



THE CIVIC LEADERSHIP PROJECT

A Blueprint for Creating a Culture of Personal and Civic Responsibility and Engagement in Your Community

We need to change our civic culture if communities and our nation are to thrive in coming decades. The Civil Rights Movement and successful public health initiatives teach us that changing a culture IS hard and slow work—but doable—and its impact on individuals and communities profound. The recipe for civic change is a combination of people and organizations; practices and resources; and vision and principles.

People and organizations

1. *Leadership*: The mayor and the heads of the local community foundation and United Way get out every Saturday morning for a year to knock on doors – to lead by example – with the goals of getting community members engaged in “civic work” and getting them to believe that it’s cool *and* realistic for people and organizations to work together to build a better community and make a better world;
2. The *manpower and organization* of the nonprofit community (including congregations and neighborhood associations), canvassing with the civic leaders and helping to channel people’s willingness to get involved into practical opportunities to make a difference;
3. The *energy* of college students and their universities working with local leaders and organizations.
4. The *vision and commitment* of a few people, with or without formal position, willing to push a project like this forward through the inevitable challenges of any ambitious project.

Practices and Resources

1. The mobilizing and educational power of door-to-door canvassing and face-to-face communication;
2. The inspiration and art of a well-crafted marketing and media strategy;

What is the Problem?

- A lack of public support, of sustained civic will, for the social, economic and environmental policies and programs that we know work.
- Too many people focused on passive isolating consumption and entertainment over an active and engaged way of life.
- Too few individuals who are willing to volunteer or work for limited pay for the good of the community and who have the emotional intelligence, mindset and skills to make a difference.
We are not simply “too busy.” People in Utah, for example, volunteer twice the number of hours of people in the rest of the country. And communities and nonprofits need more volunteers or people willing to work for reduced compensation. Blue Engine in New York, for example, puts five recent college graduates in each classroom along with a seasoned teacher to provide small group instruction in struggling schools with dramatic results. Imagine if communities could tap seniors, college students, and workers with flexible schedules to do the same.
- Too few organizational, political and civic leaders willing to take prudent risks to collaborate with one another and work for the long-term benefit of the community as a whole even when it may not be in their short-term self-interest.
- An overall lack of trust, empathy, and sense that there’s anything that can be done to improve the situation.

3. The transformational power of small groups meeting regularly for personal and leadership development, fellowship, and service combined with opportunities to slow down, reflect, pray or meditate, including *Neighborhood Leadership Circles*, student groups, traditional service clubs, and faith-based small groups;
4. Shared information, data, and stories helping to organize and mobilize organizations and community members;
5. The online tools for collaboration, project management, volunteer management, and matching resources to community needs.

Vision and Principles

1. Successful democracy requires that citizens *feel more responsible* in large decisions and small for their communities. We have a “moral duty to be intelligent,” as Martin Luther King put it, to square how we live our lives with the needs of the community, nation and world.
2. History, social psychology and research on the process of leadership show that *people can do more to work together effectively* for the good of the community and the nation. The details on how to get there may be murky but sometimes we must “begin with only a question” and trust that a positive course of action will unfold.
3. *We can better organize our lives, our organizations and communities* for both personal fulfillment and community well-being. We have more viable choices than most of us recognize.
4. *A holistic approach* toward both personal and community change is most likely to succeed. At an individual level, this means addressing the physical, mental, social/emotional, economic and spiritual dimensions of people’s lives. At a community level, it means addressing education, health, social and economic dimensions together.
5. We need to focus more attention on the *long-term*, even though change is slow and hard to measure.
6. Personal and collective growth and accountability is found in *small groups* – whether in organizations, schools, families, teams or community groups.
7. *Lack of personal and interpersonal leadership skills or “emotional intelligence”* are major barriers to sustained civic involvement. These barriers include impatience, poor listening skills, lack of self-awareness, over-reaction to feelings of frustration, annoyance and anger, and being too quick to withdraw or take an adversarial position when interests or opinions diverge. Nobody is perfect, but our “collective emotional intelligence” can be improved.
8. Mere civic engagement or a louder voice aren't enough in our politically divided communities: The best way to right a power imbalance is to get those in power or those in the undecided or undogmatic middle on one's side... although it takes time.
9. Actions speak louder than words: *real leadership* requires demonstrating that one’s focus is on the good of the greater community, not just on oneself. Key civic and nonprofit leaders can show this by knocking on doors and taking a “vow of moderation” – perhaps voluntarily limiting their salaries to, say, no more than \$100,000 and committing to a more modest lifestyle than people in their position are accustomed to. Does it matter? Just look at the power of Pope Francis’s rejection of the luxuries of previous popes or U.S. Army infantry officers “leading from the front.”

Want to learn more? <http://www.civicLeadershipProject.org/docs>

Please send comments to Tom Pollak, tom@dcTutorMentor.org. Thank you!