Sean Kershaw, Executive Director, Citizens League

Minnesota must develop new model for collectively solving public problems

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Civic Process Interview

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Present

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Summary

The role a strong civic infrastructure has played in Minnesota is vital to our past and future success, according to Citizens League Executive Director Sean Kershaw. Our ability to collectively solve problems has mattered. But he points out that the world has changed dramatically since the heyday of public-policy organizations like the Citizens League more than a generation ago. That was a unique time of post-war stability and economic growth, without a lot of inequality or political polarization.

Now, he says, we have a proliferation of interest groups; issues with global implications and connections; unprecedented changes in technology; greater time competition; and substantial changes in economic activity and competition. Problems are more complex than they were in the past; it's not as simple as going to the Legislature or any one institution to resolve them.

Given these changes, policy approaches and solutions that worked in the old model don't necessarily work anymore, Kershaw concludes. We need to rebuild a new civic imagination and capacity to address the problems we currently face and that fit well with how the world is working now. We aren't doing well today in resolving public problems, he asserts, in part because we haven't let go of the past paradigm.

Kershaw says there is no lack of interesting ideas out there about dealing with public problems, but we seem to be unable to implement the good ideas that do come up. To change that, he believes we

must recognize that every person and every institution have a role in policymaking, including both generalists and formal stakeholders. People who are affected by a public problem must be involved in the whole process of defining the problem, designing solutions to it and advancing the proposed solutions.

While new groups looking for long-term solutions to public problems are just beginning to emerge through the efforts of Millennials, Kershaw says these groups are not yet moving the needle. He calls on groups like the Civic Caucus to help support the development of a public mindset in this younger generation, while cautioning that Millennials might express that mindset very differently from the way people expressed it 30 years ago.

Biography

In 2003, Sean Kershaw became the sixth Citizens League executive director in its 60-plus-year history. He had been a member of the Citizens League Board of Directors since 1996 and co-chaired the League's 50th anniversary report, *Doing the Common Good Better.*

Kershaw describes his life's work as building the institutions necessary to "make policy public." He is passionate about active citizenship, civic organizing and good public policy. He is a founding member of the Active Citizens School for Young Adults, a young-adult civic leadership program, and is currently working on nonprofit civic leadership efforts through the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative.

Before joining the Citizens League, Kershaw was deputy director of the City of St. Paul's Department of Planning and Economic Development, where he worked for 11 years. During his tenure, he chaired then-Mayor Norm Coleman's e-Government initiative and coordinated Coleman's information technology, chartered school and education initiatives. He also worked as community outreach coordinator on the Mayor's Y2K initiative.

Before coming to Minnesota, Kershaw was planning coordinator for the Public Housing Authority in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. He has a B.A. degree in sociology from Pennsylvania's Haverford College.

Background

This interview with Sean Kershaw is part of a new focus for the Civic Caucus: reviewing the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future civic process for developing proposals and action to anticipate, define and resolve major public problems. The Caucus developed this new focus during three internal discussion sessions, held on Sept. 11, Sept. 18 and Oct. 2, 2015 . While it undertakes this review of the civic process, the Caucus will also continue interviews exploring the topic of human capital in Minnesota.

Discussion

There are "givens" in the discussion of civic infrastructure that most people agree are true. The Citizens League's Sean Kershaw outlined what he called three major areas of broad agreement about Minnesota's civic infrastructure:

1. The concept of civic infrastructure is broadly recognized .

Kershaw said he uses two definitions for civic infrastructure: (1) the capacity to govern for the common good in a democracy; and (2) the public decision-making processes, methods and reward systems in a democracy that provide the foundation to govern for the common good in the tension between democratic ideals and the real social, economic and environmental situation.

2. The role that our civic infrastructure has played in Minnesota is vital to our past and future success .

Kershaw said former Citizens League Executive Director Ted Kolderie has done a "phenomenal job" of connecting our success to the civic infrastructure Minnesota developed over the years. "Our ability to collectively solve problems has mattered and this has been modeled by the Civic Caucus and the Citizens League," Kershaw said.

He noted that the Citizens League's heyday occurred during a unique time in Minnesota and in the country: post-war stability and economic growth. We grew economically without a lot of inequality, he said. It was also a time of a relative lack of political polarization.

3. The world has changed significantly.

The scale of things has changed dramatically in a generation, Kershaw asserted. He noted several examples: (1) The number of interest groups has grown substantially. (2) Almost every issue now has global implications and connections, so what happens in Minnesota is only part of the solution. (3) There has been an unprecedented change in technology. (4) Time competition is greater with both spouses in households working, and working longer hours. (5) Economic activity and competition have changed. "The scale of almost everything has changed dramatically since that time of our peak success," he said.

Kershaw pointed out that the ability to isolate ourselves has also changed significantly. "I can pick and choose the sources I want to get my news from and isolate my worldview around them," he said. "Geographically, we're more isolated than in the past by race and ethnicity, income, and ideology. Politically, polarization has become extreme at the national level and locally among neighborhoods. People tend to surround themselves with people who agree with them."

The problem isn't that social media and television are less accurate than they were in the past, he said. The problem is that it's easier than ever for people only to hear from and talk with those who agree with them, whether or not they have the facts right. This deadens political and policy conversations and makes it very difficult to come to an understanding of the problems we face.

And in the near future, demographics will change dramatically, he said. Over the next 10 years, there will be large growth in diversity, labor force growth will fall to almost zero, and the population will become much older much more quickly than ever in history.

There are also a series of assertions about civic infrastructure with which people might disagree. Kershaw made four broad assertions that guide the Citizens League's work right now, saying people might not agree with all of them:

1. Problems are more complex than in the past.

Examples he cited include the achievement gap, medical care, education, transportation and mental health reform. "There are many more actors needed to get something done," Kershaw said. "It's not as simple as going to the Legislature or going to any one institution. The problems we face now are just more complex than they were in the past. The world now is not hierarchical; it's more like a web with a bunch of nodes."

He drew a parallel to Minnesota's approach to dealing with water pollution. In the past, Minnesota was successful in reducing point-source water pollution through regulatory means. But now we find that much water pollution comes from nonpoint sources, such as agricultural runoff, which requires a totally different strategy. "More of our problems are like that now," Kershaw said.

The point is that policy approaches and solutions that worked in the old model don't necessarily work anymore, given the way the world works now, he said.

2. We're in a completely new paradigm in terms of how the world works and what we do about it in public policy.

Kershaw used physics as an example. He explained that at one time, Sir Isaac Newton could explain things, like the motion of the planets ,mathematically with what became known as "Newtonian" or classical mechanics. He developed mathematical equations to describe the world around him and to predict things. But over time, people noticed there were things that his model couldn't explain or predict, mostly at the subatomic level. Then Albert Einstein and others developed an entirely new paradigm or model (called "quantum mechanics") that could explain and predict things the old model could not. "One model needed to replace the other in order to explain the world as people saw it," Kershaw said. The point was that this was an entirely new way of looking at the world, not just an improvement on the previous model.

"We must do the same thing," Kershaw said. "We need to rebuild a new civic imagination and capacity to address the problems we now face and that fit well with how the world is working now. For example, "we've made politics into a bad thing, but politics is how we get things done. And we've made civics only about government and not about problem solving in a democracy in every institution."

3. We aren't doing well, in part because we need to let go of the past paradigm .

"As we're moving from one way the world works to another, we're in that in-between zone," Kershaw said. "It's like moving from the payphone world to cell phones to whatever technology comes next. The implications of not doing well are critical to Minnesota. For a state that depends on civic infrastructure for our success, we have to get better at that."

The implications of these changes place an enormous amount of importance on governance, not government. Kershaw said he was referring to governance everywhere: in government, in

nonprofits, in business. "Most of the problems we're facing right now can be traced to *governance* failures, not just government failures," he said. "If we can't implement the policy solutions we develop, at what point does governance become a policy question?"

Everyone has a role in policymaking, including both generalists and formal stakeholders. Kershaw contended that we need to rethink who, how and where policy happens. Traditionally, people have thought policy was made by other people, such as government, experts or elected officials. "But what's critical in this new paradigm is that everybody has a role in policy issues," he said. "A policymaker is not someone else, it's everybody. There has to be a transition from 'policy happens someplace else' to 'policy happens everywhere.'"

"Policy doesn't happen just at the government level," he continued. "If we're thinking about school reform, transportation reform, or mental health reform, every institution has a role in it. At some point, you must include a diverse set of formal stakeholders, as well as generalists, in that process in order to get to the root of what's going on."

We need to be building capacity at all levels and with all types of individual leaders, Kershaw said. "One of the problems right now is that we're waiting for big business leaders and big government leaders to solve things and they can't on their own. It means a totally new role for all kinds of institutions: from foundations to academia to business to nonprofits. All of those organizations are stuck in this transition, trying to figure out their new roles. It's not the same as it was in 1972. The Citizens League is still not having as great an impact as it once had and needs to have today."

Kershaw said Minnesota has a legacy of collectively solving problems that we must switch into the new paradigm. "We're in a really good place to do it, but we haven't done it yet," he said. "The struggles we're dealing with are caused by trying to make an old model work that can't work, rather than saying 'What would a new model look like? And how do we support that?'"

People affected by a problem should be involved in defining that problem, designing solutions to it and advancing the proposed solutions. Kershaw said these people who directly experience the impact of problems, as citizens and stakeholders, are almost always left out of the process of defining the problem, designing specific public-policy proposals and advancing those proposals. For example, he asserted that high school reform proposals never involve teachers or students and that work on the health gap rarely engages affected community members in a meaningful way.

"This does not mean you let the foxes run the chicken coop," Kershaw warned. "But stakeholders can be broadly defined," and diverse groups of stakeholders are rarely involved together early in the policy process. He said in the Citizens League's work on energy, the organization defined any user of energy as a stakeholder, not just the large energy companies. And the League engaged low-income communities and communities of color in its work on health gaps. He said those stakeholders proposed strategies to solve the gaps that were entirely different from a lot of upstream solutions promoted by formal policy groups.

The inability to resolve differences and compromise politically is a problem. "There's no space for compromising today," Kershaw said. "Everybody needs to think about their roles differently." School districts, the business community, nonprofits all need to be part of the issue-resolving function.

Too many systems are stuck rewarding the careerism of people in them and not the outcomes they're supposed to produce. An interviewer raised the issue of how careerism and the structure of the rewards in academia have resulted in professors who turn away from their role of teaching students, which is supposed to be the mission of educational institutions. Kershaw agreed and said almost all systems reward the careerism of the people in them. He said it's key that people understand their role in the system as bigger than their careers. They need to re-imagine their role. This isn't about people's intentions, but the incentives and rewards, the policies we've created inside all types of institutions.

The model for problem solving in the future is not trying to find the silver bullet, as it was in the past. Kershaw said in the past, people trying to resolve public problems wanted to find the silver bullet to solve everything. That type of solution could be done at the top. "But the model in the future is not the silver bullet," he stressed. "It's rather to try lots of things and see what works. The new model is built from the bottom up, not just from the top down. "

The problem isn't a lack of ideas. " I don't think it's a lack of good ideas," Kershaw said. "Instead, it's that we can't implement the good ideas that come up. If we're interested in changing things, there needs to be a focus on advancing the good ideas that are out there. The proliferation of interest groups means there are lots of interesting ideas popping up." But he sees insufficient thinking about how an idea becomes reality. "The old model is not working to do that."

Kershaw clarified that a different process of developing the ideas, along the lines he's promoting, would result in both better ideas to suit the problems we face and greater capacity to implement these ideas.

Every institution must see its role in public policy. An interviewer asked whether Minnesota has institutions of public policy and if we could make a list of them. Kershaw said in the new model every institution has a role in public policy and the problem is when institutions don't see themselves as policy institutions.

"If social services organizations don't have to see themselves as public-policy providers, they can keep taking the checks and saying they're trying really hard. As long as school administrators, teachers and parents don't think of themselves as public-policy institutions, they all get away with the current system and change doesn't happen."

Millennials are networkers and collaborators, not traditional joiners. An interviewer asked if there were any institutions left now that look to the future and are not just interested in their goals for today. Kershaw responded that there might not be any of those institutions left today, but there are new groups just beginning to emerge through the efforts of Millennials. "Millennials aren't joiners in the traditional way, but they're absolutely collaborators," he said. "It's a very different mindset from past generations. The Millennials are rebuilding, but they're not yet moving the needle."

The courts might not be resolvers, but they're interveners and can raise issues. An interviewer brought up the lawsuit several families have filed against the state of Minnesota for failing to desegregate the schools. He then asked about the role of the courts in public policymaking. Kershaw

responded that the courts can intervene and raise issues and are certainly actors, but they might not be resolvers of problems. In this case, the state can't be the only one to fix the problem of poor-performing schools.

One of the most important things the Civic Caucus could do is help support the development of a public mindset in other generations, even if it's used very differently from in the past. When an interviewer asked whether any Millennials are interested in public policy, Kershaw responded by saying that they absolutely are interested and called on the Civic Caucus to help support young people in developing a public mindset. He cautioned, though, that the mindset might be expressed very differently from the way it was 30 years ago.

"The generation of people who built the Citizens League has done and is doing an unbelievable amount to make Minnesota successful," he said. "Now how does that generation support the generation behind them?"

Foundations are stuck in a very fragmented mindset. In response to an interviewer's question about the role of foundations, Kershaw said they have a very fragmented mindset. He said there is new leadership coming into the local foundation community, but right now the foundations are too fragmented from each other and in their approach to the major issues we face. "And it should be noted that nonprofits are also acting in a fragmented way on these issues," he said.

The consequence of not acting differently politically might be to drive a whole generation out of politics. Kershaw said good ideas are out there, but people with an interest in keeping things as they are get in the way of those ideas ever being implemented. The extremes in both parties are trying to drive people out of participating so their own candidates have a better chance of winning. "Over time," he said, "that is really toxic. The Millennials' negativity toward politics is right on the edge." What young adults are seeing might very well drive their whole generation away from politics.

Minnesota has more to lose. "I fluctuate between being enormously hopeful, with the Millennials coming in and doing things differently but effectively," Kershaw said, "and being dismayed by destructive examples like an enormously negative St. Paul City Council race, that make everybody want to leave politics."

"We must think in drastic terms" about what this means for Minnesota, he continued. Minnesota has more to lose in any weakening of its capacity to solve public problems because of what we've had in the past. "But we have this history of Minnesota exceptionalism that we can play off of. We're in a really good position to do it, but we have to do it differently."