

Needed: Regional Councils of Everybody

John Parr

One word describes the conditions under which any council of governments, business organization, or nonprofit works today: complexity. No serious decision is made in a vacuum; no successful initiative can be undertaken without consulting others; and no program can flourish without the understanding and acceptance of many groups. To make things happen, you need a regional council of everybody.

This became increasingly clear as I worked on the Citizen Leadership in the 21st Century project during 1997. This project was premised on examining metropolitan areas where there are initiatives that work. And from Chattanooga to Cleveland to Denver to Portland, Oregon a pattern began to emerge of what works. Success depends, more than ever, on implementing strategies that are more complex, more connective, and broader than ever. There is no magical structure—just people and relationships. The challenge for community builders is to break through the barriers that divide and diminish our communities and help people understand that they will only achieve their goals by collaborating.

The matrix that follows is an attempt to systematize thinking about creating effective community responses to challenges. Using this tool, community builders can work on developing the complex solutions needed for collaborative problem solving.

On one axis are the arenas in which decisions are made and action taken that

can affect communities—neighborhood, local, regional, state, and national. On the other axis are the players—individuals, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, philanthropic and faith-based organizations, and business and government. To be effective, players need to create as many partnerships among themselves as possible, and also influence decisions in as many arenas as possible.

Instinct for Collaboration

As communities face problems or opportunities, a first step is to consider how each of the arenas and players might intersect and interact. This is not to suggest that each box needs to have action, but each box does need to be analyzed. The purpose of the matrix is to help community builders further develop their instinct for collaboration. This tool can help people think beyond their immediate responsibilities and help them focus on larger, longer-term possibilities.

The complexity issue brings to mind an additional thought that may be helpful as people try to develop collaborative problem-solving mechanisms in their communities. Community builders need to draw from the recent work of our counterparts in the physical sciences on complexity and chaos. Simply stated: Very complex systems (certainly the way any community in the United States can be described today) constantly

Maximizing Civic Capacity in a Time of Increasing Complexity

A Collaborative Community Planning Matrix

		ARENAS					
		Neighborhood	Local	Regional	State	National	Global
PLAYERS	Individuals →						
	Nonprofit Organizations →						
	Educational Institutions →						
	Philanthropic Organizations →						
	Faith Based Organizations →						
	Public Sector →						
	Private Sector →						
	ACTION AND INTERACTION						

Every community issue, whether problem or opportunity, contains the possibility for constructive action in each arena with a role for every player.

All of the players have access to and may influence, directly or indirectly, actions within each of these arenas.

Successful communities leave no opportunity to enhance and leverage their efforts uninvestigated and no partner that shares the common vision or goal uninvolved.

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undergo spontaneous self-organization. These complex self-organizing systems are adaptive and try to turn whatever happens to their advantage.

While this adaptive process is very dynamic, it does not have to lead to weirdly unpredictable gyrations known as chaos. What happens is that an effectively-operating complex system comes into balance at the edge of chaos. The key to operating effectively at the edge of chaos and having sustainable, productive growth is the ability to see potential connections and then make the connections happen.

Successes occur in communities where there is communication, coordination, and collaborative action by a multitude of entities (institutions, organizations, agencies, and individuals). That is, on specific issues these players had the ability to see the connections and act on them.

The challenge facing every metropolitan area, and many rural regions, is how to create an institutional structure(s) to bringing people together on an ongoing basis. The communities we looked at for the Citizen Leadership in the 21st Century project all were using collaborative approaches, but they were operating from issue to issue, as what might be described an adhococracy (informal teams brought together because the existing institutional arrangements were not an effective approach).

Inventory of Groups

Metropolitan areas all have councils of governments; all have regional business organizations (chambers of commerce, growth associations, corporate CEO groups). They generally have a regional United Way. There are community foundations and regional associations of grant makers; and, generally, a regional council of churches (and other faith-based institutions). There are community leadership pro-

grams and regional volunteer centers; and increasingly we find regional associations of neighborhood and homeowners associations. But these groups do not meet in any continual or ongoing way across sectoral and institutional lines to be able to design and implement collaborative strategies.

Across the U.S., there are some fledgling efforts to bring together regularly a broad cross section of the regional community. Along these lines are the Central Ohio Regional Forum, out of the Columbus area, and the Greater Triangle Regional Council in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Therefore, my proposal for the next decade is the creation of regional councils of everybody which would bring together in an ongoing way the players described in metropolitan areas to develop effective initiatives and redefinition of roles and responsibilities for dealing with community issues. How these organizations should be structured, members selected, and the operations funded would be different in each region, but the hoped-for outcome the same—a more effective use of resources ranging from the energy of individuals to the federal government and international companies. The past decade has proven that collaborative approaches are the most effective for community problem solving. The challenge for the future is to institutionalize the interaction and create a new synergy on issues ranging from affordable housing to multimodal transportation. ■

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