



Civic Caucus Interview Group - Internal Discussion

A recap of findings to date yields ideas for future direction

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Discussion

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Present

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Summary

From interviews held over the past several weeks we might infer the following challenges to those who wish to bring about solutions to major public policy problems: Assist, don't just complain about, media coverage. Recognize that leaders might be hindered by the structures within which they function. Consider the benefit of setting up teams explicitly to propose major change. Look for system change, rather than simply respond to symptoms. To ensure effective change, see that change is owned at the operational level, not just the policy level. Consider whether too many of us are more concerned about "me" than about the "community." Engage in less protectionism and more voluntary sharing of information. Consider whether recreating something akin to a state planning agency would help. Emphasize that non-insider organizations are very much needed for developing creative proposals.

Background

Today's meeting was devoted to giving all members of the interview team the chance to share their current thinking on the role of Minnesota's institutions of public policy. We've already conducted several interviews on the subject:

[Chris Ison 04-08-16](#)

[T. Williams 04-01-16](#)

[Civic Caucus Discussion - Progress Report 03-18-16](#)

Judith Healey 03-11-16
Lisa Hills and Sarah Jackson 03-04-16
Civic Caucus Discussion - Progress Report 02-26-16
Richard McFarland 02-19-16
Tom Dennis 02-12-16
Bill Salisbury 02-05-16
Blazar, Hauer, Lyon and Shallbetter 01-29-16
Ted Kolderie 01-22-16
Justin Schardin and Matthew Weil 12-18-15
Steve Kelley 12-11-15
Mitch Pearlstein 12-04-15
Devon Foley 11-13-15
Sean Kershaw 11-06-15
Dane Smith 10-30-15
Tim Penny 10-23-15
David Durenberger 10-09-15
Civic Caucus Discussion - CivicProcess3 10-02-15
Civic Caucus Discussion - CivicProcess2 09-18-15
Civic Caucus Discussion - CivicProcess1 09-11-15

Several more interviews are scheduled. Today's session was held to help the group start thinking about its work this summer on specific findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Discussion

Clarification of definitions is needed . It was clear early in the conversation that the overall term "institutions of public policy" is too broad and might also be misleading. We clarified that rather than "institutions" such as family, community, or education, we're really talking about "organizations" of public policy. Moreover, we will consider some organizations, but not all. Organizations that decide or make public policy, such as city councils, school boards, county boards, legislative bodies, and government agencies will not fall within our purview. Nor are we reviewing organizations delivering services. Nor will we review the advocacy groups organized around a specific interest. Such groups might be characterized as "insiders". Our focus is on general purpose organizations involved in *generating and sharing information, analyzing options, and proposing solutions* to public policy questions, perhaps characterized as "non-insiders". That would include electronic and mass media, foundations, research and academic bodies, think tanks, and civic, business, and community organizations.

Assist, don't just complain about, media coverage. Journalists covering complicated questions deserve all the help we can give them, a member suggested. The media perform immensely valuable services because they endeavor to use plain language, keeping matters as understandable as possible for a broad audience. They urgently need good background information from many sources. Thus, organizations ought to exert special efforts to always provide good background on a topic under discussion.

Look at helping leaders bring about system change . A recent book by Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Simple Habits for Complex Times* , outlines why change in an organization is complex, difficult, and requires a new form of leadership with new approaches to leading people and crafting solutions, a member noted. The member suggested we should focus on strategies for system change with the goal of closing gaps between what is happening and what is desired to happen.

Consider how much change is occurring. A member contrasted the last 50 years with that of the previous 50 years. It seems that public policy organizations in an earlier time were more in tune with culture and institutions. Society was more coherent. Today the situation is different. Things are not as neatly aligned, creating difficulty for organizations to adapt.

Meanwhile, many youths are graduating from colleges deeply concerned about the world but don't know what to do about it.

Is our current organizational framework not conducive to producing good leadership? A key component of leadership, a member suggested, is the ability to achieve consensus among persons with different views or political affiliations. This seems very difficult, the individual said, citing two examples, the efforts to improve education by T. Williams, outlined in a recent Civic Caucus interview and the efforts by Steven Rosenstone to accomplish change in Minnesota State Colleges and Universities.

Consider setting up different teams explicitly assigned to bring about change . A member cited examples in the business world where real change—e.g. from main frame computers to mini computers and from mini computers to personal computers—didn't come from those involved in direct operation of areas needing change. Instead, entirely different teams were set up to create a climate for change and to design the specific change needed. Thus, the member wondered, whether existing organizations can bring about change needed in public policy or whether a different "team" is needed. In so many areas of public policy today it is obvious that change won't occur if led by the people responsible for the current situation, who have no incentive to do things differently, the member said.

Efforts are hindered by failure to recognize business contribution and to throw off an attachment to the past. Over the past several weeks the dialogue seems to be headed in a direction that has no focus, a member said. We have added too many Civic Caucus member sermons and not addressed the real question. Too few people recognize the value of business in the community and too few recognize that the public policy vision is fixated too much in the past and defined by the same team of the past.

Don't forget need for restructuring, not just attacking symptoms of problems. A member cautioned us not to forget that it's more than just creative solutions to specific problems that are needed. Too often we concentrate only on symptoms. We need to be concentrating on *causes* of the problems. This would open the inquiry to the larger concepts that some call "system architecture".

Too much ill intent is presumed. Too often, it seems, a member said, that almost before they are advanced, proposals for change are attacked by defenders of the status quo who will attribute nefarious motives to advocates for change, irrespective of the merits of a given proposal.

It is difficult to ensure that change is implemented at the operational level . A member illustrated the difficulty in accomplishing change at the operational level by highlighting a major strategic **report** from University of Minnesota Provost Karen Hanson. Recommendations for change in this report are very strong, but it's not enough for top university leadership to be supportive. Deans need to be held accountable and, below the deans, the department heads. It's not sufficient, the member said, for department heads to be left to themselves to translate recommendations into action.

In further discussion on this point, members wondered if a chain of command is broken when leaders have too many subordinates reporting to them. One case was mentioned where 23 persons report directly to an immediate superior.

Should we narrow the focus? Many words that coincidentally begin with the letter "c" are of concern to one member, who cited "civic", "citizen", "community", "collective", "coherent", "conceptual", "communication", "challenge", "climate", "consensus" and "change", as examples. This person suggests that what we are really trying to talk about is effective involvement of citizens (not just professionals), working together (collectively), seeking agreement (consensus). This individual is concerned that civic groups might spend too much time trying to restructure grand systems, when they might be more productive looking at narrower, specific questions that the community is trying to answer.

Build a specific recommendation on public policy information. Looking for something precise that one can easily explain, a member suggested that public policy organizations ought to periodically, perhaps weekly, prepare reports, concise and narrowly-focused, that could be easily picked up by print and electronic media. The member reminded the group how consensus was finally obtained to create the Nicollet Mall. A published survey of business leaders, indicating their feelings, was an important stimulus to action. Perhaps similar surveys on current needs could be encouraged, the member said.

Specific, creative recommendations can insulate themselves from undue attack . Those individuals and groups with courage to come forth with specific, creative recommendations can usually expect verbal attacks from individuals and groups negatively affected, a person noted. But, the person said, those who make courageous recommendations can come back with a highly-defensible question: "What would you do instead?" Perhaps keeping this question in the forefront will promote more consensus, the person said

Is there too much concern for "me" as opposed to concern for the "community"?

A member reminded the group that dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War, which was an event that produced benefit for the entire community. Too much emphasis today seems to be placed on concerns that are individual-focused, not community-focused, the member suggested. Thus it's harder to figure out what should be done about changing the world systemically for overall benefit.

Less selfish protectionism and more voluntary sharing of information would help. A member said umbrella organizations, such as state leagues of cities, would seem to be well positioned to make

as their main objective the sharing of good ideas among member participants. Perhaps such activity is occurring, the member said, but it often appears as if such umbrella organizations are spending most of their effort on trying to wrestle more aid from their state legislatures.

Does Minnesota need something like a state planning agency? Some states seem to be better prepared than others with public policy initiatives, a member said, citing an example of the [Washington State Institute for Public Policy](#).

Narrow the focus to "non-insider" organizations in public policy . A member suggested it might help us if we think of an entire picture of organizations in public policy, elected and non-elected, governmental and non-governmental, for-profit and non-profit, citizen-controlled and professional-controlled, and so forth. Within the society of organizations, issues get raised, issues get shaped, solutions get proposed, and decisions get made. In virtually all cases, some kind of official governmental recognition (permit, charter, or the like) is given to the organizations. We're looking at a particular slice of that entire society of organizations. Essentially our slice doesn't include governmental agencies, elected officials, organizations advocating on behalf of specific functions, and organizations carrying out operating functions. Those might be characterized as "insiders". Our slice is mainly concerned with the "non-insider", more general-purpose organizations that work on communicating information, raising issues, shaping issues, and developing proposals.

Acknowledge the influence of paid lobbyists . A member suggested that we need to be fully aware of the enormous sums of money being paid to professional lobbyists working on behalf of a host of advocacy groups. This is where the bulk of opposition to creative proposals for change occurs. We need public policy organizations equipped to counteract the impact of lobbyists, a member suggested.

If a problem doesn't get solved, don't just blame the "insiders"; the do-gooders are also to blame. Critical problems facing the state often aren't adequately addressed because not enough good ideas are emerging from "outside" groups, the general-purpose organizations who are working on behalf of the population at-large, not a specific interest group, a member suggested. These general-purpose organizations unfortunately don't always sense how critical their role is. If they don't make creative proposals, no one else is likely to do so. They need to have more courage and stop fearing that they might make the wrong proposal. A less-than-perfect proposal is far better than none at all. Moreover, these organizations need to make on-the-merits proposals, not those that take into consideration every compromise that needs to be made before final action. Someone else can do the compromising. It's possible, the member said, that many general-purpose organizations have little appreciation of the potentially vital role for them. They need to be not just "do-gooders" to be petted and patronized, but hard-nosed thinkers to be respected. They need to recognize they'll likely receive biting opposition from insiders.

There are serious problems with "omnibus" bills . The group noted a constitutional requirement in Minnesota that each bill in the Legislature must encompass one subject, which must be expressed in the title. Members wondered whether that constitutional provision would ever be used to declare any legislation unconstitutional, given precedents to date. Members said it seems as if the Legislature is putting more and more legislation together in one bill, so that it becomes impossible to see whether a given lawmaker is for or against any given provision. It was noted that no individual advocacy group would ever challenge the current legislative approach, fearing legislative retribution. Only an outside

group, largely immune to legislative reaction, would likely bring a constitutional challenge, members said.

The Metropolitan Council is an issue raiser and solution proposer . It was noted that the Metropolitan Council originally was conceived as a body to bring issues of metropolitan significance to the Legislature with proposals for action. For example, it was the Council's recommendation that led to the Legislature's resolving the metropolitan sewer question in 1969. In more recent years the Council has become an agency that directly operates metropolitan functions, which has had the effect of diminishing its role of bringing proposals to the Legislature.

Note *After the notes were completed a member who was not present urged that the following points be included.*

Impact of technology. Public-policy related functions must adapt to this technology revolution which is "disrupting" the way people interact. This must however be viewed as an opportunity, not a barrier or risk.

Impact of demographic diversity. The diversity of our community has an impact on levels of interest, approaches to topics and the nature of interaction in discussion. This is a major factor and should be considered an opportunity for improved solutions to public problems.

Impact of new media. There are numerous blogs, LinkedIn groups, etc. which address public policy. We must pay attention to these new sources of information.

Processes evolving . The Civic Caucus has moved to become more aware of how information flows and is used today. The Civic Caucus must recognize that community and all its interactive processes have evolved and continue to evolve. We need to make specific efforts to stay abreast of these changes.