

# Listen, Convene and Follow Through

Reflecting on 10 Years of Public Square Success

BY TERRY WOODBURY



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**Ten years ago** this month, Kansas communities began “rebuilding the public square, one community at a time.” We changed our name to Public Square in 2009, but the mission stayed the same.

Our primary product is grassroots, bottom-up mobilizing of the entire community that takes a minimum of two years, and can continue indefinitely if the community chooses to sustain the process and host a peer review by four other communities every two years.

Ten years of work in 34 counties enabled us to size up our process in a few simple words: we listen, we convene, we follow through.

Four years ago, the need for another product emerged as we heard from organizations wanting to engage their customers, members or constituents in new ways. They weren’t trying to change their entire community’s culture, but they did hope to reshape or redirect the course their organization was on. Their requests were legion: strategic planning, improving board performance, bond election feasibility, leadership succession, conflict management, team building and consolidation.

So today, in addition to long-term community work, Public Square facilitates short-term projects that alter and strengthen organizations. And, we are finding that our community development process—listening, convening, following through—translates directly to effective organizational development.

Three Public Square projects are currently underway. Each highlights a different element of our process.

► **We listen.** An electric utility departed from the traditional format of a strategic plan that aligns an organization’s mission with goals set by, then filtered down from the board of directors. Instead, their first step in crafting a long-term

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plan is utilizing Public Square’s neutrality and listening skills to garner fresh ideas from employees, stakeholders, community representatives and board members. Dedicated listening to a range of voices is the foundation for this utility’s next-generation vision.

► **We convene.** A downtown business group found itself at an impasse. Instead of stopping, they appealed for support from city government to engage Public Square in convening stakeholders from the larger community. Our colleague will facilitate the business owners in creating an expansive list of citizens for one-on-one interviews, then convening a community conversation to generate innovative ideas and foster community investment in tomorrow’s downtown.

► **We follow through.** A county and its two cities, anticipating future financial stress that will demand greater efficiency, began exploring ways to cooperate. They’re now researching a variety of shared services. Inspiration to go forward came from Kansas’ only example of unified rural government—Greeley County—a Public Square community which started discussing city/county cooperation in 2004, enacted it in 2008, and today has reversed course: growing its population, building new houses, and gaining national attention for succeeding against all odds.

At Public Square, we have found these three steps to be a rhythm—a natural life cycle—for our own organization. We are just now planning our annual colleague retreat. Each year takes us in new directions that beg, once again, that we listen to each other, convene our collective energy, and follow through so that our words become action that moves us in yet another new direction. **KCL**

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