

Heroes Many; Acts of Leadership too Few

Leadership Involves Mobilizing People to do Difficult Work

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BY TIM STEFFENSMEIER



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The public square process begins with listening, one-on-one, to a cross section of the community. It is the most interesting part of the process because two strangers are conversing about what it means to feel engaged in their community. It is the kind of conversation we rarely experience.

When I sit down with individuals to talk about what makes their community vibrant and healthy, the conversation often comes around to describing a beloved community leader. These stories are about unselfish individuals who risk crossing community lines to make things better for the entire town or city or county, or even region. As I am listening to these heart-warming, hero stories, I have two contradictory reactions: 1) despite all the “bad news” in the world, we are going to be okay, yet 2) the person I am speaking with does not believe they can accomplish something so impactful.

Talking about amazing people accomplishing great things evokes admiration and offers proof that positive change is possible. It is the inspirational calendar on our wall that reminds us we ought to be doing more and doing it better. Human beings, writes Kenneth Burke, are “rotten with perfection” such that we create idealized historical figures to explain how healthy communities have been built. These stories of grand leaders put leadership on a shelf that most of us think we cannot reach. People who make big things happen are—we imagine—extraordinary individuals (or they have much more money and positional power).

Working with communities through the public square process has revealed another way to understand how communities become

healthier.

First, a “container”—a tested, proven process—is created for a community to come together and talk about shared problems and shared dreams. Our experience convening community conversations suggests that people like having positive conversation about the preferred future of their community.

Then, converting those conversations into a healthier community requires a second component—many people engaging in acts of leadership. By “leadership” we mean actions that encourage and motivate people to work on behalf of a community goal. Our friends and partners at the Kansas Leadership Center would describe these acts of leadership as “mobilizing people to do difficult work.”

In pursuit of healthier communities, each of us can engage in acts of leadership anytime and anywhere. You might invite someone to the next meeting whose presence would turn heads or raise an unstated opinion that typically gets told only in the parking lot after the meeting. Simple as it may sound, acts of leadership are those words and actions that help people come together to make progress.

There are stories aplenty to inspire us. See any Disney movie. What we lack is the understanding of how to mobilize people to see themselves as capable of performing acts of leadership. It is these acts—repeated over and over and over—that build healthier communities. **KCL**

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