

Building a Better Bridge

Expanding Social Capital Is Central to Northeast Ohio's Path Forward

Northeast Ohio is at a crossroads. Although the City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County have faced significant challenges in recent years with issues such as education, foreclosures, government fragmentation/corruption and population decline, the area is uniquely positioned to initiate broad policy changes that address these issues head-on. These changes, if executed properly, have the potential to improve the quality of life for area citizens for decades to come. Conversely, failure to “seize the moment” will stifle economic and population growth in the region for the foreseeable future.

As the region ponders its future, there is a familiar tension in the air that too often impedes progress. This tension stems from distinct differences of opinions about how the critical issues of the day should be addressed. These differences would be better characterized as a community dichotomy, with some stakeholders looking at the past as the template for the future in terms of what works, who should be in charge and to what end, while other stakeholders believe *new* systems, processes, structures and people are necessary for the region to be vibrant in the 21st Century.

Following is a brief overview of some of the challenges and opportunities facing the region that support this argument for unprecedented change:

For the past six years, the Fund for Our Economic Future has worked in earnest to unite 16 counties with an aim of sharing resources and improving the overall economic health of the entire region. Before the Fund was formed, there was no such collaboration of its size and scope anywhere in America. As such, the Fund became and continues to be a national model for regional economic development and collaboration. Similarly, after many years of debate, dialogue and discord about the function and functionality of Cuyahoga County government, local voters decided that the time had come to do away with the old structure of government and start anew. Notwithstanding the sharp ideological divides that this new form of government (County Executive and County Council) has fomented, the process of county government reform is moving forward in robust fashion, with many counties around the country watching closely with replication efforts in mind.

Equally important and daunting is the school transformation plan currently

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being implemented by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. This plan aims to reform the accountability measures for school buildings and the teachers and administrators that occupy them, giving supportive resources and leeway to schools that are performing at high levels while setting high expectations and progress benchmarks for schools that need to improve. As part of this plan, 16 schools have been slated to close based on poor academic outcomes and a shrinking school population. Bold and innovative school reform is becoming the national model for urban education, and Cleveland can be at the forefront of demonstrating meaningful change.

Another local initiative that has received national attention is "Sustainable Cleveland 2019," which kicked off in 2009 as an effort to get stakeholders from all sectors of the region to explore, collaborate and initiate policies, practices and programs to make Cleveland an international model for sustainability. The process was initiated by Mayor Frank Jackson and designed as a 10-year plan to turn Cleveland into a "Green City on a Blue Lake." The kick-off meeting was a three-day appreciative inquiry exercise that drew more than 700 people and resulted in hundreds of ideas and dozens of collaborations.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Each of the aforementioned initiatives are "once-in-a-lifetime," game-changing initiatives that can make or break the Greater Cleveland region. However, as processes like these are undertaken, they are generally led by a small subset of the population who control significant resources. Although this is an acceptable practice, especially as it relates to the school board authorizing reform or the city administration organizing a sustainability summit, a critical flaw in the process has been consistently overlooked. That flaw is the level of community engagement required for success, including the stage at which community stakeholders are involved, the level or depth of their involvement, and the overall length of their involvement.

Each of these initiatives has included a community engagement component. The Fund for Our Economic Future engaged more than 20,000 residents over an 18-month period through its "Voices and Choices" discussions of the region's economic health and vitality. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District hosted a series of community meetings to discuss the transformation and allowed for community input up until the day the school board officially voted on the issue. Plans for the reformed Cuyahoga County government structure include several community forums over the course of the transition year (2010) in which residents can learn details of the process, offer ideas and input, and question or even challenge the outlined strategies and recommendations.

Although these efforts to involve or engage the public are noteworthy and will help garner community support and buy-in, the overall strategy for outreach has been largely episodic. With each of these initiatives, residents or stakeholders have been called on at a particular point in the life of the project to share information, ideas and critiques, and have then been "released" from the assignment, very much like a citizen serving on jury duty. This practice leaves community stakeholders with mixed emotions, ranging from excitement, optimism and engagement to disappointment, distrust and cynicism. The most common question that stakeholders ask six to 12 months after such an outreach process is: "Was anything ever done with all of the great ideas and suggestions that were shared?"

The organizers or leaders of these initiatives are not, in most cases, deliberately limiting public engagement. However, they *are* limiting the time and extent to which stakeholders are allowed to

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participate in the process. This approach, therefore, needs to be revisited. If these are truly “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunities, it is essential that the best possible thinking take place over the long haul. That requires that the best thinkers have a seat at the table for the duration of the effort.

The “long haul” is the operative phrase in terms of understanding the importance of social capital. Social capital realizes the value of “connectedness” among community stakeholders over an extended period of time versus “episodic” information-gathering over a limited timeframe. This is evidenced by the following definitions of social capital:

- “Social capital is the stock of community’s goodwill and trust acquired by an organization over the years, through its understanding and addressing of the concerns and priorities of its citizens.” (*Businessdictionary.com*)
- “Social capital is the web of cooperative relationships between citizens that facilitate resolution of collective action problems.” (Brehm & Rahn, 1997, p. 999)
- “Social capital is defined as the norms and societal relations embedded in the social structures of societies that enable people to coordinate action and to achieve desired goals.” (*Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development*)

Although these definitions vary in scope, it is clear that the major tenet of social capital involves community problem-solving, collective action and extended relationships. For any number of reasons, the Cleveland landscape has had its challenges with accessing and leveraging social capital as defined above.

Perhaps these challenges are best understood as outlined in the 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* by Clay Shirky. Shirky explains that, when sociologists talk about social capital, they often make the distinction between *bonding capital* and *bridging capital*. Bonding capital is an increase in the depth of connections and trust within a relatively homogeneous group, whereas bridging capital is an increase in connections among relatively heterogeneous groups.

The bonding capital among the key players in Cuyahoga County is robust and proven. However, it is also fairly homogeneous, which limits the perspective, or the lens, through which these groups can address broad societal problems. No matter how well-intentioned the group, the homogeneity and trust among the few will always leave a broad swath of the community on the proverbial “outside looking in.” The region is lacking the bridging capital necessary to foster relationships with a broader range of stakeholders, promote trust and attain greater levels of consensus and buy-in.

As Greater Cleveland takes on the daunting challenges of reforming its schools, its county government and its regional opportunity structures, those of us who care about reinvigorating this region must operate in new and different ways. We must cultivate and build on the area’s bridge capital and embrace community stakeholders from all backgrounds in the work of change, not merely as an information-gathering exercise but as a partnership addressing shared priorities. The reform efforts currently under way require not only radical thinking, but inclusive thinking. We need to heed Shirky’s call to bring everybody to the table. All citizen stakeholders of the region need to come forward with their ideas for change. *Everybody* should be welcomed to the process of reform with open arms. The burden of responsibility rests with all of us.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create Citizen Engagement Panels representative of diverse constituent groups in the region that serve as advisers for public-sector reform efforts for extended periods of time. These could be similar to the three-year terms typical on non-profit boards. The goal would be to engage diverse groups early in the process and keep them engaged over time.
2. Reconvene a sampling of community volunteers who participate in forums and other public meetings annually to report progress and hear feedback. Tweak plans as necessary based on this feedback in order to stay current with the needs and interests of community stakeholders.
3. Monitor boards, commissions and other public-sector advisory groups to ensure that membership has racial, ethnic, gender, age and geographic diversity. Challenge these groups to reach out to the community at-large to gather information on a regular basis.
4. Initiate cross-pollination programs and activities that build “bridge capital” across sector lines. Coordinate formal and informal meetings, trainings and joint projects that build relationships and trust among community stakeholders.
5. Formally evaluate the effectiveness of short-term public engagement activities and share information regarding potential improvements with key decision-makers and decision influencers, such as foundation officials and administrative personnel, in the region.
6. Create Offices of Public Engagement in the public sector to allow members of the public to interface regularly with the elected officials and other key decision-makers. The work of these offices should not only focus on hearing stakeholders’ concerns, but also provide detailed updates on the inner workings of the agency, organization or institution. As a best practice, enlist Chief Elected Officials and Chief Executive Officers to engage in on-going discourse with the public well beyond the period of a campaign or reform effort.

These recommendations will initiate the paradigm shifts necessary to engage Northeast Ohio’s stakeholders in meaningful change.

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