

The New Civic DNA

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The keys to success in the leadership of American communities have been recast by the rapidly changing global environment. A new approach to leadership has been taking shape in the crucible of global era realities. An exciting search is on to discover a new civic DNA, the biochemistry of leadership that fits the demands and opportunities of the 21st century.

Lesson 1: The Table Gets Larger— and Rounder

The old-style top-down management style doesn't work much any more. We are in a transition to a new, more collaborative style, a culture where citizens insist on having a place at the table. The lesson from Portland, Oregon is to make civic involvement a given. In Portland, there is "an expectation of participation." From San Antonio, the lesson is that savvy groups that aren't listened to through normal channels find a way to be heard, and sometimes they make the mainstream squirm. Moral? Find ways to include everyone, and the theatrics won't be necessary.

Lesson 2: The Only Thing More Challenging Than a Crisis May Be Its Absence

Success in cities is often heralded as a story of civic perseverance in the face of extreme crisis. After Cleveland became a

national embarrassment, its leadership finally realized the depth of the problem, picked up the pieces and rebuilt the city. In Denver, when the energy companies that led the boom busted in the 1980s, that crisis forced leaders to forge a balanced economy. But a lack of crisis can be dangerous. San Diego has all the exterior signs of health, but complacency has led to serious unattended problems. The lessons of Portland and Charlotte prove, though, that even in the absence of civic meltdown, smart cities can solve problems before they loom large.

Lesson 3: The Agenda Gets Tougher

Hard as the nails and mortar revitalization of some inner cities has been, the shiny new buildings and newly-bustling downtowns are the easy part. The more difficult question is how to improve the lives of those still caught in dead-end ghettos of poverty and hopelessness. Progress is possible: in Chattanooga, concerted, intensive efforts have led to turnarounds. But the vast majority of cities face huge questions: How can areas outside the inner cities be convinced to take responsibility for the poor concentrated inside? How can people of different races and backgrounds get along well enough to solve problems together? People are talking about the problems and possible answers. That isn't a solution, but it is a powerful first step.

Lesson 4: There Is No Magical Leadership Structure—Just People and Relationships

The message from a wide variety of cities in the United States is that there is no all-purpose governance structure that works today. What matters instead is organizing governance based on a community's strengths—and recognizing that it is the relationships among people that get things done. In Cleveland, business takes the lead. In Denver, government and business have a successful partnership. San Antonio's governance style is prodded by citizen organizations. In every case of successful leadership, it is not the structure that matters, but the way people work together to get things done.

Lesson 5: No One's Excused

Everyone has to chip in to make the mix work. Universities, professions, faith communities, and the media are top among the candidates to enrich the leadership mix. The University of California at San Diego spawned the San Diego Dialogue to get tough issues on the regional agenda. In Cleveland, a farsighted bishop is mobilizing Catholics to deal with urban sprawl, citing a moral dimension to the isolation of the inner city poor. The *Charlotte Observer* strives for coverage that provides a context for solving community problems.

Lesson 6: Sometimes the Old Ways Still Work

Charismatic individual leaders can still make things happen. In Charlotte, NationsBank Chairman Hugh McColl convinced his company to buy up devastated city blocks and develop them. In Oregon, legislators, governors, and mayors have spearheaded many successful efforts—from the land-use laws to light rail—that have helped shape a lively downtown as the cen-

ter of a region with a high quality of life. The lesson here is to respect and welcome civic-minded leaders who can make a difference.

Lesson 7: Collaboration Is Messy, Frustrating, and Indispensable

Regardless of whether traditional leaders like it, collaboration is here to stay. Once people know they can have a voice, they demand it. The partnerships take many forms. One example is Denver, where governments and businesses joined forces in the 1980s to launch an economic turnaround that continues today. But power sharing is always difficult, and some learn the language so they can abuse the process. Today, cities are fumbling toward collaboration, making mistakes, and beginning to form new, inclusive institutions that can solve problems.

Lesson 8: Government Always Needs Reforming, but All the Reforms Need Government

Most Americans say they don't like their governments, but real change depends on good government. Government's perceived role runs the gamut across the country, from innovator and catalyst in Detroit to leader in Portland. These days, government has a new role—as a bridge between community organizations and business. In all its myriad forms, though, and despite its inefficiencies and problems, we still need government as a partner for real, long-term change.

Lesson 9: Place Matters

Connect to the Internet all you want—but realize that home counts. The places that matter most today are regions, formed by suburbs and inner cities with a nod to their mutual self-interest despite their mutual antagonism; neighborhoods, increasingly organized and involved in partnerships; and center cities, the heart and soul

of every region. Nowhere is the importance of the center city better illustrated than in Portland, where neighborhood-rooted citizen outcry against thoughtless development sparked the creation of a glorious downtown.

Lesson 10: It's Never Over

Keep your eye on the ball. Los Angeles didn't after the roaring success of the 1984 Olympics, and one result was the shattering riots of 1992. Atlanta is trying to learn

from Los Angeles' mistake. No success is ever final. In some cities, one victory leads the drive to another: Chattanooga, which began by improving air quality and reclaiming a river, is now making sustainability the key to its revitalization. In Cleveland, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is open and reformers are turning to improving poor schools. In short, no community, however successful, can ever rest on its laurels—or even its lovely waterfront park. ■