective, there is no public voice until people have carefully deliberated on the value of the action being taken by government agencies.

As we'll explain later, this deliberation requires a careful weighing of costs and benefits. And it seems to be a counterforce to polarization.

Pompili is frank about the resistance he encounters among his colleagues to this type of engagement. Many administrators are wary meeting the citizenry face-to-face. Their experience tells them that the majority of Americans don't really have the time or interest to participate in politics. They are preoccupied with just surviving. Attempting to involve the public, some warn, can be dangerous.

The danger is that citizens don't know what should be done about the problems on the table. So administrators structure meetings to be certain of coming out with the solution they think is best. As one official said, "You never hold a public meeting unless you know the outcome." Otherwise, professionals fear being placed in an impossible situation. If they accept whatever citizens conclude, they run the risk of having to implement bad decisions. But if they listen to citizens and go along with hearings because they are expected to, they run the risk of being seen as disingenuous when they act on the expert information at their disposal. Or they are accused of being arrogant and dictatorial. Administrators who worry about being put in this bind criticize colleagues who want to take issues public because it increases the pressure on them to do the same.

To make matters worse, administrators fear listening to more than a few key stakeholders runs the risk of creating unrealistic expectations about what government agencies can do. Consequently, administrators have looked for alternatives to listening to citizens face-to-face, and they have found these alternatives in polls and focus groups. These practices don't entail the risk of direct contact, and the methodologies involved are thought to be reliable because they are "scientific." While administrators in the Pompili mode are comfortable with the same self-selected people who make up the electorate, other administrators only accept demographically representative samples, even though people do not actually form their opinions in such groups. Polling and focus groups have become the "best practices" for "consulting" the public.

Administrators are reluctant to involve citizens directly for other valid reasons. People haven't been proven reliable or consistent when professionals have depended on them to accept responsibilities or to follow through on a project. Officials who are willing to support citizen participation through mechanisms like visioning, we were told, have been disappointed when participation dropped off sharply after a few meetings. Once the participatory projects ended, administrators took over the reins, assuming that they were responsible for implementation and there was nothing else citizens needed to do. But, after the fact, professionals realized citizens had other expectations. Having been involved initially, they thought they would continue to be involved. When they weren't, they dropped out.

While some administrators work to bring the views of citizens to bear on the decisions that they and their agencies make, others would go even further. They want a reciprocal relationship

with people in which the services they provide are matched by complementary actions, which citizens themselves take. City managers have committed municipal agencies to providing services if citizens reciprocate by carrying out tasks assigned by the managers. Once again, the response has been described as disappointing. The results were also less than satisfactory when administrators relied on civic organizations to collaborate on a project—only to discover that these organizations were too turf conscious to work together effectively.

Administrators frequently explain the inability of citizens and civic groups to reciprocate as a lack of power. When people have acted on their own, they have often been stopped because those with institutional power, legal and fiscal, felt threatened and blocked their initiatives. Citizens don't have the kind of authority that is conferred by law or the resources that money commands. Even when officials have tried to share this kind of power, the results have been troubling. For instance, some neighborhood councils that were given the power to set priorities for city budgets turned into fiefdoms. They came under the control of a few "neighborcrats" who led the councils. Consequently, broad-scale citizen involvement declined.

Despite their disappointments and frustrations, the public administrators we talked to value democracy. They just had varied notions of what it is and what roles citizens should play in it. The question of what exactly the "public" is in public administration has been a topic of serious discussion in recent professional literature. In *The Spirit of Public Administration*, George Frederickson begins with a chapter on the nature of a democratic public and the necessary infusion of its spirit into the spirit of an administration that serves a democratic nation. When Frederickson integrates concepts of democracy into professional principles, he redefines citizenship. Citizens, he insists, have to be more than virtuous individual electors, informed electors, or vigilant consumers; they have to be productive civic actors who can exercise sound judgment, make good decisions about how to promote their collective interests, and act effectively on what they have decided.³ His definition raises important questions about how professionals might involve or engage such a citizenry. Those questions can't be answered without considering the way the citizenry sees administrators, whom they usually refer to as "bureaucrats."

Through the Eyes of Citizens

While we spent several years listening to public administrators, we have explained that our research has been on how citizens think and feel. First and forcefully, we have been struck by the differences between the perceptions of citizens and those of professionals, even though professionals are also citizens. Citizens have sounded a constant refrain since we began to study their attitudes: "People like us," they say, "can't make a difference," meaning that they see little possibility of being able to act on their problems through political institutions. They feel pushed out of the system by a political class of representatives, the media, and bureaucrats. American's

³ H. George Frederickson, *The Spirit of Public Administration* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

hostility toward bureaucrats may be deep-seated in the political culture, going back to the colonists' antipathy toward the ministers of George III. Whatever the source of those feelings, they appear to have intensified as power in the political system shifted in the last quarter of the twentieth century from the presidency and Congress to the nonelected branches of government—administrative agencies and courts. Scholars can now document trends that have, in fact, “sidelined” citizens.⁴ The studies cite barriers, such as the power of incumbents to retain their seats by gerrymandering voting districts.

Even though administrators may think of themselves purely as nonpolitical managers, people don't make this sharp distinction. They don't classify them with politicians, but neither do they see bureaucrats as selfless servants. There have been recent exceptions for firefighters and police officers, but that doesn't apply to all administrators. The bureaucracy continues to exist in tension with democratic self-rule.⁵ And despite public ambivalence about bureaucrats, bureaucracies have grown as the role of government has grown—often at the insistence of civic organizations, educational institutions, and businesses. In addition, administrators have won increasing power to determine, not simply implement, policy. Bureaucrats rule through their power to regulate. And while their rule making is subject to broad public review, in fact, only a few highly trained lobbyists working in well-funded interest groups have any chance of mastering the intricacies of government processes. Some public servants even lay claim to the mantle of being the true interpreters of the public interest on the grounds that they are above partisan politics. Citizens may not be familiar with all these trends or know exactly how they have lost the power to make a difference, but they feel the effects of these developments.

Americans have little hope that the political system will reform itself, and they don't believe that they can reform it either. Yet there has been a notable undercurrent in the refrain about not being able to make a difference. Cynicism shouldn't be mistaken for apathy. People will sometimes add: “But we *should* be able to make a difference!” And some will go on to say that they can have an effect in their communities, though not in the larger political system. Yet a good many citizens worry that this sense of community is atrophying. (In this instance, the views of citizens and professionals are not all that different.)

The frustrations that citizens have with making a difference don't always ring true with public administrators, however. Administrators cite poor attendance at public meetings, low turnout at the polls, and the failure of citizens to carry out assigned tasks, which could actually make a difference. Complaining, some officials say in private, is just a way for people to avoid responsibility. So when citizens and administrators talk about one another, a good deal of finger-pointing goes on, which further degrades the political environment.

⁴ Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

⁵ Brian J. Cook, *Bureaucracy and Self-Government: Reconsidering the Role of Public Administration in American Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).



The sections that follow will report on how citizens can make a difference. The studies the foundation has done of citizens raises some interesting questions, which administrators may want to consider. Is it really necessary to bring everyone to the same table? Are there other ways the citizenry as a whole can represent itself? Is it possible to have a true consensus, or can communities move ahead despite a lack of full agreement? Are all forms of disagreements disruptive, and is more civility the best remedy for a lack of civility? Is the kind of power that citizens lack the same as the kind of power that has been used in successful civic initiatives? Are there other sources of real political power?

All of these questions make certain assumptions about democracy and about the role of citizens, and the foundation tries to be clear about both. We follow the protocols for conducting reliable research, but we make no secret that there is a purpose driving our studies. We hope that what we find will make democracy come closer to working as it should. When we say, “as it should,” we don’t mean that we are experts on the “right” kind of democracy. “Should” merely acknowledges what political philosophers have long pointed out: democracy is a moral ideal. And what it should mean is properly a subject of debate for every generation.

Kettering takes the definition of democracy that it uses from the literal meaning of the word, which is “rule by the people” or, originally, “rule by the people in multifamily households living in communities or villages.” This early democracy arose as a political means of countering domination by a “tyrant,” a single ruler whether good or bad. So as in Robert Wiebe’s well-titled book, democracy can also be thought of as “self rule,” another definition we use.⁶

Self-rule requires citizens to make collective decisions and join forces to act on those decisions. The authority for self-government is in our Constitution, which says that “We, the People” are the sovereign power in the country, a power we don’t think was 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 doesn’t assume, however, that citizens can rule themselves without government, just that the government isn’t the sole instrument for organizing social progress.

The sovereign people in a democracy can be described as “the public,” an inclusive, collective, but diverse, citizenry as contrasted with the many “publics,” which are particular groups of people connected by a specific interest or affinity. Earlier, we explained that the public we are talking about forms by doing the work of citizens, which has been called “public work.” The foundation’s understanding of how the public forms is something like this: imagine a group of

⁶ Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

people playing baseball. The work of playing baseball makes the group members into a team, something they weren't as individuals. Individuals only become a team by playing together. That is the way a public is created, by citizens joining in collective efforts.

Watching this work makes the foundation 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. So engaging the public requires relating to the work people do not just individual citizens. Engagement, from this perspective, is like plugging into a current rather than grasping a light bulb.

We consider the work citizens do with citizens as well as the work they do with governments to be political. Although we know that the word "politics" has a negative connotation, we use it intentionally in this report in order to recover its original meaning, which is much broader than the things done in electing and managing governments. Electing, legislating, and managing are essential in institutional politics. There is also a world of organic or civic politics, which lies underneath the more familiar world of institutional politics. It is the politics that people refuse to call politics, preferring other terms like "civic." Public work goes on at this organic level when citizens engage other citizens in solving common problems. We see the effects of these efforts in neighborhood watches, antilitter campaigns, and a host of ad hoc initiatives. For administrators to engage the public, they have to take into consideration what happens in this more basic world of politics, but they must never colonize it by imposing the products and values of institutional politics.

The Necessity of Public Work

Institutional politics depend on the foundations of civic responsibility and political will created in organic politics. And the public works that administrators manage become more effective when complemented by public work.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, studies show that if people aren't totally dependent on government, they like it better and government is more effective. That is one of the lessons in Robert Putnam's study of the effect of the vibrant civil society in northern Italy as compared with the weaker civil society in the southern region. (Civil society is what we consider organic in that it exists in networks and norms, not in laws and formal institutions.) Vaughn Grisham's study of the success of Tupelo, Mississippi, came to a similar conclusion. When people are without the ability to deal with some of their problems through their collaborative efforts, they become totally dependent on governmental institutions, which become overwhelmed by demands for services.⁷ Public work counters dependency.

The work that citizens do with other citizens also fosters the sense of responsibility that administrators report is often missing when they try to engage citizens. If citizens have to assume more responsibility, involving them has to go beyond obtaining their consent for the work that administrators do. Giving consent doesn't create a feeling of responsibility. If all citizens do is to consent to actions taken in their name, "We, the People" will 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 take responsibility for those decisions. Only that gives the people's choices moral force. And only public choices or decisions to act can launch 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 public administrators 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. Citizens who see themselves as buying services with their taxes are likely to blame whoever "manufactures" what they have bought if something goes wrong.

⁷ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Vaughn L. Grisham Jr., *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999).

What Only the Public Can Do

One reason citizens have to take responsibility is that there are some things only they can do. There are certain things that even the best governments and all of their experts can never do. Democratic governments cannot create their own legitimacy. They cannot define their own purposes, set the standards by which they will be held accountable, or chart the basic directions they are to follow. Although we may expect them to, governments cannot stay with policies on controversial issues that the people are unwilling to support. Democratic governments need broad public support if they are to act consistently over the long term. Governments can build common highways, but not common ground. And governments—even the most powerful—cannot provide the popular will needed for effective political action. Governments can command obedience, but they cannot create will. Most important of all, it is up to the public to transform private individuals into public citizens, people who are political actors. Citizens can create governments, but governments can't create citizens. Only citizens can do that.

There is also reason to believe that there are certain kinds of problems that 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.⁸ Poverty is an example. The achievement gap in schools is another, as is racial conflict. These problems are made worse when there is a diminished sense of community; the problems further weaken the relationships that are needed to build hope and change.

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. Given these characteristics, administrative 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 implications for public administrators are obvious if there are, indeed, problems that, while they may be ameliorated by professional or institutional actions, can't be fully addressed

⁸ The classic reference on “wicked” problems is Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169.

by them. That is why we have come to the conclusion that public administrators have an interest not just in the public works they manage, but also in the public work citizens must do. They can benefit from engaging the work, not just individual citizens.

“Public work” may be an odd term, but it has been going on since the country was first settled. It grew out of frontier barn raisings and town meetings; it is 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 are examples of public work.

Public work is still 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. The crucial question is how public work gets started and how administrators can recognize it in its formative stages so they can encourage it. Oddly enough, collective efforts may grow out of the very self-interest that is supposed to be the antithesis of common interest.

The Politics That Don’t Look Like Politics

Although we believe that the public work citizens do is political, in its earliest stages, it doesn’t look anything like politics. People become civically engaged for personal reasons, and their engagement slowly evolves in stages. Public administrators can profit from taking this progression into account and building on it.

On any given day, someone takes the first step to becoming involved 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.⁹ 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 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.

⁹ A woman from Little Rock did, in fact, help develop an anticrime program after finding syringe needles by the side of her house. The Harwood Group: *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1993), pp. 11-12.

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 whether 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. Public administrators 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 professionals are trained to break down problems into manageable projects and 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.¹⁰ 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, they can recognize that although their interests are different, these interests are interdependent. However, if people fail to see these interrelations or to make these connections, they tend to feel isolated and unable to make a difference.

Civic 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.

¹⁰ The Harwood Group, *Strategies for Civil Investing: Foundations and Community-Building* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1997), p. 8.

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—even if they aren't sure they can. They are often forced to commit their time and resources when 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.

The Practices Used in Public Work

To engage public work is to engage the tasks or practices that are involved as the work goes forward. This section explains what these practices are. 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 aren't just mechanical routines, however. They have to generate civic energy, political will, and commitment. So we have called them "practices" so they won't be confused with techniques.

At least six practices appear essential. 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 occur every day without anyone noticing. In order to identify and explain them, however, it is necessary to describe them as precisely as possible. And that meant coining some terms that aren't used every day.

Take the matter of describing a problem that needs attention. People do that in conversations while waiting for a bus or sitting in a restaurant. These conversations revolve around ordinary questions: What's bothering you? Why do you care? How are you going to be affected? When people respond to these questions, they are identifying what is valuable to them. Kettering wanted to find a term that would capture what was going on politically when people are identifying a problem. We have called it "naming." These names have to capture people's experiences and the concerns that grew out of those experiences. For citizens, naming the problem is 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. Tensions among different options become apparent: If we do "x," we can't do "y." Kettering would say that these conversations create a framework for addressing the problem. A "framing" collects and presents options for acting on a problem and also highlights the tensions among various options.

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 them, 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 talk to one another about a shared problem: 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 public deliberation less abstract, consider this description. Before there was e-mail, deliberative conversations often went on in the lobby of the local post office. Glenn Frank, a journalist, wrote about what he called 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.”¹¹ This is public deliberation. It is not a special technique or group process; it is part of our history, even though it may not be as common as it once was.

As people deliberate and chart a general direction for moving forward, someone has to act. In the Kettering lexicon, this is “making commitments.” When a number of citizens and civic organizations commit themselves to doing something, Kettering calls the sum of these efforts “public acting,” collective efforts that continue over a long period of time and employ 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 very brief overview defining terms. We hope that will set the stage for going into much more detail about the practices that we suggest administrators engage. The first three are crucial because they provide a foundation for the other three.

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. When people name problems, they don’t usually compete to see which name “wins.” Experiences and concerns vary, so do names. When people include multiple names in their description of a problem they begin to appreciate the

¹¹ Glenn Frank, “The Parliament of the People,” *Century Magazine* 98 (1919): 402.

complexity of issues and the different values that are affected. This openness opens the door to politics; everyone becomes a stakeholder.

Naming a problem in public terms isn't simply using it in everyday language. Public terms are distinctive in that they capture intangibles. Crime can be described in statistical terms, yet people value safety or being secure from danger. And safety can't be quantified. These intangibles 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 our primal motives. These collective or basic political motivations are similar to the individual needs that Abraham Maslow found common to all human beings.¹² Public imperatives are more fundamental than the interests that grow out of our particular circumstances (which may change). And they are different from personal 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 their city was a powerful, political imperative.

Public names facilitate public work because the names encourage people to own their problems, and owning problems is a potent source of political energy. These names can prompt citizens to realize that they already know something about these problems. They know how problems affect what they consider valuable. This insight, that citizens can draw valid knowledge from collective experience, is self-empowering. As the saying goes, we may not know how to make shoes, but we know whether the ones we have on pinch.

Professionals, on the other hand, name problems to serve other purposes. The names they use reflect their expertise and the solutions their professions provide. 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 can ignite conflicts, which many people believe are counterproductive.

¹² Milton Rokeach and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, "Stability and Change in American Value Priorities, 1968-1981," *American Psychologist* 44 (May 1989): 775-784.

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—with the tensions among them identified—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 about what they should do. Public decision making is better served when citizens create frameworks that capture the major intangibles that were identified in the naming (usually three or four options). When such a framing occurs, it becomes the second of the democratic practices.¹³

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 (often intangible) 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 of these concerns generates different proposals for action. As in the matter of safety, the issue of how to revive the economy would probably 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 one option for dealing with the overarching issue, which

¹³ For more on framing, see the Kettering publications *What Citizens Can Do: A Public Way to Act* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1999) and *Making Choices Together: The Power of Public Deliberation* (Dayton, OH, Kettering Foundation, 2003).

might be something like neighborhood revitalization. Put together, the different options create a framework for decision making. When all the options, including their downsides, are included in a framework, it forms 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. Both the tensions between the advantages and disadvantages of a given option as well as the tensions among options that reflect different views of what is valuable have to be captured for a framework.

Take the issue of protecting the American family; it is filled with tensions among options and within options. 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, 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.¹⁴

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 possibly want to invest in the interventions most likely to be effective. Imagine this council listening to the way citizens name the problems and frame the issue.

One option citizens 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. People would differ over which was best. And once again, though, a parent-centered policy might trigger the same objections as a marriage-centered policy—government intrusion into private life.

¹⁴ This account of what happens during deliberations on how to save American families is 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, *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>.

Still another option could follow from the conviction that children have to come first; they must be protected from 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. All of these measures are likely to be 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.

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.

Obviously a framing done by citizens would not be free of disagreements if issues were presented fairly by showing the pros and cons of each option. Deliberative politics resounds with different opinions, but these differences don't replicate those that characterize partisan politics. The reason is most everyone shares the same basic concerns even though they 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.

Administrators not only provide names for problems but also provide frameworks when they present issues to the public. 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. In order to engage the public in naming and framing, administrators need to promote the creation of places where the practices could go on and, at a minimum, take into account public names and frameworks as they approach issues. Elected officials in the Hawaiian legislature have taken these steps by collaborating with the University of Hawaii to hold forums based on a public naming and framing of an issue on the legislative agenda.¹⁵

¹⁵ Les Ihara Jr., "Opportunity for State Legislatures," *Connections* 19 (July 2003): 19-21 and Dolores Foley, *Civil Economics and Civic Engagement in Hawaii* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, October 2005).

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 local social service agencies. Then, public administrators would have made additional decisions to ensure that the council's policies were implemented equitably and efficiently. Decision making is a routine political activity, and on some questions, elected representatives and public administrators *should* decide. On other matters, the decision making needs to include the citizenry, especially when wicked problems require civic as well as government action. If 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 public administrators 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 seldom comes up. So people don't have to confront the costs and consequences of their wishes.

In other situations, efforts at involving people have been based on a misconception of the role of citizens. People are asked to make financial or technical decisions that can only be made by competent professionals. Citizens aren't experts in these matters, although they should have the ultimate say on matters of purpose and direction. That is why issues for public decision making have to be framed around questions of what is most valuable, not around specific technical solutions.

Decision making becomes open to citizens, not when they are invited to the table, but when they are challenged 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.

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. Doing that increases the probability that a decision will be sound by helping citizens determine whether the actions being considered are consistent with what people consider most important for their collective well-being. 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 the loss of freedom 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 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.

Expert information, however, isn't what informs the judgments we have to make on what *should* be done. Questions of what *should* be are moral questions, and there are no experts on such matters. Other considerations, which lie outside expert knowledge, inform political decisions. 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. Because these questions are ultimately about what *should* be, people have to create the knowledge needed to respond. And that knowledge is formed in the crucible of deliberations to determine whether there is a consistency between proposed actions and what is valuable to people. A more accurate term for this sort of public knowledge would be "practical wisdom," or sound judgment, which citizens create when they reason together. Deliberation, the ancient Greeks explained, is "the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act."¹⁶

Administrators should take note in the efforts they make to educate citizens. Although their efforts are useful, they aren't sufficient. 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 kind of talking people must do in order to teach themselves. So administrators have to engage the practice of deliberation. The most obvious thing they can do is recognize its importance, as the Hawaiian legislature has done.

¹⁶ Isocrates described practical wisdom in his "Antidosis." Isocrates, "Antidosis," in *Isocrates*, trans. George Norlin, vol. 2 (1929; reprint, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2000), pp. 179-365.

Public Deliberation as Politics

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).¹⁷ The insight that deliberation is a political act, the foundation has learned, is critical to understanding civic engagement and public work. Consequently, in reporting our findings, we think it best to interrupt the description of the other three practices and elaborate on what deliberation does that is political.

Public deliberation is not just a prerequisite to public work; it is 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 shape a public voice that will inform officeholders and public administrators 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 situations. Here are some reasons why.

To Move 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 citizens get beyond first impressions to more shared and reflective opinions, or what is called “public judgment.”¹⁸ Public judgment is not the same as popular opinion, which is often contradictory and shortsighted. Are Americans willing to accept the consequences of a popular course of action or policy? No one can know until people have faced up to the cost and the long-term effects. Deliberation can help them do that. Deliberation combats knee-jerk reactions, misperceptions of the problems at hand, and a failure to understand other people.

The path from opinion to judgment is long and full of twists and turns.¹⁹ A decade may pass before the citizenry is ready to change a policy. The path begins in uncertainty. People aren’t

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ Daniel Yankelovich describes the twists and turns between opinion and judgment as stages in “How Public Opinion Really Works,” *Fortune* 126 (October 5, 1992): 102-105.

sure they have a problem that merits their attention in an environment where they are constantly bombarded with urgent messages. They have to satisfy themselves that something is happening that could affect what they hold dear. And they have to be convinced that they have to respond. In other words, they have to name the problem in a way that meets these conditions. Then, being human, people are prone to hope the problem will go away or that it can be solved by placing the blame on one more culprit. The path twists almost back to the starting place. Deliberation at this point helps people get beyond wishful thinking and blaming others to face up to the course of actions or options that are available to them to solve the problem. A deliberative framework brings them face-to-face with unpleasant consequences, unwelcome costs, and tough trade-offs. Deliberation promotes weighing the options fairly and realistically. And it helps people work through the emotions that are evoked by having to make tough decisions. Deliberation will not make the feelings go away but will enable us to reach the point at which we are in control of our emotions. “Working through” is an apt phrase for what happens because that is exactly what occurs when we move from denial or blaming others to facing up to the tensions inherent in every public decision.²⁰ Only then are we in a position to make sound decisions, and popular opinion can give way to public judgment.

On any given issue, at any given point of time, citizens are at different points in the journey, and administrators who want to engage the public have to have a sense of where the public is and isn't. Trying to get people to face up to difficult trade-offs when they aren't really sure there is a problem is a mistake. So is trying to get them to make a decision when they are still absorbed in wishful thinking and blaming others.

To Work Through Moral Disagreements—Without a Consensus

Public deliberation has also been used to deal with highly contentious issues. 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. Tensions arise when what we need to do to solve a problem threatens things we value. For instance, an action that might make us more secure from terrorism could limit our freedom. Elections won't make emotional 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, it does take into account all the things that people hold dear. By recognizing what people consider valuable, deliberation helps them deal with the intense feelings that are generated by moral imperatives. So the sort of deliberation described here is more than a purely rational exercise in critical thinking because emotions are involved.

²⁰ Daniel Yankelovich discussed his concept of stages and “working through” problems in chapter 17 of his book *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

As public administrators know well, problem solving grinds to a halt when emotions polarize the political system. Deliberation is useful in countering political polarization because it also takes into account not only emotions but also the differences in what facts *mean* to different people. People may not agree, but they can begin to see what prompts others to take the positions they do. And doing that changes the tone of disagreements. Participants in forums don't necessarily come to like one another, but they have a greater sense of how they are *like* one another.

Although it tempers disagreements, we would stress that deliberation is not a means of conflict resolution per se. The deliberative forums 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 number (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.²¹ 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. But altering people's perceptions of their fellow citizens and the problems they face together can unlock a sense of possibility, which is a driving force behind progress.²²

Our research tells administrators that many Americans share their fear of polarized conversations that accomplish little or nothing. They look for opportunities to talk about the problems frankly—provided they can exchange opinions without being attacked personally. We have found people curious about what others who aren't like them think. 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.²³ Deliberative forums foster that kind of political environment.

This mutual understanding, which can result from deliberation, 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.²⁴

²¹ Steve Farkas and Will Friedman, with Ali Bers, *The Public's Capacity for Deliberation* (Dayton, OH: Public Agenda Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1995), p. 17.

²² The Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos*, pp. 11-14, 31-34.

²³ These are some of the attitudes that the Kettering Foundation has seen reflected in the deliberative NIF forums. David Mathews has a more detailed description of this political discourse in Chapter 12 of *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

²⁴ For a more complete account of the effects of public deliberation, see Doble Research Associates, *The Story of NIF: The Effects of Deliberation* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1996); Farkas and Friedman, with Bers, *The Public's Capacity for Deliberation*; and UNM Institute for Public Policy, *A Builder's Guide to Public Deliberation: An Executive Summary of "Understanding Public Deliberation"* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1995).

To Set the Stage for 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. This can pave the way for constructive change.

When forum participants struggle over difficult choices and develop a better understanding of their fellow citizens, they are in a better position to work together. 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 make connections between problems. This helps them approach political questions more realistically. Self-interests broaden; 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. Deliberations can increase a sense of collective responsibility. That has been especially true when people have come to recognize 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.²⁵

Deliberation, we have learned, affects problem solving most directly by helping people redefine the problems facing them in ways that show when new types of action can be useful and when new actors can contribute. That occurs as problems are redefined in public terms and issues are reframed to include all options for action.

For instance, a town suffering from a declining economy, including soaring unemployment, could try any number of efforts, both long- and short-term, to turn things around. As a short-term solution, several people in this town might propose that the community help a new restaurant that seems to have the potential to stimulate a modest revival downtown. The problem is that the potential isn't being realized because unemployed men, and young people who like to hang out with them, are congregating in front of the restaurant and drinking. This causes customers to shy away. So people in this town 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. While others agree with the police chief, they also have different concerns, which they think contribute to the loitering problem. Residents begin to see connections between what first appeared to be isolated problems. 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.

²⁵ Doble Research Associates, *Responding to the Critics of Deliberation* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, July 1996), pp. 52-55.

As these conversations go on over time, the definition of the town's problem would continue 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 community's welfare. Many of the comments that citizens make are about what is happening to children; some believe too many young people receive too little adult supervision and have 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. 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 Inform Public Administrators

The results of public deliberation provide administrators with insights they can't get from any other source. 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. 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. On the other hand, forum results reveal the value dimension of issues that are otherwise treated in technical or professional terms.

Deliberative forums are also useful in showing how the public goes about making up its mind on issues. Forums don't lend themselves to firm conclusions about "what the public thinks," but they can shed light on *how* the public is thinking. They reveal what the public is weighing as it decides and in what context. Public thinking is different from the way professionals reason and political leaders make decisions. It has its own distinctive logic, which tends to be very pragmatic. It isn't a superior form of thinking; it is just another of the distinctive things that citizens do in their work. And it is a way of reasoning that administrators can engage if they are aware of it.

Public thinking doesn't end in a clear prescription for administrative action, however. Expecting officeholders to do what deliberative forums dictate isn't realistic because deliberative forums don't intend to dictate. Public deliberation contributes to good government by locating 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 administrators believe they have to cross them. In other words, deliberative politics is not an alternative to representative government as some forms of direct democracy are.

The Complementary Practices in Public Work

Now to the remaining democratic practices used in public work. Naming, framing, and deliberating are of little consequence unless something comes of the decisions that citizens make. The next three practices, making commitments, acting together, and civic learning, 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. And most of this work reinforces what is being done in institutions, which is why the practices are called complementary.

Strengthening Institutional Planning with Public Commitments

Even though 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 decisions. Citizens are pushed to the sidelines again. Institutions may acknowledge what people have decided in deliberations but then fall back on familiar routines like planning. As noted in the introduction, some administrators assume that once the people have spoken, it's time for officeholders to follow up. Administrators do need to follow up because they can bring institutional resources to bear on problems. But there are often facets of these problems that require public work. And that distinction gets lost. Institutional plans don't normally include provisions for public work, which can be prescribed by administrators. People have to choose what they do.

Although planning makes sense for institutions, it isn't the way citizens mount collective efforts because 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 repairs 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 public's equivalent of planning? The fourth practice in public work is citizens making commitments to one another to act. Making such commitments isn't spontaneous or magical, nor is it done through 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. So the public's equivalent of planning is orchestrating reciprocal commitments.

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. Their commitments are reciprocal; one group promises another, we will do thus and so if you will do thus and so. These 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

Administrators can engage the public as people are making commitments to one another by offering the resources at their disposal. Consider a common community project: cleaning a public park. Such an effort usually involves citizens providing their sweat, their time, and their own tools from home. Public administrators can get involved and support citizen efforts by contributing trucks and other heavy equipment that citizens don't have access to. This work does more than result in a clean park. It also contributes to a stronger sense of community.

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 act on behalf of the public, and people 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. In a community that was facing an increase in school dropouts, juvenile crime (often drug related), and teenage pregnancies, public deliberations led one group of citizens to organize an after-school sports program. Churches expanded their youth choirs. Civic organizations established a center to train dropouts for jobs. The sum of what happened was public acting.

That said, public acting is more than cooperation among civic groups. It is not only multifaceted but also mutually reinforcing. 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. Consequently, public action can be coherent without being bureaucratically coordinated. That means

²⁶ More information on covenants is in Daniel J. Elazar and John Kincaid, "Covenant and Polity," *New Conversations* 4 (Fall 1979): 4-8.

²⁷ This report is from Barbara Brown, who introduced the deliberative forums to the community. Barbara Brown, telephone conversation with Anne Thomason, September 13, 2004.

its “transaction costs” (the cost of getting things done) are usually lower than institutional costs. 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.

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 develop among people who aren’t family or friends. Acting together over time gives people a better sense of what they can expect.

Rather than substituting for institutional 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.²⁸ It has been fairly easy for administrators to engage public acting when they value and make a place for it.

Turning Evaluation into Civic Learning

The sixth practice 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 used in government. 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.

²⁸ Clarence N. Stone, “Linking Civic Capacity and Human Capital Formation,” in *Strategies for School Equity: Creating Productive Schools in a Just Society*, ed. Marilyn J. Gittell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 163-176.

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 difference 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.

When communities learn, they rename, reframe, and decide again—after the fact. Then they make new commitments to act and try again. 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 as before: 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.

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 making progress. 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 or surf the Internet 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* nesting 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 a question the foundation often gets from people who learn about democratic practices and want to use them in their communities. They want to know where they should begin. Some groups start by naming issues; others begin with deliberation in forums. Where they start 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.²⁹ 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, 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. Administrators are better advised 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 has 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?”

²⁹ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

The Politics Underneath Politics

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, but it isn't incompatible with it.³⁰

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 institution-based politics. Obviously, the public is understood in a different way and plays a different role.

We have called the politics that go on underneath institutional politics organic and fundamental. It is the politics that grows out of civil society; it is citizen-based. Although public administrators are located in institutional politics, we believe they have self-interest in organic democracy. And we have tried to make the case that engaging the public can be thought of as engaging the practices used in democracy in its most basic form. The practical benefits to administrators include more informed public judgment and the products of public work. The politics we have been describing also brings with it different rules for conducting business, new sources of power, a broader base of leadership, and more space for problem solving. All of these traits give citizen-based politics a tone that is quite different from partisan politics.

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 deciding 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 all 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, 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.

³⁰ 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).

If these 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 to 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 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 frameworks that are weighted in favor of one particular course of action. So creating an acceptable framework imposes a standard of fair-mindedness.

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, blocking the person-to-person interaction that makes deliberation productive. Or they have imposed written rules of behavior, which stifles an honest exchange of opinions.

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. Though perhaps not the civility that administrators hope for, the rules that grow out of public work make for a better political climate.

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.³¹ 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 deliberative 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 claims responsibility for them.³²

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.³³ Most people in Tupelo agree with this concept; Vaughn Grisham says they believe their prosperity has been the result of the way the community goes about its business.

The first rule of business in Tupelo was that the public had to have a role in order for the community to solve its problems. This became a guiding principle 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

³¹ 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).

³² See Grisham, *Tupelo*, pp. 2-3, and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *CA1-3-Per Capita Personal Income Mississippi, 2003*, <http://www.bea.gov> (accessed June 27, 2005).

³³ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*.

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.³⁴ Leaders with his mind-set 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 *by* them. The implication for administrators is obvious: 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.

³⁴ Doble Research Associates, *A Consumer Mentality: The Prevailing Mind-Set in American Public Education* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1999), pp. 21-22.

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, such as deliberation.

As administrators have pointed out, 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. Deliberation helps generate this power by the questions forum participants raise about others. One of the classic questions is, who is not in this room that has to be here if we are going to deal with this issue? Not only are the experiences of others essential to fully understanding an issue, but also the resources of others are critical when dealing with the myriad facets of wicked problems.

The kind of 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 expands, picking up energy as it goes along. New relationships make more public work possible. And as people work together, they begin to see that they are making a difference. That gives them a greater sense of 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.

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."³⁵

Conventional notions about citizens' lack of power have been changed, as they were in Tupelo, when people have demonstrated what they could 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

³⁵ Jeremy Brecher, "'If All the People Are Banded Together': The Naugatuck Valley Project," in *Building Bridges: The Engineering Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community*, ed. Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), p. 93.

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.³⁶

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 a standard tool in conventional politics is 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."³⁷

Communities that begin by searching for the one correct answer to a problem have sometimes discovered that there isn't any one solution. When people realize that they, with their commitment and energy, can be a large part of the answer they have been looking for, they discover their own power. 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."³⁸ This sense of responsibility is implicit in each of the democratic practices, and it grows as people move from naming, to framing, to deliberating, and so on. This public power doesn't threaten administrative authority, but rather augments it.

Leadership from Everyone

As Kettering listened to public administrators, we heard repeated references to the importance of leadership, both in elected officeholders and in civic organizations. This usually meant people in positions of authority, as opposed to followers who had little authority. Administrators were concerned about what they saw as pathologies in leadership, especially the tendency to dominate.

Kettering's research suggests that there are other ways to think about leadership. It can be seen as an act of political initiative. We don't deny the reality of the leader-follower paradigm but believe that 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;

³⁶ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *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).

³⁷ Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities* and John L. McKnight, "Do No Harm: Policy Options That Meet Human Needs," *Social Policy* 20 (Summer 1989): 7.

³⁸ Leaf Myczack, "We're the Solution," *In Context* 28 (Spring 1991): 19.

yet in communities that are adept at solving their problems, a great many people step forward. Initiatives come from many quarters. These are “leaderful” communities, meaning that everyone is expected to provide some initiative.³⁹ 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 the number of leaders, 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 quoting 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.⁴⁰ McLean isn’t the only leader who has had this insight. In Kansas, another journalist, Davis Merritt, when 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.”⁴¹ Professionals like city managers might say the same thing.

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 anywhere: a coffee shop, a parking lot at the grocery store, even at someone’s kitchen table.

³⁹ The Harwood Group, *Forming Public Capital: Observations from Two Communities* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, August 1995), p. 5.

⁴⁰ Grisham, *Tupelo*, pp. 90-91.

⁴¹ Davis Merritt Jr., December 1992. From the unpublished transcript of the Public Journalism Seminar, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation and New Directions for News, p. 9.

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 group.

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.⁴² City managers interested in community building seem well aware of the importance of such places. 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.⁴³

Deliberative meetings can certainly create public space. That has been reported by more than 30 public policy 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 kind of space it creates. Institutes at Penn State, Clemson University, and the University of Oklahoma, among others, specialize in helping communities that want to deliberate on issues like health care, urban sprawl, education, and economic development. Nearly all of the centers use guides from the National Issues Forums (NIF) series of issue books. And a good many frame their own guides to stimulate deliberation on local issues.⁴⁴

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 deliberative forums for more

⁴² 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).

⁴³ The Harwood Group, *Forming Public Capital*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ For more information on public policy institutes, see the National Issues Forums Institute Web site at <http://www.nifi.org>.

than two decades. These forums have given hundreds of citizens a chance to make collective decisions and act as a public.⁴⁵

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 Iowa's future. One 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 the organizations were looking for an alternative to confrontational politics—an alternative they found in deliberative politics.⁴⁶

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 were 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 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. Administrators who see the need for more public space don't have to convene forums themselves. There are usually other organizations that will do the convening out of their own self-interest.

⁴⁵ For reports on actions that have followed deliberations, see *What Citizens Can Do* and *Making Choices Together*.

⁴⁶ Randall Nielsen, "Improving Education through Community-Building," *Connections* 11 (February 2001): 9-10.

A Postscript: Aligning Administrative Routines with Democratic Practices

Throughout this report, we have noted how administrators can engage the practices used in public work. But as we have made clear from the beginning, we do not pretend to have a command of what professional administrators do. We do believe, however, that it is possible for public servants to carry on this kind of engagement without adding appreciably to their workload or mastering new skills. It seems possible to align normal administrative routines with democratic practices so that the two are mutually reinforcing. Being unfamiliar with these routines, we cannot spell out exactly what alignment might look like beyond what we have said so far. If it is to occur, it will probably require considerable experimentation by imaginative administrators.

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 local governments are citizens, the work of citizens and the work of local governments are different. The idea of alignment is to carry on organizational duties in ways that make it easier for citizens to do their work. Citizens name problems, frame issues, decide questions, implement decisions, act, and learn. Local governments also name, frame, decide, implement, act, and learn. Each democratic practice has its counterpart in a governmental routine. Aligning governmental routines with democracy means to carry on the business of government in ways that strengthen the work of citizens.

The first step in alignment is to be aware that citizens have their own distinctive ways of naming, framing, and so on. Public administrators need to know the names that citizens give issues because these names reveal what is truly important to people. This information can improve expert diagnoses. Similarly, knowing what is in a public framing can strengthen institutional frameworks. On the other side of the coin, sharing with citizens the names and frameworks that professionals give problems might make people more receptive to the expertise that public administrators believe is often discounted.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have used one of the democratic practices, deliberation, in setting policy on the response to a flu pandemic. Rather than relying on a poll to gauge citizens’ reactions, the CDC wanted to know how the public would weigh in on the difficult trade-offs involved. The center organized deliberative forums to get feedback from the public to improve a plan to combat pandemic influenza, especially since such a plan would be more likely to receive public support. The primary question the CDC and its partners asked the public, as well as experts and stakeholders, was, given the fact that a flu vaccine is scarce,

who should receive the vaccine first if there is a pandemic? Citizens agreed with health experts and others interested in pandemic influenza that ensuring that society continues to function by protecting “society’s caretakers” should be the first goal of the effort to distribute the vaccine. The second agreed-on goal was to protect the people most vulnerable or at risk during a flu outbreak. Public input influenced health experts to adjust their approach in several ways, including identifying those people who are most essential to saving or protecting lives, ensuring that high risks groups would be determined using scientific data, and agreeing that the appropriate experts, not political officials, would make such decisions.⁴⁷

Another case study of aligning administrative routines with public practices comes from Ohio State’s School of Public Health. Mike Pompili, mentioned earlier, who is a program director in environmental health at the school, was concerned about local agencies not being able to reach their health goals. These agencies did not put public participation at the top of their priorities, yet conflicts with citizens over highly contentious issues were resulting in polarized deadlocks. Health agencies were desperate to have positive relationships with the citizenry but had little time for new projects.

The Fairfield County Department of Health was receptive to Mike’s proposal to experiment with another way of engaging the public. Growth and development near the city of Columbus presented the county with a multitude of issues, and officials selected three of these issues for an experiment in public deliberation: green space, traffic, and water quality. The usual public hearings were turned into deliberative forums. Citizens confronted tough trade-offs. Adding green space was popular, but the costs and the rights of private property owners had to be considered. Similarly, people wanted more bike paths, but automobile traffic was going to increase and present safety problems for cyclists. On the issue of water, people took little notice because there wasn’t an obvious crisis. Yet water quality, health officials warned, was in danger because the existing sewage system could not keep up with growth. More than 5,000 homes had their own aeration facilities, and 17,000 families had home systems. They wanted to know whether owners would improve the maintenance of their systems or accept the cost of adding to the county system.

No experiment is without problems, and these in Ohio had their share. Forum participation was smaller than desired even though groups of around 20 were ideal for citizen-to-citizen conversations. Local administrators in other agencies were invited to participate. They didn’t always understand the importance of practices like naming issues in public terms. They considered a deliberative forum just another public meeting. Other administrators felt constrained by elected officials who wanted to deal directly with the citizenry. And some deliberative efforts were derailed by internal bureaucratic conflict. The experiment, however, attracted enough interest with the National Association of County and Municipal Health Officials that a representative from the

⁴⁷ Public Engagement Pilot Project on Pandemic Influenza, *Citizen Voices on Pandemic Flu Choices: A Report of the Public Engagement Pilot Project on Pandemic Influenza* (December 2005).

Fairfield Health Department was invited to speak at the national public health conference. And administrators from other agencies who saw the difference between forums and hearings were supportive. “We have used discussion stations in the past,” said Brooks Davis, executive director of the Fairfield County Regional Planning Commission, “but this process had more interactions from the public.” Citizens didn’t talk to officials; they talked to one another.⁴⁸

Moving from Popular Opinion to Public Judgment

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Ohio experiment, in addition to making citizens more aware of what they could and should do, was in moving citizens further along the way from first impressions and hasty, individual reactions to “public judgment.”⁴⁹ Many people in Fairfield County were unaware of emerging problems like the threat to water quality. Some hadn’t yet thought through the costs of the options they favored or the consequences for others, particularly in the case of adding green spaces. People were also prone to do a great deal of wishful thinking to avoid having to make tough trade-offs. County residents were not far along on the path from opinion to judgment, but they had begun the journey. And administrators were able to get a better sense of where citizens were—and weren’t.

The Ohio and CDC examples are cases in which special projects were used to tap into the democratic practice of deliberation. The resources that had gone into organizing discussion sessions and public hearings were redirected into forums where choice work was done. Aligning administrative routines with democratic practices needs to move on from projects to a reconceptualization of the relationship between administrative agencies and the public.

Agencies may have more opportunities to tap into democratic practices than might appear to be the case. There are fledgling attempts to rename issues or reframe them or make deliberative decisions in neighborhood conversations and restaurant discussions. Deliberative frameworks for issues have been placed on restaurant placemats and put on the editorial pages of newspapers. And forums have been held in the places people already gather—schools, churches, libraries. No one has to be “invited.” For example, deliberations on preventing breast cancer moved from a demonstration forum to family reunions. The public often has opportunities and resources that go unutilized.

Given these opportunities in everyday routines, an engagement strategy could be based on the advice of a veteran community organizer and scholar, J. Herman Blake. In nearly every community, something is happening to turn conventional routines into public practices. The key, Blake insists, is to find what is already trying to happen and engage it. “Build on what grows,” he advises.

⁴⁸ Michael J. Pompili, *Kettering Foundation Report: Public Participation Project* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, October 2006).

⁴⁹ For more on public judgment, see Daniel Yankelovich’s *Coming to Public Judgment*.

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 progress comes in spurts, that two-steps-forward-and-one-step-back is normal. Self-rule can only be achieved incrementally, through trial and error. In fact, it is the experience of learning from trial and error that leads citizens to realize that they are, indeed, responsible for our democracy. *That* is the ultimate insight in self-rule. And it could be the ultimate goal for public administration in a democracy.

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Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459
800.221.3657
www.kettering.org