Making a Case for Collaborative Problem Solving

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MAKING A CASE FOR COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

As the number and diversity of actors expecting to be part of any community decision increase, so must the process for making those decisions become more open and accessible. Bringing diverse players together — finding common ground, defining shared interests — is a process of self-realization whereby all community members can discover that they have the talent and ideas necessary to improve community life for themselves and their neighbors.

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The theme of community problem solving is central to the work of the National Civic League. Simply put, the goal of the organization is to provide cutting-edge approaches to citizen-based community problem solving. Whether it is by providing tools or information, we endeavor to help civic entrepreneurs find ways to be more effective in addressing their communities' needs. One of the tenets of this approach is to find ways to involve individual citizens and diverse community interests in the community problem-solving process.

This collaborative theme stretches to the roots of the organization. When the National Civic League (then the National Municipal League) was formed in 1894, its founders — a group of rabble-rousing civic reformers that included Theodore Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, Charles Evans Hughes, and Marshall Field — had two major purposes in mind.

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The first was to professionalize local government, at the time a morass of favoritism, deal making and nepotism largely controlled by partisan political bosses. In just over a decade the organization developed the first-ever "model city charter," created the council-manager form of government, and thus oversaw the birth of a profession called city management. The issue of excellence in local government has continued to be a major element of the National Civic League's agenda. In 1989, the League issued the Seventh Edition of the *Model City Charter* and a Revised Edition of the *Model County Charter*. League board and staff continue to work with communities of all sizes as they review their forms of local government.

The second purpose, or theme, discussed by the founders of the organization was that of "self-government" at the local level. Simply put, Roosevelt and his colleagues felt that traditional forms of representative democracy worked well at the state and federal levels. It made sense for voters to place their trust, in effect to give up their proxy, to those who represented them in Washington or the state capitols. But, the League's founders cautioned, it was not enough at the local level simply to vote every two years and feel as if commitment to community had been fulfilled. They felt that communities had to

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take responsibility for themselves, that individual citizens, businesses and community groups needed to find ways to help improve the quality of life of their communities. The League's founders were not diminishing the role of government and the public sector in community building, particularly in promoting "greater good" issues. They were merely saying that "government" could not be held solely responsible for the quality of life of a community. As Saul Alinsky wrote in 1969, " I do not believe that democracy can survive except as a formality if the ordinary citizen's role is limited to voting, and if he is incapable of initiative or any possibility of influencing the political, social and economic structures that surround him. This issue is at the center of the future of democracy in America."

It is this theme of self-government which now provides the intellectual framework and touchstone for the League's work and it is intriguing that the message is as appropriate today as it was in 1894. What Theodore Roosevelt referred to as "self-government" is what former NCL Chairman Henry Cisneros calls "citizen democracy": the creative and positive interaction of business, government, community groups and individual citizens. It is this interaction that the League recognizes through its All-America City

MAKING A CASE FOR COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Award Program, that is chronicles through its publications (the NATIONAL CIVIC REVIEW and *Civic Action*) and that it discusses at its annual National Conference on Governance. As then-President George Bush said on August 6, 1990 when he presented the 1990 All-America City Awards in a White House ceremony, "We honor all ten of these communities not because they claim to be the best cities in America — I think they are too smart or, in some instances, too modest for that — but because they represent what is best about American cities. Rather than looking for an outside solution or a quick fix, they are looking within for the answers and they are finding them. By recognizing and unleashing the power and potential of the people themselves, they are proving that big cities can meet enormous challenges and that small towns can do very big things."

Complex and Difficult Realities

More than ever, communities are being forced to find new and creative ways to meet the challenges before them. The realities facing community problem solvers have never been so complex or so difficult. Communities clearly require new approaches to deal with the issues of the present and future. Unless communities recognize that the context for local problem solving has changed, it is unlikely that they will be able to respond appro-

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priately. These "New Realities" include:

• *There will be fewer and fewer public sector dollars available to deal with the critical issues facing our society.* It was not long ago when it seemed that government at some level could always find some extra resources, whether it was $10,000 or $1,000,000, to help a community deal with a particular vexing issue. While this might be painful to accept, the new fiscal reality is that governments at all levels of our federalist structure have seen their abilities to both tax and spend severely restricted during the decade of the 1980s. In addition, what money is available is often accompanied by spending guidelines, as with legislatively mandated entitlement programs. This has meant that government can no longer be considered the problem solver of last resort, forcing communities to adopt the "self-government" model of community responsibility. Today communities need to look to the private sector, the nonprofit sector and individual citizens for help and decide how all these resources can be leveraged with public dollars to address critical issues.

• *The challenges and problems we face as a society are increasingly becoming the responsibility of local and regional communities.* Both Democrats and Republicans in Washington point out that the vast majority of their time is spent dealing with the

small set of mainly nation-to-nation issues that include the budget deficit, the trade deficit, the health care crisis, military and trade issues with Europe and Asia, and the changing face of government in both eastern and western Europe. This leaves them little time or intellectual energy to focus on the issues that communities put before them, and places them in the unenviable position of being perceived unfairly as "anti-city" or "anti-urban." State governments have also developed a fairly focused set of issues that consume most of their time and energy. They include building highways and prisons, dealing with both K-12 and higher education, and a new push toward international economic development.

What this means for community problem solvers is that a host of issues that were once the purview of higher levels of government have fallen directly into their laps. Whether it is gangs, drugs, hunger, homelessness, air quality, water quality, transit, or patterns of development, it is clear that the scope and scale of community challenges have dramatically increased over the past two decades. This is not to say that the state and federal governments do not have a role to play in helping communities cope with the challenges in front of them. They clearly must be a part of the equation. But communities must first look within as they think about how to improve themselves.

• *This renewed focus on local decision-*

making responsibility will place even greater importance on ensuring integrity and effectiveness in local government. While local government is clearly nothing like it was at the time the League was formed, in some places there developed a perception that because the real "action" was at the state and national levels, it did not matter how local government was run. Now that the pendulum has swung back to the local level, it is critically important that government hold itself to the highest ethical standards and work in a creative and entrepreneurial way to increase the effectiveness of local government.

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• *Communities need to begin spending as much time thinking about how to effect change as they do thinking about what the change itself should be.* Communities will need to develop new tools and new strategies to get people, institutions and sectors to agree on a plan and then work together to implement it. In general, communities spend too much time thinking about the solutions to their problems. There are very few community challenges that do not have a host of possible solutions chasing close behind them. Communities that complain about a lack of solutions invariably find that the real dilemma is that they cannot agree on an *approach* and move forward with it. This is partially explained by the fact that both elected and appointed officials became very risk-adverse in the decade of the '80s. Experimentation and creativity were often rewarded with re-

MAKING A CASE FOR COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

call campaigns or firings. The tolerance of the body politic for "failure" reached a discouraging low as the level of cynicism about government reached an equally astounding high. One of the goals of communities in the 1990s must be the creation of an environment for local problem solving that is more flexible and forgiving. Communities must recognize that as the difficulty of the problems facing them increases it will be less and less likely that the first effort or idea will be successful. It will be important to find ways to learn from those unsuccessful attempts so that the odds for success will be higher on the next try.

• *Community power has been widely and thinly distributed.* In the "old days" community power was held in several large blocks by major community players — the mayor, the city manager, the large employer, the family that had been in the community for generations — who literally could sit down in the back room and make a decision or cut a deal. That situation was made possible largely because of two aspects of community life that no longer exist:

■ First, there was a time when citizens had fundamental trust in the large institutions of their community to "do the right thing." They assumed that government and business made decisions with the best interests of the community in mind.

Clearly those days have changed. In a national survey conducted in 1990 for the League by the George H. Gallup International Institute, respondents were asked which institutions they trusted "a great deal" or "quite a lot" to solve community problems. The answers reflected this lack of faith. Local business leadership rated 32 percent, municipal government rated 23 percent, the federal government rated 18 percent, and political parties rated only 13 percent. Only two sets of institutions rated higher than 50 percent, religious institutions at 57 percent and volunteer groups at 54 percent.

■ The other change that has taken place revolves around the issue of information. In the days when citizens gave up their proxy to large institutional players, they did so in part because they did not feel as if they had enough information to form a balanced judgement on the issue at hand. Now, because of the information revolution that has taken place in this country, many more citizens feel they have enough information to be directly involved in the resolution of issues. What this has all meant for communities is that they are full of people who have just enough power to say "no," but not enough courage to say "yes." The goal for the 1990s must be to find ways to also say "yes" in this new environment where everyone expects a seat at the table.

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• *Community popula- tion will become increasingly diverse in every way.* In California, for example, by the year 2005 the population will be equally apportioned among Asians, Caucasians, African Americans and Hispanics. The first response to a major increase in community diversity, whether it be ethnic, racial, religious or economic, is often to treat the change as a problem: "What to do about this new dilemma?" In communities that work, however, diversity is not treated as a problem to be solved but as an asset to be celebrated. Rather than worrying about becoming more like other cities, community leaders need to recognize what is special and unique about their community and build upon it. Diversity can be one of those aspects that sets a community apart — in a positive way — from other, similar cities or towns.

Two Types of Communities

If these six points describe the new context of community problem solving, what approach can work within this complex environment? At the National Civic League we differentiate between communities that work and communities that do not. That is, the difference between communities where the focus is on meeting the challenges in front of them versus communities where most effort is put into figuring out who is to blame for the existence of problems. There are two main areas of difference between these two types of communities. One is in their

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approach to community problem solving and the other is their philosophy about community leadership. Communities that have been able to prosper in this new environment aggressively practice collaborative problem solving and consensus-based decision making. Communities that do not work are marked by contentious and obstreperous behavior. Leadership in communities that work always strives to create win/win solutions and uses its power to convene and bring people together. These new-style leaders listen as often as they talk and have learned to both win and lose gracefully. Leaders in communities that do not work are *threatened* by citizen involvement and input, still try to use their power to decide for others, and spend their time trying to convince citizens to follow a predetermined course of action.

The challenge of the coming decade for America's leaders will be to adapt themselves and their communities to this new world. The move toward these new approaches to community problem solving and new approaches to leadership will not be easy. It will require, among other things, a new definition of success at the local level. Cities and towns must recognize that their goal can not be simply to eliminate or avoid problems. The existence of problems is not a sign of failure. There is not a community in the country — large or small, poor or rich — that is not being confronted with a vast

MAKING A CASE FOR COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

array of difficult challenges. There are simply too many issues that have landed in their laps for any community to be problem-free. Instead, the definition of community success in the 1990s will be the successful mobilization of resources from all sectors to deal with problems and issues at hand.

The National Civic League works directly with communities to assist them in moving in this direction. Whether it is through Civic Index projects, as in Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina, or strategic visioning projects as in Phoenix, Arizona, we work to empower community leaders to find ways to adapt to these new realities. These types of responses to community change are still considered unorthodox and experimental by some. While we do not consider them a panacea, we feel very strongly that they represent the way that all communities will need to work in the future.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, few communities try collaborative approaches the first time they address a difficult issue. Most times, communities have made several attempts using "traditional" approaches that have all failed and they then begin looking for alternative methods. These failed approaches usually reflect a lack of understanding of the new context of community problem solving, in particular, the need to view community through the prism of "governance" and the need to understand the new, highly dispersed form of community power.

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But once these communities begin to employ tools and approaches that are designed to be effective in this new environment, they quickly realize that cynicism and paralysis need not be fixtures of the civic environment in America today. These new approaches to dealing with the challenges of the present and the future can restore a community's faith in its ability to effect positive change, help it realize that no problem is insurmountable, and that all individuals — on every block in every neighborhood — have within them the power and the ideas necessary to make life better not only for themselves, but for their fellow citizens.

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