Bringing Divides and Communities Together

BY MIKE MCGRATH
Sometimes it seems that nothing can bring residents of our divided communities together. On the local government level, however, there is ample evidence that we can still work together across dividing lines to create stronger and more equitable communities. By better understanding residents’ aspirations for their communities, learning how residents talk about and see community challenges, and demonstrating a commitment to inclusive government, governments can cross divisions and create stronger communities.

BRIDGING THE POLITICAL DIVIDE

Here's an example of how it can work. During the early 1990s, a measure to limit the placement of billboards on city streets in Asheville, North Carolina, led to a bitter power struggle between interests on both sides of the issue. Opponents of the ordinance won a majority on the city council and proceeded to fire the city manager. A group of former elected officials then mounted a recall drive against the new majority which led to members of the new council majority launching a recall effort against the remaining council members who had supported the billboard restrictions.

Ultimately, neither recall drive was successful, but when the local chamber of commerce hired an economic development consulting a few years later, “political polarization” was identified as a significant obstacle to local economic development efforts. The consultant’s report served as a wake-up call for a group of business leaders, government officials, non-profit organizations, and citizen associations that banded together to overcome the political conflicts dividing the city.

Asheville was so successful in bridging its political divides that in 1997 it was named an All-America City by the National Civic League. The award is given to ten communities each year for outstanding civic accomplishments. In the write-up on Asheville’s story, the National Civic League noted that the “search for political common ground” was “symbolized by the city’s two top elected officials, very different people who have vowed to work toward consensus.” The mayor, a Republican, was a Merrill Lynch stockbroker. The vice mayor, a Democrat, was an architect who had lived in a commune.

THE CIVIC RENEWAL MOVEMENT

Asheville’s experiment in what its leaders called “community-oriented government” was part of a larger trend that emerged during the 1990s, an upswelling of civic innovation at the local level. More and more cities were experimenting with new forms of trust-building, community-based problem solving, public deliberation and democratic governance—so many, in fact, that in their 2001 book, Civic Innovation in America, authors Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland identified what they saw as a “new movement for civic renewal.”

The authors traced the origins of this “movement” to a variety of sources—community organizing, environmental activism, conflict resolution, community development and community-based health initiatives. Promoted by a network of organizations such as the National Civic League (NCL), Public Agenda, the Study Sources Resource Center, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, and AmericaSpeaks, these new ideas about civic engagement, public deliberation, and democratic governance found their way into the publications and annual conferences of governmental organizations such as the International City/County Management Association and the National League of Cities.

One of the most influential thinkers in the growing field known as “public deliberation” was Daniel Yankelovich, author of the 1991 book, Coming to Public Judgment. In the book, he argued that most citizens were “ill-prepared to exercise their responsibilities for self-governance, even though they have a deep-seated desire to have more of a say in decisions. People want their opinions heeded—not every whim and impulse that may be registered in an opinion poll, but their thoughtful, considered judgments. But...few institutions
are devoted to helping the public to form considered judgments, and the public is discouraged from doing the necessary hard work because there is little incentive to do so."

Yankelovich drew a distinction between "public opinion" and "public judgment." Public opinion polls tend to be misleading “because they fail to distinguish between people’s top-of-the mind, offhand views (mass opinion) and their thoughtful, considered judgments (public judgment).” Public judgment is the result of a deeper and more meaningful process of deliberation, which happens in stages over time. Coming to public judgment involves both head and heart, and it is only possible through deliberative discussions with others.

In the late 1980s, the Kettering Foundation brought together a network of public deliberation groups known as the National Issues Forums to hold deliberative dialogues on potentially divisive issues in communities across the country. What the organizers of these dialogues and meetings discovered was that, given a chance to have a deliberative, informed discussion of the real world trade-offs between policy alternatives, even on hot-button issues such as health-care reform, abortion, or the future of social security, ordinary citizens are capable of surprising levels of nuance and flexibility.

David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has written about something he calls “a public voice” that is distinct from the sort of loose talk you get in cable news debates and Facebook arguments. "The tone of a public voice is distinctive. It is more than logical reasoning, yet it is reasonable. It blends our analytic and instinctive minds as it captures the passions that surround the things we hold most dear in political life. It is more provisional and contextual...The tone is pragmatic rather than ideological.”

COMING APART AND COMING BACK TOGETHER

Decatur, Georgia, held its first “Study Circles” in the 1990s after a proposed reorganization of school district facilities, among other issues, led to increased racial tensions. On one occasion, a zoning debate between local residents and a private college over a new parking structure degenerated into a fistfight. A proposal to build federally subsidized affordable housing as part of a redevelopment project involving a historic Decatur building was drawing opposition from nearby homeowners. A local pastor made disparaging comments about the city’s growing gay population.

"It seemed like the city was sort of coming unglued,” recalled Jon Abercrombie, a community organizer and affordable housing advocate, “and I started looking for a better way to have the conversation.” Abercrombie thought he found his better way when he heard about an organization called the Study Circles Resource Center, a non-profit group now known as Everyday Democracy that has helped many communities make the journey from dialogue to action on difficult local challenges.

The Study Circles model, in Abercrombie’s description, was a “technology for bringing people together in small groups around difficult but important issues with neutral facilitators, a process where each of the small groups generate ideas. It is focused on what actions institutions could take, what actions small groups like clubs and organizations could take, and what a single citizen could undertake to make a difference on a particular issue.”

Abercrombie worked with a city commissioner, the city manager, the mayor, a city marketing staff-member, and a member of the city’s planning staff to organize the roundtables. At the end of the process, the group came up with 400 ideas about how to improve the community and created action teams to work on implementing some of them.

A number of ideas came out of the roundtables, including some that were adopted officially as part of the city’s 2000 strategic plan. A new organization called the Decatur
Neighborhood Association was created to serve as an alliance for neighborhood groups. The city created a neighborhood liaison position to help the alliance.

As Matt Leighninger recounts in his book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, a symbol of the project’s success was that one of its participants, a gay African-American woman, went on to run for city commission and won. “To many it was a sign that Decatur could resolve the kind of cultural conflict that was so apparent in nearby communities, where tensions still simmered between old-timers and newcomers, and between people of color and their gay and lesbian neighbors,” wrote Leighninger.

**FROM GOOD GOVERNMENT TO GOOD GOVERNANCE**

As H. George Frederickson wrote in his 1997 book, *The Spirit of Public Administration*, “Modern public administration is a network of vertical and horizontal linkages between organizations (publics) of all types — governmental, non-governmental, and quasi-governmental; profit, non-profit, and voluntary. Citizens participate in these publics in many ways and at many points. It is for this reason that the core values, or spirit, of public administration include a general knowledge of a commitment to the public in a general sense, as well as responsiveness to both individual citizens and groups of citizens in the specific sense.”

The NCL’s All-America City Award casts a spotlight on successful examples of community-based problem solving, emphasizing efforts that are innovative and inclusive, especially those that engage members of the public as active participants. Hampton, Virginia, is another three-time winner, most recently in 2014. One of the projects highlighted in its application was a citizen-based budgeting process known as I-Value.

In 2010, two years after the onset of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, Hampton was facing a projected budget shortfall of about $19 million. To engage citizens in the difficult task of deciding what cuts to make, the Hampton city manager initiated an ambitious public participation process. “We didn’t expect people to come just to us,” she said. “We went to them. We went to the soccer clubs, and the PTA meeting, and the Girls and Boys Scouts, anywhere anybody would take us. We set up a booth at the YMCA and the local town center. We just made sure we were going to touch as many people as we possibly could, and every time we went to one of those places we took a recorder and a laptop and a printer.”

Community meetings were held throughout the city, using keypad polling technology to get the views of residents. Transcripts of each meeting were posted within days. The manager and staff members went out to local non-profits, schools, and clubs to discuss the budget. Online chats were held during lunch hours.

The government solicited opinions via dropboxes with comment cards. Residents were encouraged to use the city’s exemplary 311 phone system to ask questions or voice their views. Transcripts of the calls were kept on file. Citizens took online surveys and had special meetings with city staff members to give their input. The city’s budget priorities were based on the feedback from these varied means of communicating with residents.
City officials were expecting pushback from citizens who would haggle with one another to protect their favorite programs from the budgetary ax. Some city staff members worried that the open-ended process would lead to bad choices, but in fact, most of the citizens’ priorities were entirely reasonable.

“It made my job as manager really easy that year because I wasn’t having to struggle with the choice of cuts that had worse impact,” the city manager said. “I think there were only two things that stood out. We had been prepared to cut library hours and the community was completely opposed to that, so we didn’t.”

**A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT**

Hampton’s habit of solving local problems through citizen engagement goes back to the late 1980s, another time of tough financial challenges for older cities and a time when citizens were deeply divided. A proposed general plan update ran into fierce opposition from neighborhood groups who opposed a new freeway because they feared that it would cause significant traffic problems. Residents on one side of the city felt the plan had come out of the blue, without their being consulted. Hampton’s then-city manager proposed that neighborhood groups join city officials in a consensus-based effort to come up with a new plan.

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As author Suzanne Morse described the process in an article in the *National Civic Review*: “Beginning in late 1988, the working committee held a three-hour meeting every week or two. All meetings were open and were well-covered by the local newspaper. When ideas or suggestions were made, neighborhood groups and others were invited to attend the meetings of the committee. After a year, the working committee produced a plan that most people agreed was not only acceptable but better than the one proposed originally by city planners.”

Over time, cities such as Hampton and Decatur have developed what we might call a “culture of participation,” taking the time and making the effort to regularly engage the public in meaningful discussions. In the city of Fort Collins, Colorado, citizens expect to be engaged by their government on matters large and small. Local government has intentionally sought to create an organizational culture that not only values but mandates resident engagement. Both resident expectations and government culture have evolved to reinforce one another.

“People here want to get involved and want to be engaged,” noted a city staff member in one of several interviews conducted in a recent case study of city government and public engagement in Fort Collins. “It is a community expectation that we will do robust civic engagement. Council rarely, if ever, makes decisions of any real impact without a significant engagement process. And if they tried to do it, people would storm City Hall and say, ‘You didn’t talk to this group, this group, or this group. Isn’t my opinion important to you?’”

**ALL-AMERICA CONVERSATIONS**

Writing in the *Atlantic* magazine, James Fallows noted a recent poll suggesting that “two in three Americans said that good ideas for dealing with national social and economic challenges were coming from their towns. Fewer than one in three felt that good ideas were coming from national institutions.” These results, Fallows concluded, that “city by city, and at the level of politics where people’s judgments are based on direct observation rather than media-fueled fear, Americans still trust democratic processes and observe long-respected norms.”

In response to the bitter divisions that were revealed during the 2016 election season, the National Civic League is challenging communities across the United States to hold “All-America Conversations.” The goal of these conversations is to identify the small, specific actions that remind people that we can work together across dividing lines and help our communities reflect the best of what America can be. These conversations are aimed at bringing residents together in a small, conversational setting to exchange ideas about their community.

Some communities may also choose to hold larger gatherings in which people break up into small groups or to conduct the conversation as part of another forum. Regardless of format, the conversations are meant to address three main questions: 1) How can our community reflect the best of what we see in America? 2) What are the divisions in our community and how do they impact our ability to live in the kind of community we want? 3) How can we bridge these divisions?

In his book, *Trust Building*, Rob Corcoran writes about the move Richmond, Virginia, made from being the “Capital of the Confederacy” to a home of meaningful and enduring racial dialogues and the resulting changes. He writes that “by treating people as potential allies rather than enemies, we can focus on solving problems instead of continuing to glare at each other from self-righteous and isolated positions. The key to healing is in provoking and sustaining honest conversations among citizens.”

At a time when so many people see their fellow neighbors as enemies rather than allies, the National Civic League
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is calling on communities to hold All-America Conversations, providing citizens with chances to bridge divides and the opportunity to “focus on solving problems” rather than fostering further division and mistrust. To support communities in engaging diverse residents across dividing lines to create stronger, more equitable communities, the National Civic League has produced All-America Conversations Toolkit, a free resource that includes everything a community needs to hold productive and meaningful conversations. (The toolkit can be downloaded at http://www.nationalcivicleague.org/all-america-conversations/.)

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CONCLUSIONS

Across the country, many local communities are already creating opportunities for residents to engage with one another and find common ground. Whether these divisions are racial, religious and ethnic, socioeconomic, or of another type, the strongest local communities will be those that face these tensions, engage residents, and take actions to work together.

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