

**THE CIVIC & NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP PROJECT:  
 A BLUEPRINT FOR CREATING A CULTURE OF PERSONAL AND CIVIC  
 RESPONSIBILITY AND ENGAGEMENT**

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## **Introduction**

Imagine: A mayor and the heads of the local community foundation and United Way<sup>1</sup> recognize that despite decades of well-intentioned efforts, their work has produced little in the way of measureable impact on their city. Maybe dropout rates have declined from 50 to 40 percent, the economy is chugging along, but poverty persists for more than one out of five young people. Worse, there's a growing gap between those with good jobs that can sustain a middle class life and those in the service sector and other industries where wages remain stagnant.

Sure, they say, we can compete for the next manufacturing plant, give grants for entrepreneurship, and team with the local university, but unless we are extraordinarily lucky, these efforts are likely to have limited impact.

But what if we can build a stronger foundation for our community so we're not only playing catch up, but building a truly vibrant city that is known for its arts, its schools, its leaders' ability to work together for the common good, its safe and vibrant neighborhoods, and its friendly, responsible, healthy, well-educated, creative, thoughtful, disciplined and compassionate citizens who take care of one another whether they are in positions of authority or have the most modest of jobs. Then we will be in a strong position to become a magnet for talent and jobs – both homegrown and from other regions.

The three recognize that they need to do something dramatic and something to show that they are really serious about this work. They've seen lots of initiatives come and go with little to show for them despite initial enthusiasm. And they've all given lots of speeches about the importance of working together about the value of serving their communities but they feel that their words seem to fall on deaf ears, not only among ordinary citizens but also among the nonprofit organizations and other civic leaders who spend too much time fighting for turf.

Maybe it's just human nature; maybe there's nothing that can be done. But these three are optimists; they share an intuition that people and that the community as a whole really can do much better.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Or it could be the leaders of local universities, large corporations, hospitals, city council, religious congregations or the Chamber of Commerce – whoever is in a position to mobilize resources in the community.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars of leadership have long noted the importance of “realistic optimism.” Why some people feel it and others don't remains a mystery. Some combination of genetics and life experience seem to account for it. See, e.g., Goleman, Daniel. *What Makes a Leader?* (Harvard Business Review 2004 available at <http://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader/ar/pr>) or, more generally, John W. Gardner. *Leadership* (see summary at <http://www.altfeldinc.com/pdfs/JohnWGardner.pdf>).

But they are realists too. They recognize that communities are complex and multifaceted. For them, the community is best thought of as divided into different segments, each with its own set of attitudes, barriers and capacities for getting more engaged:

- A small number of top leaders who are civically engaged and good team players and who keep the interests of the city in mind.
- Other leaders who, for a variety of reasons, seem to focus more on self-interest or the interests of a narrow constituency – sometimes consciously and sometimes not.
- Leaders of nonprofit organizations, religious congregations, PTAs, and civic clubs, some of whom work actively together in coalitions and others who work in relative isolation.
- 25-30% of adults who volunteer in some capacity in the community. The average person volunteers hours 34.3 hours per year.<sup>i</sup>
- College students. Approximately one-third say they want to be community leaders but surveys show that they are also very focused on their careers.<sup>ii</sup> Moreover, while they are easily organized for episodic volunteering (a day spent cleaning a school, for example), sustained involvement in activities like mentoring and tutoring programs has proved relatively rare unless there is compensation for the work.
- Major corporate leadership. With frequently strong ties to local United Ways, leaders of major corporations often play key roles in major initiatives within the nonprofit sector.
- Small businesspeople. I hesitate to characterize them; some Chambers of Commerce, the key association of small businesses in most communities, have taken major leadership roles supporting the nonprofit sector and civic projects while others are known for their lack of imagination and for defining their interests narrowly.
- Other opinion leaders from the mainstream media, bloggers, or people who may be looked to for their wisdom by virtue of their past political or civic service.

In short, on one hand, they see a wealth of untapped civic capacity – people who want to make a difference in their community and who could find the time. On the other, they've seen how difficult it is to mobilize this capacity in practice over any sustained period of time.

Success requires not only *more* time and engagement, but *better* leadership. People at all levels of authority – from those running government agencies and nonprofits to ordinary citizens – need to feel a greater sense of responsibility for the community as a whole and a corresponding willingness to work together as a team with both patience and a sense of urgency.

## ***Their Theory of Change***

Like most nonprofit and public leaders today, they are committed to using research and evidence about what works in designing and managing effective programs. They are familiar with the rapidly growing body of scientific evidence captured in popular books such as *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (Heath & Heath), *The Social Animal* (Brooks), *Predictably Irrational* (Ariely), and *The Power of Habit* (Duhigg) that highlight the extent to which our mental frameworks and our actions can be shaped for the better. But they also recognize that what works in small experiments or at historic turning points like the Civil Rights Movement may not work today.

However, like a doctor treating a patient with a potentially fatal disease, they recognize that much is unknown and if they wait for evidence to catch up to the problem at hand, the patient might not survive. In short, sometimes a bold vision is required even if success is far from certain.

### ***Vicious cycles, virtuous cycles: What would a better community look like?***

The three leaders believe that whether one is working with young people, strengthening the local economy, or addressing foreign policy challenges, sustained commitment to work with one another toward a shared vision of the future is critical. But too often they see their community falling short. Why?

Let's start with what our three civic leaders see too often. Too many people seem to be stuck in a vicious cycle: They are working long hours, which leaves them too tired to exercise, which together leave them in poor mental health, depressed or longing to escape into the fantasies offered by TV and the internet. They don't develop the leadership skills, the wisdom or emotional intelligence – the self-awareness, self-discipline, empathy, assertive communication skills, awareness of others -- they need to interact positively and consistently with one another around a vision.

Evidence suggests that approximately 45% of Americans could be characterized as having either avoidant or anxious relationship styles.<sup>iii</sup> Compounding the challenge, new technologies leave us with decimated attention spans and ill-equipped for the civil back-and-forth dialogue, the shared quest to understand the world, that healthy relationships, organizations and communities need.<sup>iv</sup>

A community populated by harried, shortsighted, escape-prone, impatient or leadership-deficient people interacting with one another leads to widespread cynicism about people in general, about institutions, and about the possibility of making a better world. When people can't bring out the best in others, it's not surprising that their interactions with institutions, which are, after all, comprised of people more often than not like themselves, tend to be negative as well. The

negative interactions – directly experienced or absorbed through stories from the media and other sources – breed distrust.<sup>v</sup> And this distrust, too often indiscriminating, impatient and reflexive, undermines our ability to make sustained civic commitments.

That’s the negative. But a “virtuous cycle” is possible and within people’s grasp. Small changes in “keystone habits” to improve our lives spiral to create larger changes.<sup>vi</sup> At an individual level, it would mean that people opt for a modest lifestyle or organize their lives so that they have more time – whether paid, low-paid, or volunteer – to work in their communities. The limits to volunteering are not merely a result of people being too busy. In Utah, for example, people volunteer more than twice as many hours per year as in rest of the U.S.<sup>vii</sup> Recent research on the “prosocial behavior” of Mormons – the dominant faith in Utah – shows stunning levels of giving and volunteering not only among Mormons living in Utah but in all of the cities around the country that the researchers surveyed.<sup>viii</sup> Our leaders believe that with time, they can create a similarly robust but secular *civic* culture.

Our three leaders recall one of the most elegant experiments demonstrating the potential for people to switch from an adversarial to a “we’re all in this together” mindset—albeit on a small scale and for a limited time: The Robber’s Cave Experiment.<sup>ix</sup> Adolescent boys at a summer camp were divided into two groups. At first, competition between the groups was promoted and the groups learned to dislike each other. Then several “crises” were staged, which required the two groups to work together on “superordinate goals.” In the first “crisis,” for example, the water supply to the camp was cut off and the two groups had to work together to haul the water. The result? By the end of the session, the groups were good friends.

### ***The Sequence of Community Change***

The three leaders’ goal is to create a virtuous circle at a community level: Starting with only a small number of people who “get it,” the proposed plan will lead to increasing numbers of engaged community members and organizations until a tipping point is reached and the civic culture of the community is transformed.

The sequence is likely to look like this:

- Civic leaders agree to take on the challenge →
- They recruit some “early adopters” (organizations, media and individuals) →
- They begin the Community Canvass & recruit people for the Neighborhood Leadership Circles & community leadership development →

- Expanding numbers of people and organizations become engaged in a widening circle of visible activities yielding short-term accomplishments and a sense of camaraderie, which in turn lead to more people getting involved →
- The civic culture of the community is changed →
- This leads to both more fulfillment for individuals, better outcomes on a range of local concerns, and a resilient and flourishing community

### **The Plan**

They hatch a six-part plan to strengthen the city's civic culture (and make an impact in the short run on public health, mental health, the environment and especially education in the shorter run). Each component has been tried and proven effective--at least with the right kind of leadership. What's different about this plan is that it pulls the pieces together in a sustainable, vibrant project that stands a reasonable chance of transforming the community.

The central principle is that we need to take a holistic approach to community change that builds on:

- Pervasive anxiety among the American public that things aren't working. (As of August 2012, 75 percent of the public are dissatisfied with the way things are going.<sup>x</sup>)
- The clear evidence that although we have made modest improvements on key social indicators – dropout rates, poverty, global warming, energy consumption, crime – over past five decades, we haven't begun to solve virtually all of the really pressing problems that threaten our future and that of our children.
- The sense that long-term problems require long-term systemic solutions.<sup>xi</sup>

Mobilizing nonprofit organizations, the media and businesses is probably the easy part of the plan. Actually getting community members to engage in large numbers is the central challenge for the project and the last two activities focus squarely on this:

***Recruit nonprofit service and grassroots organizations*** – the human service, housing, arts, and environmental organizations (to name a few) – to join in creating a community-wide effort.

These organizations are often preoccupied with the daily challenges of fundraising and sustaining programs; however, they are home to many of the people who have organized their lives for public service and who recognize the importance of strengthening civic capacity for both their own organizations as well as for the greater good – even if time and financial constraints mean that they too often get mired in an organization-first strategy to the detriment of the broader community.<sup>xii</sup> See below for more details.

***Build a civic information and data infrastructure*** using the Urban Institute’s **Community Platform** and other resources to provide a toolkit to help nonprofit organizations share resources, better align their programs with one another and meet community needs, and help the community – nonprofits, policymakers, funders, and perhaps most importantly, engaged citizens – track and share information on community indicators, services, stories and knowledge about what works. See the attachment for more information on the Community Platform. In the twenty states and communities where we are working, our local partners are starting to use their Platforms – customized and branded to meet their local needs – to integrate our national sources of nonprofit and community data with existing community data from 2-1-1 emergency assistance providers, community indicators from state and local government agencies. Further, the Platforms of our most successful partners are being used to do everything from mapping the needs and resources around hunger and veterans’ issues to providing technology for neighborhoods and, soon, rural counties to map their assets and tell their stories.

***The Community Canvass.*** Each Saturday morning for the next year, rain or shine, key leaders and their recruits will participate in neighborhood canvassing – a door-to-door campaign from nine to noon – to create a denser web of active connections, of civic engagement, in the community. During the summer, they will spend a couple of weeknights before dark canvassing as well. The canvassers will listen to what citizens are thinking and feeling about their communities and their personal needs. See below for further details on the process and intended outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The author used this approach systematically in the summer of 2009 and several times in 2011 through the Strengthening Ward One Together (SWOT) nonprofit coalition of Washington DC. The scale of these efforts was modest – five or six canvassers on a typical evening in 2009 and approximately 20 canvassers on the several Saturday mornings in 2011. However, the results were encouraging. Approximately 80-90 percent of people who answered their doors – and our sense is that it was highly unusual for people who were home not to open their doors – were willing to sign up for some neighborhood or nonprofit activity and to provide us with their email and name. Other examples and evidence for the efficacy of this approach include:

*The Volunteers canvass East Boston in effort to fight drug abuse: City campaign seeks to gather public health data.*  
[http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/01/31/volunteers\\_canvass\\_east\\_boston\\_in\\_effort\\_to\\_fight\\_drug\\_abuse/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/01/31/volunteers_canvass_east_boston_in_effort_to_fight_drug_abuse/)

*Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy.* Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, Feb. 2004: “A randomised experiment with 30,000 voters in the USA to see how voter turnout might be increased compared the effectiveness of leaflets, telephone campaigns and face-to-face reminders of a forthcoming election, all using a non-party political message highlighting the importance of voting (Gerber and Green, 2000)<sup>30</sup>. Leaflets were found to have a modest effect, boosting turnout by around 2.5%. Telephone calls were found to have, if anything, a negative effect. But face-to-face contact – someone turning up at your doorstep to remind you in advance – was found to have a highly significant effect, boosting turnout by around 10 to 15%. This meant that despite its relatively high cost, face-to-face contact was ultimately highly cost-effective

**Neighborhood Leadership Circles**, meeting every other week over dinner for dialogue and reflection, provide space to strengthen the web of connections, the social fabric that makes for vibrant communities and to help build the personal and civic leadership skills needed for the community. Ideally, these circles combine both an outward focus on service with a holistic inward focus on personal growth, leadership development and community. You could think of them as combining some of the features of book clubs; neighborhood watches; Bible study and religious “life groups” or “discipleship groups,” neighborhood watches, and traditional civic associations. We have also identified a range of TED and other videos that could be used as good conversation starters. (See the appendices – <http://www.CivicLeadershipProject.org/docs> – for list of videos and for more details on the structure and process for these groups.)

On the external side, some could focus on neighborhood issues, others on community-wide challenges, and still others on national topics. But this would be balanced with attention to what each of us can do in our personal lives, to “walking the talk” of responsibility for ourselves and our community. This dual inward and outward focus has proved hugely successful for religious and “twelve step” (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) small groups, which dwarf traditional civic groups in numbers and depth of involvement; given the public’s sense that the failure of traditional political and policy prescriptions are endangering our future, the time seems right to see if the small group approach can be adapted to a secular focus on the need for citizens to take greater responsibility for themselves and their communities and, by extension, the nation.

**Marketing and Outreach.** A multi-pronged public education campaign helps to legitimize the ideas behind the Leadership Project. Ideally, people of national stature – maybe retired General Colin Powell or Congressman John Lewis, a hero of the civil rights movement – would be willing to help make public service announcements or advertisements but the stories of “local heroes” who have made sustained commitments to their communities and have sacrificed to achieve their visions may be even more likely to lead to action.

In parallel, we will develop video, news media, and social media strategies to reach broader audiences, especially of young people. The release of *Lincoln* – co-produced by Jeff Skoll, founder of the Skoll Foundation – this fall along with the election and upcoming inauguration may also help to draw the public’s attention to the central idea of this project that we need to take

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relative to other means of boosting turnout." Gerber, A.S. and Green, D.P. (2000) *The effects of canvassing, telephone calls, and direct mail on voter turnout: a field experiment*. American Political Science Review, 94 (3): 653-663.”



more responsibility for our communities and our nation, that we need to commit ourselves to a long-term vision, to a more difficult road than we are accustomed to travelling.<sup>4</sup>

Marketing research has shown that it often takes at least a dozen contacts before someone buys product. Multiple contacts for this work are also vital. The combination of face-to-face interactions and media messages, we hope, could get a critical number of people willing to work together systematically. Once that critical mass has been achieved then, like we saw with the Civil Rights Movement, momentum can build quickly. (Two of the most significant efforts of the movement, the lunch counter sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, for example, began with dozens of people but laid the groundwork for much larger efforts like the March on Washington with hundreds of thousands.)

How many people would be necessary? Probably just a small percentage—maybe 1-5 percent. Think about the most successful of recent public mobilization efforts, the 2008 Obama campaign. The estimated number of volunteers range from 1.5 to 8 million, or 0.5 to 2.7 percent of the population.

*Civic Leadership Corps.* Building this initiative to the point where a substantial proportion of community members routinely participate and the project is self-sustaining will take time. In the meantime, creating a cadre of committed and well-trained organizers – paid and volunteer – to help with outreach, facilitating Neighborhood Leadership Circles, organizing the Community Canvasses, and working with coalitions of nonprofit organizations will help propel the project forward.

These could be developed in partnership with existing organizations doing somewhat similar work like Public Allies or the leadership development programs that some Chambers of Commerce support such as Leadership Omaha or LEAD Brevard. (My understanding is that these leadership development programs typically charge in the low thousands of dollars for their one year programs; the Civic Leadership Corps might arrange for their fees to be waived in exchange for the commitment of the volunteers to spend substantial hours each week serving their communities.) Community organizing groups traditionally focused on mobilizing low income communities might also find this approach congenial since it ought to yield deeper

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<sup>4</sup> Why the focus on this movie? Skoll's Participant Media, which also produced Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, "believes that a good story well told can truly make a difference in how one sees the world...Participant exists to tell compelling, entertaining stories that also create awareness of the real issues that shape our lives. The company seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference." To facilitate this, Participant creates specific social action campaigns for each film and documentary designed to give a voice to issues that resonate in the films." If the movie's impact is similar to *An Inconvenient Truth*, the boost for the Civic Leadership Project could be substantial.

community support for low income communities. Groups like Common Cause (focused on campaign finance reform but also created with a vision of empowering citizens), the Rotary, or other civic groups that take civic engagement seriously are also potential allies. The ideal would be to find common ground for action – this may take some time and dialogue! – among both traditional “establishment” and pro-business groups as well as from typical liberal-leaning advocacy and civic engagement organizations.

Volunteer members might commit to working, say, at least four hours a month and would be expected to attend the leadership training program that would meet weekly as well. Stipended or paid participants would be expected to work more. Ideally, they would combine a real sense of teamwork, include people of all walks of life, and be held together by a sense that they were working together to have a major impact on their communities. The early history of civil rights organizations like SNCC and the local student groups that led Freedom Summer and sustained the Freedom Rides, captures some of the possibilities.

### *The Role of College Students and Universities*

Colleges and universities could play a huge role or none whatsoever – or somewhere in between. It could consist of groups of students, like the students who integrated lunch counters around the country in the 1960s through their sit-ins or who registered blacks to vote in Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964, or the smaller numbers who took part in the perilous Freedom Rides to integrate interstate travel<sup>5</sup>; faculty members organizing their sociology, leadership, freshman seminars, nonprofit studies, community studies, social entrepreneurship, public administration classes around supporting the initiative; or it could come from campus-wide efforts to promote student and faculty engagement through the many offices of student engagement, Campus Compact and Nonprofit Leadership Alliance chapters, and other means.

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<sup>5</sup> “Years later...what [Diane Nash, one of the leaders of the student movement,] remembered was her fear [sitting through her last class of the day] before they went downtown and challenged the age-old segregation laws at the lunch counters in Nashville's downtown shopping center. No matter how much she steeled herself, no matter how much she believed in what they were doing, the anticipatory fear never left her... She, Diane Nash, a coward of the first order in her own mind, a person absolutely afraid not just of violence but of going to jail, was going to join a small group of black children and ministers and take on the most important and resourceful people in a big, very white, very Southern city. She and her friends, who had nothing and were nothing, were going to go up against white businessmen, who were rich and powerful and connected to the white politicians, who were their pals and who agreed with them on everything. What had all of them been thinking in Jim Lawson's workshops on nonviolence? These men would have nothing but scorn for a bunch of black children venturing into their territory.” (Halberstam, *The Children*, p.3-4)

## **A Holistic Approach**

The comprehensive and holistic approach we propose is intended to build on a more complex understanding of human nature highlighted in a wide body of research in cognitive science, social and positive psychology, and behavioral economics over the past several decades—and consistent with what most people consider practical wisdom.<sup>xiii</sup> More specialized work on emotional intelligence, management and leadership also point to the likely efficacy of this sort of approach.<sup>xiv</sup>

*The social dimension.* As any mentor, salesman, politician, or AA member will tell you, one-on-one and small group face-to-face interactions are a powerful tool for changing beliefs and actions.<sup>xv</sup>

*The moral dimension.* Seeing leaders lead by example and sacrifice their time if not some of their salaries for a goal is often critical for building the trust that can lead to sustained action.

*The cognitive dimension.* To change a civic culture, the cognitive framework of people needs to change. A media strategy that reinforces key themes through compelling stories, sensible reinterpretation of current civic possibilities, and new ways of thinking about the world, coupled with the legitimacy that comes from support by recognized and respected leaders in the political, social, sports, intellectual, nonprofit and artistic realms can help. Small groups successful at bringing about change, even if on a small scale, would reinforce these messages.

*The action dimension.* Providing opportunities for actions and quick successes keep people motivated for the long-term and give people the shared experiences of working together for a common goal that build trust. This is essential. People will remain engaged to the extent that they feel they can make a difference through their actions.

*The spiritual dimension.* An overwhelming majority (76%<sup>xvi</sup>) of Americans consider themselves to be spiritual. “Spiritual” can be framed in religious terms or in the secular language of getting in touch with one’s deeper intuitions or sense of purpose, of feeling connected to something beyond oneself. There’s ample research from management literature on “servant leadership,” “adaptive leadership,” and “transformative leadership.” One can also think about the leadership and lives of our greatest leaders like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King to see the spiritual dimension at play.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, there’s a wealth of research over the past couple of decades that

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<sup>6</sup> Lincoln: "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day." Lincoln Observed: The Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks edited by Michael Burlingame (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

"Dr. King's personal devotional life was very, very important in giving him the courage and the determination to fight for justice," said Baldwin [author of "Never to Leave Us Alone: The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King Jr."]

reinforce the common sense idea that we are more motivated when “head and heart are connected.” (See Frequently Asked Questions and the Notes below.)

### ***Recruit Nonprofit Service and Grassroots Organizations***

There are several ways that nonprofits within a neighborhood or community could work more effectively together:

- **Outreach:** Community canvassing along with community meetings and other events to help connect community members with the work of the nonprofits. As discussed elsewhere in this proposal, this provides an efficient way both to help citizens find the resources they need and to get them more involved as volunteers (and maybe donors).
- **Programmatic:** Use data and regular meetings to identify opportunities for collaboration and more effective alignment of programs so resources are better aligned with needs in the community. Also, “peer learning communities” of organizations engaged in similar work could meet together regularly to learn from one another.
- **Operational:** Sharing resources such as office space, recreational facilities, and “back office” accounting, HR or other administrative staff can save smaller organizations money.
- **Fundraising:** With the prominent exception of United Way campaigns, this is usually done alone, and sometimes with one other organization. However, it seems to me that there may be opportunities to do more neighborhood- or community-wide joint fundraising, which can be more efficient, permit broader reach as fundraising budgets are pooled, and perhaps permit more exciting bigger events. The downside, of course, is the challenge of coordination and having proceeds fairly allocated based on some combination of current efforts and past contributions.

Probably more important than the direct benefits of using scarce resources more effectively is the indirect benefit: By demonstrating that they are truly committed to the community good, even at the expense of their narrow organizational interests, the organizations are likely to become more visible and more trusted – especially if they actively conduct outreach combining community canvassing and regular events with and for the community as part of the collective strategy. The result: more contributions and volunteers.

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King would take ‘personal prayer retreats’ and shut himself in a hotel room or pastor's study to pray, meditate and plan his next sermon or civil rights activities.”

Just as many businesses in business improvement districts (BIDs) tax themselves or make voluntary contributions to support a community business infrastructure, so, too, nonprofit organizations could work together.

How will the nonprofit organizations be recruited? As the Industrial Areas Foundation has demonstrated repeatedly in its organizing of congregations in a range of cities around the country, one-on-one meetings between a community organizer and congregation leaders is *the* approach that works in bringing disparate congregations together in an active coalition.<sup>xvii</sup> In our much smaller scale work in the District of Columbia, we see the same approach working to bring nonprofit organizations together and expect the same patient strategy to be effective in other cities as well.

### ***The Community Canvass: Process and Outcomes***

In the short term, the goal is to recruit dozens of new volunteers for local organizations, let residents know about their activities, and help connect them to services if they need them.

In the longer term, the goal is to build a civic culture where all residents feel responsible for the community and where all feel they can connect with other individuals and organizations committed to building a community that works. This change takes time. Getting people to believe that we can work together after maybe a lifetime of experiences to the contrary isn't going to happen quickly, but the lessons learned from efforts as varied as the Civil Rights Movement and smoking cessation campaigns teaches us that these sorts of changes are feasible with patience and persistence.

Each team will be given a one-page survey and a handout to give everyone they talk to, but equally important is the simple act of talking about what we are doing and hearing from people about their thoughts on the community or their individual needs. Canvassers are not trying to make a hard sell; this is all about planting seeds that will grow in time.

If someone doesn't want to complete the survey, that's ok. If they don't want to volunteer for anything, that's ok too. The important thing is to get the word out that there are people and organizations in the community who are working hard to make it better; they need help, but they understand that some people are going to be skeptical, too busy, or too tired.

The first step is just to make the human connection, to show that there are real people who care about strengthening community, who are willing to take the time to listen and talk because they believe it really does take a whole community working together to build the world we want for ourselves and our children. Second, they are communicating that the organization that residents may have walked past for years that serves "other people" is not just for others. We are part of the community – we and our partners can use your help or if you have unmet needs, we may be

able to help you or connect you with a partner who can. Third, they are communicating that they “walk the talk” about collaboration. Some people think highly of community-based organizations, but others feel that there’s too much focus on organizational self-preservation at the expense of broader community needs. This canvass is a concrete demonstration of what organizations can do when they work together.

At a practical level, canvassers can keep volunteers that they sign up for their own organizations if they want – a nice incentive for organizations to participate. However, canvassers are also expected to recruit people to help with activities that their own organizations don’t support, too. (See attached for details.)

### ***Neighborhood Leadership Circles: Process and Outcomes***

The Neighborhood Leadership Circles are intended to combine a range of different activities that together should produce a range of outcomes. The activities include opportunities for reflection; dialogue for understanding and consensus building and problem solving; experience in direct, honest and “assertive” communication; patient listening; and a primary focus on long-term goals and vision coupled with short-term achievements. The overall process is intended to build trust, civic friendship, and sustainable motivation for groups to work together.

Longer term, the Neighborhood Leadership Circles are intended to result in positive individual and community change:

#### ***Inward Focus***

- In the long-term, better organizing one’s life to meet personal goals as well as well helping others; finding one’s calling
- In the short-term, developing better leadership skills, better managing stress, anger, anxiety, or fear constructively

#### ***Outward Focus***

- Better understanding the needs of the community and the nation
- In more affluent communities, developing a deeper understanding and connection to local distressed communities that need support
- In less affluent communities, developing an understanding of and ways to talk about the assets and values that the members of those communities offer each other and those outside the community

- Identifying achievable projects that either individuals or the group can take on to strengthen the community
- Finding ways to undertake the project(s) and monitor success and learn from the experience
- Connecting with others – both individuals and organizations— engaged in similar work

### ***Short-Term Wins***

Although the focus is on the long-term, some short-term accomplishments help keep people energized. Short-term goals and projects could vary by group and community, but we think the example of the Blue Engine program in New York City is especially promising.

The Blue Engine program places recent college graduates, funded through Americorps, into a handful of schools where they serve as “instructional assistants” with experienced teachers and bring the student-instructor ratio down to six-to-one and also help with after-school activities. This extraordinarily low student-teacher ratio enables lots of small group teaching and connecting with students. The results have been truly extraordinary. When most successful social and educational programs count success as maybe a ten or twenty percent improvement in outcomes, Blue Engine is doubling the number of students who pass key state-wide tests. Alternatively, if small group learning is not a good fit for a particular class, organizations such as Reading Partners, which provides one-on-one in-school tutors for students reading substantially below grade level, provides another model for how volunteers can be used.

What if the Civic Leadership Project initiatives could recruit a combination of active retirees, college students, stay-at-home spouses, employees of businesses willing to give extra flexibility to their workers, and others willing to devote one or two days per week to fill the same role and provide the same student-teacher ratios as the Blue Engine team members? The results might not be quite as extraordinary since the volunteers would only be part-time, but we’d bet that the results would still be dramatic. And they could also provide a tangible set of short-term goals for the project: Recruit enough volunteers for selected neighborhood schools to lower their student-teacher ratio to six-to-one and provide after-school activities and support for all.

### ***Crosscutting Themes***

A number of themes are intended to infuse the communications around each of the activities. If they resonate strongly with at least a minority of the community and if the various outreach methods can reach those people, the project is likely to succeed. Most are mentioned elsewhere; they are summarized here:

- We need to take *responsibility* for ourselves and our community.
- We need to take a patient *long-term* perspective on solving major social, economic and political challenges.
- *Uncertainty & humility*. We need to recognize that we understand less than most of us think we do about what should be done.
- We need to recognize the power of *leading by example* and of leaders demonstrating their willingness to sacrifice for the common good.
- *Urgency & action*. Like waiting to buy health insurance until after one is sick, if we wait until a major environmental, social or economic crisis hits before we are willing to start actively organizing our community more effectively, it may be too late.

### **Research and Evaluation**

This project is first and foremost about having an impact on the ground.

Does this qualify as an “evidence-based project”? Perhaps. From one perspective, it relies on current research in cognitive science, behavioral economics, social psychology and other disciplines for its theory of change. However, research in the social sciences could be mounted to argue that this is bound to fail as well. Ultimately, this is best thought of as a series of demonstration projects from which lessons are sure to be learned. Formative evaluations involving ongoing participation of local universities may be the best approach to assessing the local projects.

In addition, household surveys administered at the start of the project and after three years that build on questions used in the Social Capital Benchmark Survey may also provide useful, albeit expensive, data on the impact of the project.

### **Project Requirements, Budget and Timeline**

At a local level, this project could be run with as little as one staff person per community but the ideal scenario is to combine at least one junior-level staffer – possibly through the AmeriCorps VISTA program – with a senior project leader. Both would need strong communication skills and be expert team builders. They in turn would need to work closely with key civic leaders to get the project underway. A detail-oriented data manager and analyst is likely to be the third person hired if resources permit. Better yet and if funding permits, a team of people, the Civic Leadership Corps discussed earlier, could move the project along more quickly. Much depends



on the leadership of the people involved and of the willingness of a larger circle of volunteers and supporters to become involved.

The cost to get this project launched in any one community depends on the extent to which senior leaders have the capacity to integrate this project into their current activities. It's possible that this could be done at no additional cost if, say, a foundation was willing to donate the time of a project manager and if the key civic leaders took it upon themselves to champion the project as part of their daily activities and communications.

### ***Conclusion: The Social Investor's and the Citizen's Perspectives***

We can keep competing and struggling for small short-term political or economic wins but I think that we are winning some battles at the expense of losing the war, so to speak. Until we step back and tackle the problems with our civic culture head-on, we will continue to be stuck with polarized politics, deep cynicism, erratic policies and, largely as a result, an inability to do what needs to be done.

Social investors need to add projects and organizations with this perspective to their investment portfolios. The odds of success for any one project may in fact be slim. (It's hard to know until we start experimenting.) But the potential return to individual communities and the nation as a whole is huge if they are successful. This project needs the same sort of patient capital that has propelled many of the most dramatic changes in our world ranging from the Civil Rights Movement to the creation of new life-saving drugs and other scientific innovations. Sometimes, the most important innovations require a leap of faith, a vision of what is possible to move forward. We can make an evidence-based case that many components of the project stand a reasonable chance of success but ultimately one must rely on our intuition about what is possible; sometimes, as Jim Collins puts it, a "big hairy, audacious goal" is the right goal to choose.

Philanthropy has invested heavily in improving the capacity of individual organizations or programs and occasionally for advocacy. Place-based work is usually focused on specific low-income communities. This, however, is different from what we are proposing. Our starting point is that we all, rich, poor and middle class, need to work together and take more responsibility for ourselves and our communities. It's not a problem that can be isolated in low income neighborhoods.

Imagine if most people in the average American community routinely worked together, as they often did in World War II, to support civic infrastructure. In the midst of the war, there were some 20 million victory gardens – this in a country of fewer than 40 million households. Millions more volunteered for active military duty or helped out on the home front. Let's now

harness that same sort of energy, that willingness to work and sacrifice for the common good, to strengthen and reorganize our communities to support a civic infrastructure that we can all be proud of.

This project is about changing how Americans relate to one another and think about their communities and their lives. It's about moral and transformational leadership, about helping Americans young and old learn the "habits of the heart," and of the mind -- the leadership skills, the personal management skills, and the values -- to move beyond detachment and cynicism to work together to achieve the common good.

### **Appendix: FAQs**

*Many communities have built collaboratives and other efforts premised on organizations' and the public's willingness to work collectively, yet few have succeeded. How will this be different?*

There's no magic bullet for achieving this work. Too many organizational initiatives have focused solely on the programmatic, the technical or the structure of relationships. This is different in that we are tackling the issues of civic culture head on – not only in rhetoric but by emphasizing the importance of the project leaders "walking the talk." We first need to build on our sense of things not working.

We also need to move beyond the typical civic engagement project that focuses exclusively on community assets to one that deals honestly but constructively with negative aspects of a community's or neighborhood's culture.

*How do we prevent the creation of insular circles that feel exclusive rather than inclusive?*

- Require periodic elections of leadership at the community level.
- For NLCs, periodically rotate people into new groups.
- Emphasize importance of ongoing canvassing and one-on-one conversation to bring new voices to the projects.

*There are so many worthy nonprofits interested in these and related issues. Who should we fund to assist with this work?*

Pick any nonprofit field at a national or local level and one will find a crowd. Our operating principle should be to share control and keep compensation modest and as equal as possible. Why? We enable more people to do good work if nobody is making lots.

Some funders view the funding challenge as finding the truly effective models or leaders. They talk of bringing, for example, charter schools to scale. This may work in a handful of areas, but

not in others. Local conditions vary; leadership is critical but not always transferrable from one scale to another.

Our guiding principle should be to permit as many civic-minded people as possible to do the work that they believe in.

*Are there any books or online resources I can read that more fully develop your ideas?*

John W. Gardner's works on civic leadership provide a practical and accessible introduction to many of the guiding ideas behind this initiative. (He was a founder of Common Cause and Independent Sector, among other accomplishments.) To quote from the posthumously published *Living, Leading, and the American Dream*:

We must continue the work of community building in school, congregation, neighborhood, workplace. It's not just that we shall be building communities. We shall be developing citizens who know out of their own intimate experience the disciplines and satisfactions of community. They will understand teamwork, the observance of shared values, collaborative problem solving and the building of trust.

We have major tasks ahead...The loss of civic faith is an obstacle... [T]he government (and other powerful institutions) will not become worthy of trust until citizens take positive action to hold it to account. Citizen involvement comes first...It is not a liberal or conservative issue...It is a question of whether we are going to settle into a permanent state of alienated self-absorption or show the vigor and purpose that becomes us. We do not want it said that after a couple of great centuries we let the American Experiment disintegrate.

Online, you can find his essay *National Renewal* at <http://www.cpn.org/crm/essays/national.html>.

The Strategy Unit of the British Prime Minister's Cabinet Office has published several terrific discussion papers that synthesize research of direct relevance to this project:

- *Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy*. Available at: [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work\\_areas/personal\\_responsibility.aspx](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/personal_responsibility.aspx)
- *Achieving Culture Change: A Policy Framework* available at: [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/achieving\\_culture\\_change.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/achieving_culture_change.pdf)
- More recently, the British organization, RSA (formerly known as the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), published *Beyond the Big Society: Psychological Foundations of Active Citizenship* (2012) available at: <http://www.thersa.org/action-research-centre/social-brain/beyond-the-big-society>.
- For a brief overview of Britain's Big Society project, see the column by David Brooks in the New York Times at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/opinion/20brooks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/opinion/20brooks.html?_r=0).

***Do you really think you can get college students and universities involved?***

It's hard to know what one can expect from students and universities. I've worked with some extraordinary undergraduates but also felt that many I've worked with over the past ten years lack the wisdom, humility, patience and commitment to work effectively in communities. Contrary to conventional wisdom, research indicates that this generation is actually less civically engaged than Baby Boomers.<sup>xviii</sup> Then again, the 2008 Obama campaign was remarkably successful in mobilizing college students, at least for short term action and Teach for America was at one time receiving applications from eighteen percent of all Harvard graduates.

Bottom line: With the right leadership development program, the sort of deeper commitment and wisdom needed for sustained work seems very possible. Just as the Nashville sit-in students had their James Lawson, who met with the students regularly to teach them the practice of civil disobedience and who had spent more than a year in a harsh prison rather than join the military, so, too, today's students could benefit from the training and example of others.

There are competing currents within higher education about the role of universities in communities. Many, at least in practice if not in rhetoric, define their role narrowly as preparing students for professional life. However, a broader vision of universities has existed for hundreds of years: As Ben Franklin put it, "the great aim and end of all learning" is to help students develop "an inclination joined the ability to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family."<sup>xix</sup> An emphasis on community contribution has been growing over the past two decades. Campus Compact, the umbrella association of student engagement programs, has seen a huge increase in the number of its member colleges to more than twelve hundred.<sup>xx</sup>

If formal institutional support cannot be secured, we are finding that there are at least a couple of faculty members in many if not most universities who are actively trying to find ways to involve their students more deeply in community work. Some are engaged in community asset mapping, others in ethnographic studies. More than two hundred colleges now offer courses on some aspect of the nonprofit sector, ranging from its history to how to manage organizations.

***What is your definition of "leadership" and isn't a focus on leadership elitist and anti-democratic?***

For some people, the term *leadership* has nothing but positive connotations, but for others it connotes a top-down approach to decision-making that leaves those without formal positions of authority without voice or power. This is *not* what we have in mind. There are many theories of leadership but *servant leadership* and *adaptive leadership* are two that come close to what we mean when we use the term. Greenleaf writes "The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first

and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.” (<https://greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/>)

The term *adaptive leadership* has been popularized by Ron Heifetz in his 1995 book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* in which he distinguishes “between technical and ‘adaptive’ problems, and between leadership and authority. He also attempts to redefine leadership as an activity rather than a position of influence or a set of personal characteristics. We need to abandon the idea that ‘leaders are born and not made,’ he insists. This belief fosters both self-delusion and irresponsibility in those who see themselves as ‘born leaders,’ and it can lead to inaction and dangerous forms of dependency in those who do not see themselves as leaders.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Saved: 2/5/2014

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<sup>i</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (2011?)

<sup>ii</sup> See, e.g., the UCLA Center for Higher Education Research, College Freshman Survey. *Atlantic Monthly*, 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Goleman, Daniel. *Social Intelligence* (2007), p.194.

<sup>iv</sup> Turkle, Sherry. The Flight From Conversation. *The New York Times*, April 22, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html>.

<sup>v</sup> See, e.g., Gallup Inc., *Confidence in Institutions* (results from June 7-12, 2012 public opinion poll), retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

<sup>vi</sup> See Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. (2012)

<sup>vii</sup> Volunteering by state, retrieved from the Volunteering In America website, created by the U.S. Corporation for National and Community Service, <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/UT>. Retrieved Jan. 2011.

<sup>viii</sup> Cnaan, Ram, Van Evans & Daniel W. Curtis. *Called to Serve: The Prosocial Behavior of Active Latter-day Saints*. Retrieved from <http://www.upenn.edu/pennnews/news/penn-research-shows-mormons-are-generous-and-active-helping-others> (summary: *Penn Research Shows That Mormons Are Generous and Active in Helping Others*) and [http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/docs/people/faculty/cnaan\\_lds\\_giving.pdf](http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/docs/people/faculty/cnaan_lds_giving.pdf).

<sup>ix</sup> Sherif, Muzafer et al, *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation*. (1961). For an online summary of the research, see [http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Sherif/Sherif\\_1958a.html](http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Sherif/Sherif_1958a.html).

<sup>x</sup> Jones, Jeffrey M. (Gallup Organization). *U.S. Satisfaction Levels Remain Depressed: Twenty-three percent are satisfied with way things are going in U.S.* (August 15, 2012). Retrieved 11/4/2012) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/156686/satisfaction-levels-remain-depressed.aspx>

<sup>xi</sup> See, e.g., George Lakoff, *What Made Obama's Speech Great: The true power of the speech is that it does what it says. It not only talks about empathy, it creates it.* Retrieved 11/15/2012 from [http://www.alternet.org/story/80549/what\\_made\\_obama%27s\\_speech\\_great](http://www.alternet.org/story/80549/what_made_obama%27s_speech_great).

<sup>xii</sup> See Crutchfield and McLeod; Jim Collins, *From Good to Great* and his concept of Level 5 Leadership.

<sup>xiii</sup> See, for example: Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, in which he makes explicit the connections between current psychological research and ancient wisdom; David Brooks, *The Social Animal*; Nobel Prize-winner Oliver Williamson's work; Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, for useful summaries of this research.

<sup>xiv</sup> See, e.g., Daniel Goleman. *Emotional Intelligence* (1995); Koutzlis & Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (4<sup>th</sup> edition 2008).

<sup>xv</sup> Tina Rosenberg. *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Save the World*. David Brooks. *The Social Animal*.

<sup>xvi</sup> Fetzer Institute, Survey of Love and Forgiveness in American Society (2010).  
<http://www.fetzer.org/resources/fetzer-survey-love-and-forgiveness-american-society> (Retrieved 9/1/2012).

<sup>xvii</sup> Warren, Mark. *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton University Press 2001)

<sup>xviii</sup> Twenge, Jean. *Millennials: The Greatest Generation or the Most Narcissistic?* Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/print/2012/05/millennials-the-greatest-generation-or-the-most-narcissistic/256638/> (May 2012)

<sup>xix</sup> Hartley, Matthew & Ira Harkavy. *The Civic Engagement Movement and the Democratization of the Academy* in Longo, Nicholas V. & Cynthia M. Gibson. *From Command to Community: A New Approach to Leadership Education in Colleges and Universities* (2011).

<sup>xx</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.compact.org/about/history-mission-vision/> (December 2012).

<sup>xxi</sup> London, Leadership Without Easy Answers: Book Review. Retrieved from <http://www.scottlondon.com/reviews/heifetz.html> (Sept. 24, 2013)