

# **Neighborhood Leadership Circles: An Overview**

## **DRAFT**

By Tom Pollak, Dec. 2011

The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized, it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion. And even as far as political arrangements are concerned, governmental institutions are but a mechanism for securing to an idea channels of effective operation...Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.

- John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, 143, 148)

Today, 40 percent of all Americans — some 75 million people — belong to a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members.

- From Scott London's review of Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (1994).

This represents my initial effort to lay out an approach for forming neighborhood-centric small groups. The goals are several: build a sense of civic responsibility; produce tangible achievements to improve their communities; help to develop the well-rounded community members – spiritually, physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually – who can provide the patient, empathetic, and disciplined leadership our country needs at all levels of social, political and economic life; narrow divisions between our ideologies and worldviews that hinder our country from making the progress we need to make.

***Is this a proven strategy with high probability of success?*** No. But if you feel as I do, that there's a civic or – to use a charged word – moral transformation that needs to occur then, like fighting cancer or getting a man into space, one must take an experimental mindset, beginning as best one can with the tools and knowledge at hand, learning from experience and mistakes, making gradual progress toward the goal.

***What's different about this approach?*** Consider this a mash-up of existing approaches, a different design which rearranges the same basic building blocks used successfully by others. The goal is not to create something radically new, but to design a balanced approach – call it the quest for the iPhone of civic transformation – that meets the needs of and appeals to many people and communities. Key ingredients: from Christian small groups and Alcoholics Anonymous, taking spiritual and personal growth seriously; from the Tea Party and the environmental movement, taking a sense of urgency and need for immediate action to begin to fix what is

broken; from civic engagement and community development models, taking trust in the value of a small-scale democratic process. And there are other models that may prove useful as we learn from our experiences: Lawrence Community Works' NeighborCircles, for example, provides \$100 to a neighbor to host three dinners, first focusing on the story of how each neighbor came to be in the community, the second a discussion of neighborhood needs, and the third – if the group chooses – the development of an action plan.

**Why the sense of urgency?** Maybe I have too vivid an imagination, read too much history, or know too many people from Europe, Latin America and Africa who have seen their democracies and economies crumble and corruption and violence soar. The future remains highly uncertain — even if we all need to believe otherwise — but it's easy for me to picture a grim world in just a few years if we do nothing. We may believe that America is exceptional, but there's ample evidence, with the Civil War as Exhibit 1, that we are not immune from self-inflicted catastrophe. "Large systems imbalance like a sandpile – they are in "poised critical states," where a single additional grain may be sufficient to cause an avalanche... Maybe we have the resilience, maybe we rise to the challenge of environmental disruptions, but if we don't get started now, we run the risk of being grossly unprepared like a sedentary man deciding he's going to run a marathon next week. He may make it through, but systematic preparation *dramatically* improves the odds of success.

## **The Framework**

Key activities are likely to include a blend of activities with both an internal and an external focus:

### ***Internal Focus***

- AA-style personal challenges: physical, mental, emotional. Discussing what we can do better in our personal lives
- Servant leadership
- Long-term self-development ("Discipleship," to use the Christian term?) – Learning to live like we want to live, like the people we admire, or according to the values that we aspire to. What do we value? How can we organize our lives around these values?
- Short-term personal goals: Be more disciplined, lose weight, be a more attentive spouse or parent, etc.
- Develop communication and leadership skills
- Meditation and reflection

### ***External Focus***

- Discussing local and national issues of the day

- Activity: volunteering or advocacy
- Giving circle: Invite nonprofit leaders to talk about their organizations and collectively make at least a minimal donation to each one and possibly more.
- Community canvass. See other materials.
- Community research – homeless census model; what do people in your community value?
  - What are your gifts of the head, hand, and heart? How can you imagine sharing with community?
  - What do people need help with?
  - Measuring social capital, the connections and trust people feel for one another and
  - Using social capital survey as an opportunity to start community leadership circles. Why? Survey is superficial. Need to move the needle. And get at deeper understanding of people than one can get in a 20-minute survey. Need to really understand how people live.

### ***What I Don't Know***

Rather than focusing on a balance of internal and external, an alternative framework is from Cedar Ridge Community Church. It organizes its small groups and larger efforts around three goals:

- Spiritual growth
- Community
- Servanthood

### ***Stories***

Please excuse the extended quotes. This is my effort to compile key materials and begin weave them into a coherent framework for those, like me, who are new to most of this.

We do have more choices than we realize:

“Hannah Salwen of Atlanta, Ga., was just 14 when she noticed a homeless man holding a sign saying he was hungry and another man sitting nearby in a gleaming Mercedes. She turned to her father, Kevin Salwen, and said, “You know, Dad, if that man had a less nice car, that man there could have a meal.”

That incident sparked a series of interesting dinner table conversations that included Hannah’s mother, Joan, and Hannah’s younger brother, Joe. As a result, the Salwen family decided to sell their \$2 million mansion and donate half the profits to charity.

Together, Kevin and Hannah have written “The Power of Half: One Family’s Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back.”<sup>1</sup>

Or how about a grown man getting to know his neighbors through a series of sleepovers?

"It was a calamity on my street, in a middle-class suburb of Rochester, several years ago that got me thinking about this. One night, a neighbor shot and killed his wife and then himself; their two middle-school-age children ran screaming into the night. Though the couple had lived on our street for seven years, my wife and I hardly knew them... I wanted to get to know the people whose houses I passed each day — not just what they do for a living and how many children they have, but the depth of their experience and what kind of people they are.

What would it take, I wondered, to penetrate the barriers between us? I thought about childhood sleepovers and the insight I used to get from waking up inside a friend's home. Would my neighbors let me sleep over and write about their lives from inside their own houses?

A little more than a year after the murder-suicide, I began to telephone my neighbors and send e-mail messages; in some cases, I just walked up to the door and rang the bell. The first one turned me down, but then I called Lou. "You can write about me, but it will be boring," he warned. "I have nothing going on in my life — nothing. My life is zero. I don't do anything."<sup>ii</sup>

Monthly neighborhood gatherings. Neighbors in a suburban neighborhood in Oakland have been meeting once a month to share a meal for the past eighteen years:<sup>iii</sup>

In a sense, First Wednesday is our communal life without the commune, our church supper without a church...Our first inkling that something unusual might be up on the block came only weeks after we moved into the house with the big redwood tree in 2001...At some point, the doorbell rang. It was our neighbors Bissie and Jerry Miller, whom we'd never met, bearing four glasses and a bottle of vodka.

To my then-New York eye, the idea of making time during the workweek just to hang with neighbors, enveloped by good food and...far too much wine, felt foreign and a little crazy...But soon, like the crescent-shaped avenue we live on, the sheer predictability and endurance of First Wednesday began to feel like an embrace.

The potluck has its own flow, converging with the tributaries and rivulets of neighbors' lives. In our nearly seven years on Rose Avenue, the block has been through cancer, divorce, marriage, adoption, retirement, birth, grandparenthood. The gravitational pull is such that alumni like Len Banda, who moved to another neighborhood, return to First Wednesday practically every month... Kids who were toddlers when the potluck started now are young adults. Scott Bradsby, who used to sneak under the table and slip off the adults' shoes and hide them, recently turned 17. The closeness of the neighborhood, he points out, "takes away the fear of what are we going to do if this [pick a natural disaster] happens."

## **Why?**

Let me explain more fully. As New York Times columnist David Brooks frames our current challenge:

"In a densely connected society, people can see the gradual chain of institutions that connect family to neighborhood, neighborhood to town, town to regional association, regional

associations to national associations, and national associations to the federal government. In a stripped-down society, that chain has been broken and the sense of connection gets broken with it. The state seems at once alien and intrusive. People lose faith in the government's ability to do the right thing most of the time and come to have cynical and corrosive attitudes about their national leaders. Instead of being bound by fraternal bonds, and occasionally responding to a call for joint sacrifice, a cynical "grab what you can before the other guys steal it" mentality prevails. The result is skyrocketing public debt and a public unwilling to accept the sacrifice of either tax increases or spending cuts required for fiscal responsibility. Neither side trusts the other to hold up their end of any deal. Neither party believes the other would honestly participate in truly shared sacrifice. Without social trust, the political system devolves into a brutal shoving match."

- The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement (David Brooks) (Kindle location 5604-13).

### *Lack of social and civic maturity.*

Mature approaches to handling conflict and disagreement are critical in personal relationships as well as in many jobs or community activities that require teamwork. Yet many Americans have a tendency to quit or avoid difficult situations rather than exercise constructive voice. Goleman (p.194) reports that only 55 percent of Americans could be considered to have secure attachments to others while twenty percent are considered "anxious" and twenty-five percent have "avoidant" styles.

To some extent, these relationship styles may be bound up with our personalities, which in turn are based on genetic predispositions, but there remains ample room for improvement and growth for many.

Constructive and assertive communication skills can be taught. And when people feel that they have the skills to engage constructively with one another in difficult situations more often than not, they are far less likely to dismiss the other person or to avoid the challenge than if every potential or actual conflict is associated with bad feelings and dead end relationships.

*Moral disengagement.* Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo's pathbreaking research highlights how easy it is for almost all of us to "morally disengage." Maybe we feel there's nothing we can do about a given situation because it's too complex and we don't understand it. Perhaps we feel we can't make any difference even if we did engage – but we are too busy anyway.

[EXPAND]

*Over-reliance on own limited experience.* Over the past several decades, a wealth of research by psychologists and behavioral economists has demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that we are far less rational than we realize.<sup>iv</sup> How we can get beyond our typically myopic perspectives? A small group and the diverse feedback it can provide offers one opportunity.

### *Lack of reflection.*

Who can decide off-hand what is absolutely better, to live or to understand life? We must

do both alternately, and a man can no more limit himself to either than a pair of scissors can cut with a single one of its blades. – William James (1979)

This is a simple idea eloquently expressed by philosopher and psychologist William James above. We see it applied in realms of life. Reflection offers no guarantees against misjudgment, but I'd argue that it helps.

At a deeper level, this time is vital for digesting the day's experience; for better developing or understanding the goals that give meaning and purpose to our lives, our activities and our organizations; and for better understanding our current experiences in relationship to our broader vision.

The foundation for virtually all widely-used management practices today is the idea that strong organizations have feedback systems in place to quickly identify and correct problems. This can be equated to reflection on an individual level.

*What's Possible? Where's the upside potential? Why not focus on my own small world, technology, etc.? Aren't we already too busy, doing the best we can to balance work and family obligations?*

- People are already fully engaged, some people feel. Professionals are responding to their e-mails 24/7 thanks to Blackberries, smart phones and iPads. Yes, but the average American is also watching around four hours of TV every day. And look at Utah, where the average citizen volunteers two and a half times more than the average American – 87 hours versus 34 hours. Yes, the Mormon faith of the majority of Utah residents has something to do with it, but the point is that people CAN find more time if they feel it's important.
- Cultures DO change, sometimes as a result of identifiable efforts, sometimes as result of broader forces. From major declines in smoking and the impact of the civil rights movement over the past five decades, to major decreases in the level of violence in developed countries over a number of centuries, cultural change is possible. But it usually requires intentional action.
- We do have more choices, conscious and unconscious, than we often recognize. This is a central implication of the revolution in behavioral economics, cognitive and social psychology over the past several decades. There's not just one "rational" choice; instead, we have a variety of mental frameworks or schemas that we deploy to decide what actions to take. The framework we use depends on a variety of factors, ranging from the influence of recent conversations and TV shows to our professional training and to broader cultural influences.
- The George Bailey difference...

### ***Incentives: Fellowship, Fraternity, Camaraderie, Team Spirit***

"We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body." – John Winthrop, aboard the Arabella (1630)

Like most social institutions, these need to appeal to people at a variety of different levels. First and foremost, as a purely voluntary endeavor it must tap into our inherent need for social connection just as much as, and probably more than, it appeals to any broader ideals about democracy or anxiety about the state of our communities or nation.

It is easy to forget in the midst of numerous requests for volunteer support and the struggles of the nonprofit organizations to attract contributions and volunteers that successful examples may be few, but there are a number of volunteer organizations that have withstood the test of time: First, just in the U.S. alone there are more than 300,000 religious congregations; I don't have precise numbers but many are at least one hundred years old. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 and now claimed 1.8 million members and more than 100,000 groups as of 2006. Finally, service clubs like Rotary International (1.2 million members and 33,000 clubs worldwide), and the Lions Club International (1.35 million members), and the fraternal benefit organizations have all shown staying power over many decades.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Tina Rosenberg's recent book, "Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World," highlights some interesting success stories. Here's how she frames what they have in common:

"The innovators described in this book have reimagined fields as diverse as public health, poverty alleviation, education, spiritual development, and social change. But they are also part of an even broader struggle-- to reimagine social change, to introduce into common parlance a new strategy based on the most powerful of human motivations: our longing for connection with one another... and the respect of our peers." (intro xxiii, xix)

### ***A role for religion and faith?***

As I think about how to frame the circles, I am frequently struck by narrow line that is being walked by those who see the value in a spiritual practice yet refrain from the "r" word.

Americans are unique among Western countries for their widespread beliefs in god and the importance of spirituality as well as in the prevalence of their religious worship. Does it make sense to embrace this tradition or shy away from it? I'm not sure. Perhaps the best approach is to leave it to each small group to adopt a language and perspective that fits for its members. Why take this approach?

- Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs that emphasize trust in a "higher power" and that originated with the Christian Oxford Movement are perhaps the best examples of small groups that walk that fine line maintaining a strong focus on a "higher power" while being steadfast in their rejection of the "religious group" label.

- Regional differences in religious preferences and the prevalence of church-based volunteering highlight the value in letting groups set their own course since what works in, say, the Bible Belt is unlikely to work in the far more secular-minded Pacific Northwest.
- Meditation practices. “Contemplative prayer” or “centering prayer” are both grounded in Christian traditions and are remarkably similar to meditation practices that emphasize “mindfulness.” Benson (year?), a Harvard professor, wrote a widely used guide to “the relaxation response” that sought to demystify and secularize the practice. Where’s the line between religious and secular meditation? It’s hard to tell.

### ***Small Group Dynamics***

What can a small group accomplish? Here’s one quote on how a group worked:

We were a diverse group: women and men, African-Americans and Euro-Americans, factory workers, teachers, and church musicians. We read Scripture together, ate together, prayed together, confessed our sin together, and shared our sufferings with one another. We encountered each other and God in the midst of poignant questions and pain. We listened to Miriam’s stories of growing up in a rigid cult. We helped Sara construct strategies to individuate from her overbearing mother. We wept with Tom in his depression and despair. We confronted Rich when he spoke harshly to others. We supported Cynthia as she navigated through a series of life changes — marriage and graduate school. We persistently prayed that each of us would experience God as trustworthy and kind, that we would find ways to participate more fully in our respective congregations, that we would fulfill both our common and particular vocations.

- “A Tale of Two Small Groups” by Theresa F. Latini<sup>v</sup>

### ***Beginning with Only a Question, a Commitment, and a few Guiding Principles – but no Answers***

Where to begin? The Tea Party is a good example of the dramatic growth that can occur – even in today’s cynical and fragmented world – when an idea captures public awareness. One could argue about the politics and cooptation of the movement by the Republican establishment, but the rapid rise of the party gives me some grounds for hope, even in the absence of a carefully tested curriculum or plan for the groups.

Local conditions and groups will differ in their emphases, but that’s probably ok. Some may be focused more on external projects, others on personal spiritual development. There’s so much work for us to do and so little time between our busy work schedules, family and, for most, TV. Alcoholics Anonymous seems like the best example of a group – and an all-volunteer one at that – that has found a formula that can be easily replicated among its tens of thousands of groups even as individual groups retain their distinctive cultures. To what extent is its focus on the basic virtues and spirituality – humility, courage, teamwork, etc.) a key to its success? Can a similar

focus on spiritual development succeed when the problem is “out there” rather than (mostly) in our own hearts.”

*The Big Picture.* We are better off if we start from the really big picture – we are all profoundly lacking in the wisdom we need to understand ourselves, our place in the world, or how we ought to spend our lives – let alone understand the larger world. One can frame this from any number of religious or secular perspectives. Regardless of our starting point, this view of the human condition, our condition, leads to humility, tolerance, and other democratic virtues that are in too short supply today.

*Focus on the Long Term.* Central to the success of the groups will be a focus on the long term. What does a life well lived mean for us personally? What sort of community do we want to live in? We need to recognize that we probably can’t get there without challenges, adversity, and sacrifice. This could mean making a long-term commitment to volunteer in an organization or to mentor a young person. Or it could mean commitment to nonprofit board service.

### ***The Power of Small Groups in Christian Churches***

At the time this article was written by Malcolm Gladwell in 2008, Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life" had sold twenty-three million copies:

"Churches, like any large voluntary organization, have at their core a contradiction. In order to attract newcomers, they must have low barriers to entry. They must be unintimidating, friendly, and compatible with the culture they are a part of. In order to retain their membership, however, they need to have an identity distinct from that culture. They need to give their followers a sense of community—and community, exclusivity, a distinct identity are all, inevitably, casualties of growth... If I go to a church with five hundred members, in a magnificent cathedral, with spectacular services and music, why should I volunteer or donate any substantial share of my money? What kind of peer pressure is there in a congregation that large? If the barriers to entry become too low—and the ties among members become increasingly tenuous—then a church as it grows bigger becomes weaker."

One solution... to create a church out of a network of lots of little church cells—exclusive, tightly knit groups of six or seven who meet in one another's homes during the week to worship and pray. The small group as an instrument of community is initially how Communism spread, and in the postwar years Alcoholics Anonymous and its twelve-step progeny perfected the small-group technique. The small group did not have a designated leader who stood at the front of the room. Members sat in a circle. The focus was on discussion and interaction—not one person teaching and the others listening—and the remarkable thing about these groups was their power. An alcoholic could lose his job and his family, he could be hospitalized, he could be warned by half a dozen doctors—and go on drinking. But put him in a room of his peers once a week—make him share the burdens of others and have his burdens shared by others—and he could do something that once seemed impossible.

When churches—in particular, the megachurches that became the engine of the evangelical

movement, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties—began to adopt the cellular model, they found out the same thing. The small group was an extraordinary vehicle of commitment. It was personal and flexible. It cost nothing. It was convenient, and every worshipper was able to find a small group that precisely matched his or her interests. Today, at least forty million Americans are in a religiously based small group, and the growing ranks of small-group membership have caused a profound shift in the nature of the American religious experience."

... Membership in a small group is a better predictor of whether people volunteer or give money than how often they attend church, whether they pray, whether they've had a deep religious experience, or whether they were raised in a Christian home. Social action is not a consequence of belief, in other words. I don't give because I believe in religious charity. I give because I belong to a social structure that enforces an ethic of giving. "Small groups are networks," the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has studied the phenomenon closely, says. "They create bonds among people. Expose people to needs, provide opportunities for volunteering, and put people in harm's way of being asked to volunteer. That's not to say that being there for worship is not important. But, even in earlier research, I was finding that if people say all the right things about being a believer but aren't involved in some kind of physical social setting that generates interaction, they are just not as likely to volunteer."

### ***Small Groups and Leadership Development: Heifetz's Leadership Development Year***

This extended quote is from “Leadership Can Be Taught” (S. Parks) on the teaching approach used by Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz in his leadership class for students at the Kennedy School for Public Policy. The classes combine lectures with intense small group work. (Heifetz is also the author of the minor business classic, “Leadership Without Easy Answers.”)

#### **“LEARNING FROM FAILURE IN PUBLIC**

A vital feature of the practice of adaptive leadership is the capacity to take corrective action. This requires continual learning in dialogue with one's own mistakes, missed opportunities, and disappointments that inevitably occur when one is working on the edge of known problems and unclear solutions. Accordingly, for each session, one member of the group is assigned to be a case presenter (CP), presenting a case of his or her own leadership failure.

A Case Study Guide asks the CP to write a brief description of the case and present it as an engaging story, allowing ample time for consultation... (T)he CP is encouraged to use suggested questions drawn from the framework that is being taught (another form in which there is the possibility of a meeting between the student's experience and the idea). Students are also encouraged to develop one or two questions that they think will yield the consultation they most need...

The task of the other members... is to give good consultation so the CP will begin to see new options for diagnosis and action. This also provides an opportunity for every member of the group to learn how to listen, to intervene, and to hold steady to promote the work of the group. Each can test his or her own understanding of what leadership requires, both in

relationship to the case being discussed and to the ongoing work of the small group.

Cases of failure are often painful. In the small groups, there is a level of engagement in one another's cases that is different than simply reading and working a case from another context...

(E)ach time the small consultation group meets, a different member of the group serves as the designated authority (DA). (pp. 76-77)"... Disciplined written reflection -- study questionnaires are an important part of the work. "Writing is a critical part of this discipline because it prompts more depth and precision in reflective thought."

### **Role of Exercise**

Being the exercise nut that I am, I think everyone can benefit dramatically from turning off their TVs and getting serious about physical (as well as spiritual) exercise. And physical exercise can have a major impact on our mental states. I'd bet that if everyone in a small group exercised and had a personal spiritual practice, groups would be far more successful than they are now.

What difference does it make? See, for example:

- Martin Seligman, *Flourish*.
- *New York Times* articles
- NPR: Exercise and teens

### **What Would Success Look Like?**

Personal – Finding a vocation, reorganizing lives for service and community. Feeling a sense that the world is full of possibility. The positive experiences in the group inspire, and the negative offer opportunities for action and understanding and a greater appreciation for the patience that is necessary for collection action and personal growth.

Relational – bridging gulf between people with very different world views within the group.

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.wickedlocal.com/wellesley/fun/entertainment/books/x626053249/The-Power-of-Half-authors-Kevin-Salwen-and-Hannah-Salwen-to-visit-Wellesley> (Retrieved 4/10/2010)

ii [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/opinion/23lovenheim.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/opinion/23lovenheim.html?_r=1) 2008-06-23 “Won't You Be My Neighbor?” Peter Lovenheim.

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/magazine/01Food-t-001.html?\\_r=2&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/magazine/01Food-t-001.html?_r=2&emc=eta1) (Retrieved Oct.8, 2010)

<sup>iv</sup> Ariely, Kahneman, Vedantam.

<sup>v</sup> <http://eerdword.wordpress.com/tag/robert-wuthnow/> (Retrieved 11/10/2011)