



Civic Caucus Interview Group

Identify issues no one else wants to address, deepen understanding

A Civic Caucus Internal Discussion

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Present

John Adams, Janis Clay (executive director), Fata Acquoi, Paul Gilje, Ted Kolderie, Paul Ostrow (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: Audrey Clay.


Summary

In this internal discussion, the Civic Caucus interview group raises the questions of what readers of the Civic Caucus interview notes are getting that they aren't getting elsewhere and why people are willing to be interviewed. One interviewer calls the Caucus an advocate for a marketplace of ideas. Another says the Civic Caucus has a newspaper model, with a unique panel-style interview and a distribution process to inform the citizen-public and deepen understanding about important issues.

The group looks back to the purpose of the Citizens League, while also hearing that the Civic Caucus does not have to do what the Citizens League used to do. There are people around who have ideas and proposals. The Caucus can find these people and give attention to those ideas and proposals.

About five years ago, the Civic Caucus used to change topics quickly, sometimes from interview to interview. In recent years, the Caucus has focused its interviews on one topic over a period of months or even a year. The group discussed changing topics more often, so the Caucus could deal with issues as they arise. An important function of the Caucus should be to tackle issues no one else will. The members list a number of such issues.

Background

The Civic Caucus continues its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness and the important role the quality of the state's public-policy process plays in maintaining competitiveness. As part of the exploration of Minnesota's public-policy process, the Civic Caucus issued a report in November 2016,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*.

Continuing this focus, beginning in October 2017, the Civic Caucus has held a series of interviews with eight 2018 gubernatorial candidates, interspersed with interviews about the quality of Minnesota's legislative process. The Civic Caucus interview group held this internal discussion to explore the Caucus's mission and its future focus.

Discussion

Organizations need to examine four elements: mission, structure, distribution of power and responsibility, and resources. One member of the Civic Caucus interview group started the discussion with that remark, which he attributed to Robert Kudrle of the University of Minnesota's (U of M) Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Kudrle said the ordinary tendency is to look down to the bottom element, resources. He says it's better to go to the top and redefine what the point of the organization is.

An interviewer said it is still unclear to him exactly what the mission is, the well-defined purpose, of the Civic Caucus. What are readers looking for that they don't get elsewhere?

Another interviewer said it is crucial to think about why people read what the Civic Caucus produces and why people are willing to be interviewed. This could help us shape where the Civic Caucus goes. Someone else noted we should also ask why people drop out of the interview group.

The Civic Caucus conducted 24 interviews last year, not counting internal discussion meetings. An interviewer was surprised at that number, thinking we had conducted more interviews. He said we could consider having one session a month to digest what speakers have said or a board meeting once a month.

The Civic Caucus is an advocate for a "marketplace of ideas." An interviewer made that remark and said that we call on citizens to engage in informed debate. This is almost nonexistent elsewhere.

How do we differ from *MinnPost*? an interviewer asked. Another interviewer said the Civic Caucus is more niche.

What were the aims of Verne Johnson when he founded the Civic Caucus? An interviewer said she has some of his thoughts from 2002 on this. Ted Kolderie discusses Johnson and the Citizens League in chapter six of his book *Thinking Out the How*.

A productive way to look at the Civic Caucus is that we actually have a "newspaper model." An interviewer earlier had articulated this idea. We have in place a reporting process, with a unique panel-style interview, and a distribution process to inform the citizen-public and deepen understanding about important issues. An interviewer pointed out that, early on, the Citizens League was led by two ex-journalists, Ted Kolderie and Paul Gilje.

We have a good idea of who opens the notes from our interviews and have built up a very impressive e-mail distribution list. We now have 5,500 people on our e-mail list, including news outlets from across Minnesota. The Civic Caucus needs to be sure to update its distribution list to include the people newly in elected office, such as city councils and mayors, an interviewer said.

Five years ago or so, Civic Caucus interviews used to jump from topic to topic, but in more recent years, we have stayed with a topic for much longer periods. An interviewer made that observation and another interviewer said Issues are about choices. What do you want to accomplish and how should you go about it? He leans toward the model of taking important things as they pop up and not trying to stay too long on a single topic. A function of the Civic Caucus is to identify those issues, to shape the agenda. Articulate the issues and get people in public life to talk about them. One concern is losing people who are not interested if we stay on a topic for too long.

The Civic Caucus interview group members have a wealth of experience in public policy. An interviewer said what attracted him to the Caucus was the collective experience of the interview group. The Civic Caucus has a purpose in gathering information. Very important, too, is to share what we have around the table, a "zillion" years of wisdom and collective experience.

Another interviewer mentioned that our speakers often remark after an interview how much they have learned from the interview group.

We should look back to the purpose of the Citizens League: (1) to help the community understand its problems and (2) to determine what to do about them—that is, to deepen understanding of problems or issues. The interviewer who made that remark noted a continuing underlying feeling or belief that the Civic Caucus ought to be making proposals and a frustration that it does not do so. He stated he does not think it is a bad thing to deepen understanding.

Another interviewer pointed out the reports the Caucus has produced that *have* contained proposals—for example, on human capital and on the policy process. A third interviewer asked if it's that we don't have the capacity to make proposals or that our proposals are not being accepted.

An interviewer asked whether there is even such a thing today as a nonpartisan policy proposal. That is a huge change from the past. Could that be the Civic Caucus's sweet spot? We are not about the result, but about the process, about deepening the public-policy process. He mentioned the example of calling for the return of the State Planning Agency.

Another interviewer asked how the Citizens League got the leverage it had. What is different now? Community engagement was part of this. Also, the Citizens League had key policymakers' attention. How realistic is such a model today?

The Civic Caucus does not have to do what the Citizens League used to do. An interviewer made that statement and said so much has changed that he doesn't think we can replicate what the Citizens League did. There are people around who do have ideas. An important function is to find these people and give attention to those who do have proposals.

As an example, the interviewer said that Bob Wedl of Education|Evolving and Tom Melcher of the Minnesota Department of Education have been examining how the Minneapolis schools are

changing the flow of state compensatory aid money as it relates to the students those funds were attracted to serve. The Civic Caucus could be one of the only organizations bringing this to light. It is good to be more topical. Jump on the opportunity when we hear about something.

It is very attractive to take on the issues no one else wants to discuss, another interviewer said. This could appeal to donors.

What are some issues no one else wants to address? The interviewers briefly named some of those issues:

1. Alternative schools.
2. The difficulty people have getting to work in 30 minutes or less. This is a great obstacle to employers and to people who can't make more money by taking other jobs.
3. Cost control and productivity of faculty members in higher education.
4. True criminal justice reform. We send too many people to jail and pay too little attention to how to prepare people to re-enter society. Instead, we put up barriers to voting, employment and housing. This is an issue of collateral consequences.
5. Lawmaking prompted by and named for victims of horrendous events.
6. Intelligent conversation about choices and issues in health care. It is such a huge portion of the budget. Medical error is a big cause of death. Put focus on quality and cost. Possible speakers would be Minnesota Commissioner of Health Jan Malcolm and Bryan Dowd at the U of M's School of Public Health.
7. Two immigration topics: (1) The black immigrant experience in Minnesota. There are many Somali and Liberian immigrants, for example, but there is so little focus on their experience. Temporary Protected Status is expiring. (2) The teacher shortage coming through the pipeline, especially for teachers of color, and how to invest resources into that pipeline.
8. What are we facing from a state budget standpoint? No one has a clue.
9. K-12 compensatory funding: where it goes and who benefits.

If the Civic Caucus wants people to give their time and their money, it must be clear as to what it is going to do. An interviewer made that statement and said one function is to carry on the discussion of problems and objectives that has so largely disappeared these days. Public affairs is a combination of government and non-government. He believes things have deteriorated because the civic sector has deteriorated, which allows politics to show its worst features. He noted that the League of Women Voters, the Citizens League and the Minnesota Meeting are either gone or are not as effective as they once were.

Politics is often about avoiding choices and governing is about making choices. An interviewer made that statement and said an interesting aspect of the Civic Caucus's gubernatorial interviews is what things the candidates agreed on and also what they were unwilling to talk about.

Regarding the need to strengthen and restore the civic sector, an interviewer noted that many people now don't have a clue about how organizations function, such as human services, higher education, K-12 education, transportation, workforce development and housing. The culture is self-centered and self-oriented. Many people—students and others—have no idea, for example, where cities get their money. There is a real market for asking good questions.

There is an educational function to perform. An interviewer made that statement and said that in his discussions with Lori Sturdevant, editorial writer and columnist for the *Star Tribune*, she has noted that the paper will have one story when a controversy appears and one about the conclusion. There is no coverage about the process in-between. Is this a function for the Civic Caucus?

It's tempting to turn our attention to Washington, D.C., but we must remind ourselves to stay Minnesota-focused. An interviewer closed the discussion with that remark.