Excerpts from

Catalytic Leadership

Strategies for an **Interconnected World**

Jeffrey S. Luke

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The Right Balance of Stakeholders and Knowledgeholders

Many efforts to address public problems fail because the right people were not included. For example, stakeholders who are excluded can interfere with the implementation of agreed-upon strategies. Later on, they can introduce damaging or conflicting information and visibly question the legitimacy of the group or its decisions. They can also prevent approval by key organizations, agencies, or legislative bodies needed to implement or sustain action (Wood and Gray, 1991). To avoid this, the initial impulse is to involve everyone who wants to participate from the beginning. The inclusion of all stakeholders, however, is seldom practical. A balance must be reached between "getting everyone in on the act and still getting some action." (We are indebted to Harlan Cleveland, who first used this phrase in the 1970s in defining one of the most difficult challenges facing public leaders.) Once the larger community of interests—all potential stakeholders and knowledgeholders—is identified, several iterations can occur to cull the large list down to a more practical size. Consultative forums of various formats are then used as mechanisms to stimulate constructive involvement from those not invited to join the core working group but who still need to be heard.

Individuals Who "Make Things Happen"

A first step is to identify people who can facilitate or ensure implementation of decisions made by the working group. These individuals include public, private, and nonprofit executives who can commit resources—funding, information, or staff—to the implementation of the agreed-upon actions. They are most often individuals who can make on-the-spot decisions to commit to action without having to seek someone's permission first. (This is particularly important in public-private partnerships. See Waddock, 1989.) Facilitators also include individuals who may be active in a broad range of organizations and who can commit portions of their diverse personal network to the effort (Selsky, 1991). Further, when enabling legislation is likely or necessary, successful efforts also include participants who can lobby or mobilize others to lobby and legislators who can champion and defend the initiative in legislative committees and other political arenas (Bryson and Crosby, 1992).

Although *power* is often considered a dirty word in leadership, both organizational and personal power are exercised in addressing any urgent issue. The more systemic the actions that might be needed to get at the root of the matter, the more strength and energy is required. With interconnected public problems, no hierarchically based authority can make command-like decisions. Instead, agencies are "arrayed like beads on a bracelet," with some beads larger and brighter than others and none possessing identical power and influence within the problem area (Laumann and Knoke, 1988).

Assessing stakeholder power is central to the early stages of convening. Reflecting on her efforts to stimulate statewide educational reform, a former Minnesota commissioner of education noted, "You had to find out where the power was and those are the ones you have to court first" (Roberts, 1985, p. 1039). Power is not solely a function of hard resource holdings, such as money, size of staffs, public authority, or information sources. It also emerges from one's connectivity to others—one's central role in relevant networks. Power is generally the ability to influence or block change within an issue domain. Roberts and King (1989b) note that stakeholder power in an interconnected arena can be assessed in four dimensions:

- Access to key decision makers
- Credibility, a history of committed action in the issue area, and good contacts and interpersonal networks
- New, fresh ideas, including background expertise on the issue plus a willingness to consider and champion new alternatives
- Resource control and an ability to dedicate money, time, and people to address the issue

A first pass at identifying who should be invited to the table commonly includes those who have the capacity or power (that is, connections, credibility, openness, and control of resources) to further the implementation of any options by the working group. This includes those who can make things happen and those who can block things from happening. Those with the power to block or thwart implementation must be considered at the beginning stages because, as one public leader warned, "Negative energy can oftentimes be much more powerful than positive energy."

Individuals Who Think Outside the Box

A common error made by public leaders is convening only well-regarded professionals and opinion leaders with recognized interests and power in the issue area. However, effective analysis of interconnected problems also requires the participation of individuals who can see the issue in entirely different contexts. Those with a broader, systemic, and long-term perspective often can initiate what is called "frame-breaking." Indeed, Thomas Kuhn's classic analysis of paradigm shifts (1970) found that major scientific breakthroughs were stimulated by scientists who were not the field's established thinkers, but who were usually either very young or very new to the field.

Such innovators are often new to the issue or to the community and have little commitment to established practice. They are more likely to see connections and options others may have missed or disregarded. In analyzing a collective effort to change Minnesota's educational system, researchers found that involvement of the usual stakeholders for educational reform—teachers and educators—generated enthusiasm for reform through incremental change. In contrast, business leaders and others outside the system promoted more radical innovations and restructuring (Roberts and Bradley, 1991). There is a key role for individuals, typically outsiders, in stimulating innovative, frame-breaking, and system-changing responses to public issues (Grady and Chi, 1994; Gersick, 1989).

Varied Sizes of Successful Working Groups

Most often, a small working group (called a planning group, core group, or initiating committee) consists of a critical mass who emerged from the stakeholder assessment. Unfortunately, there is no magical size. Successful core working groups can vary from six to sixty. Different process designs can accommodate larger or smaller numbers of individuals. Although some public initiatives are open to all interested parties, there are usually multiple levels of participation, and not all critical stakeholders need to participate fully or in the same fashion. Generally, the core working group must be large enough to include those considered critical to implementation, but small enough to think creatively about potential strategies.

Three general guides are important when deciding on the size of the working group (although in practice they are infinitely more complex to balance). First, a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives should reflect the complexity of the issue. Effective working groups include members who do not all think alike and who will not discourage new or different ideas. The more complex and more tightly interconnected the problem is with other issues, the more diverse the perspectives must be. Such diversity generates considerable conflict in defining the issue and in deciding appropriate responses, and requires additional time in dialogue and deliberation. However, when effectively facilitated, conflict leads to increased involvement among participants, a richer discussion, and a wider array of options considered (see Chapter Eight).

Second, working groups should be large enough to include those considered critical to implementation, but small enough to develop agreement. Those who will be responsible for implementation must be included in the process. This includes those who have sufficient power and resources to make things happen as well as those who can block things from happening. It may be better to include too many rather than too few to prevent influential outsiders from seriously challenging the agreements reached. However, as mentioned earlier, not all critical stakeholders need to participate fully or in the same fashion.

Third, design other forms of participation for those not enlisted to the core working group. A dynamic and evolving inclusion process uses tiers or layers of stakeholder and knowledgeholder groups, some with full participation and some with partial participation. Size is best managed by creating a core group connected with multiple working groups, task forces, or planning committees. A core working group generates and requires more intense participation, while additional working groups and task forces can facilitate involvement by other stakeholders and knowledgeholders. Although it requires coordination and additional resources, such a multilevel approach with clear roles and responsibilities is more inclusive and less likely to become "elitist," and it integrates a wider range of interests, experts, and citizens. Inclusion is not driven by a sense of equity or mandate for citizen participation. Rather, it is motivated by the need to connect core participants with sound ideas and unique perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked, and to develop a broader ownership for reaching tangible public outcomes.

Three Rules of Successful Efforts

1. Do not start without considering all the potential stakeholders and knowledgeholders, particularly ripple-effect stakeholders and others beyond the usual group of suspects.
2. Do not invite all stakeholders and knowledgeholders to join the core working group. Those to be considered can make things happen, can block things from happening, and can contribute to making the best decision.
3. Create multiple tiers of participation, such as consultative forums, to generate input from those not participating on the core working group but who still need to be heard.

Unfortunately, there is no one "right way" to structure the multiple levels of full and partial participation in every issue area. The appropriate configuration must be custom-designed for each effort. A common multilevel approach to stakeholder participation, however, includes at least three levels of participation: a small group that acts as a group catalyst or initiating committee; a core working group of diverse stakeholders; and multiple working groups that engage a wider circle of stakeholders and knowledgeholders who are affected by or interested in the issue.

The initial catalyst for convening a working group is typically one person or a few individuals who feel compelled to stimulate action. This smaller group most often includes a few passionate individuals who act as an initiating committee to then mobilize a larger core group. The core working group can range in size from nine to twenty-five members; it represents the diverse set of perspectives necessary to arrive at a high-quality decision; and it includes individuals with implementation power once agreements are reached. The core working group gathers relevant information from a variety of sources, generates and analyzes multiple options, and develops recommendations or reaches agreement on specific directions for action. In addition, they craft appropriate task groups or consultative forums to invite quality input and expand participation.

Task groups ensure that critical perspectives and information are not overlooked, and expand the technical resources for addressing the issue. Task groups can be established around substantive areas, geographical areas, or interest areas. The core working group can use one set of task groups to gather information and identify subissues. It can then create new task groups to generate strategies and action plans for addressing the issue, or it can retain the same working groups throughout the entire process.

Eliciting the Participation of Key Individuals

Public leaders not only must be able to identify a core group of potential participants, but also must have sufficient influence and connections to elicit their participation. Recruiting is essentially an interpersonal process, done one by one. People get recruited into alliances and collective efforts through friends, acquaintances, or individuals who are perceived as credible and trustworthy. Catalysts almost always begin with an existing network—a set of relationships developed and nurtured over years. Trust has been established, and there is a history of interaction and exchanging information. A prior understanding of strengths and resources can jump-start the catalytic process.

Because each new issue requires somewhat different players for success, an existing network is merely the starting point of contact. Public leaders then move out of their comfort zones to engage others who can contribute. Even with existing networks, identifying and motivating participants to join a collective effort can take considerable energy and time, sometimes years (Jones and Siegel, 1993; Olshfski, 1990). Convening becomes even more difficult when no preexisting network can be used as a foundation. People may be suspicious of the convener's agenda. If trust is low or if the convener has no previous track record, convening a working group takes even more time. Catalysts use their knowledge of the problem area, the knowledge of stakeholders' interests and interrelationships, and even personal charm to convince key stakeholders that participation in the effort is worthwhile.

Willingness to respond to recruitment efforts and join in a collective effort often depends on whether or not the stakeholder or knowledgeholder feels he or she has something to gain. Common reasons for unwillingness or inability to join include the potential loss of power or funding, ideological or cultural differences that create uncompromising conflict in core values, and legal barriers for joint action. Closer analysis reveals that willingness to participate is more complex. Individuals and organizations will join in collective efforts when they feel

- An interest or stake in an issue and that the issue is urgent (Logsdon, 1991)
- A sense of interdependence—that they cannot solve this issue alone but must join in a collective effort to address it (Logsdon, 1991)
- That the convener is credible, and the other stakeholders invited to the table belong there (legitimacy of membership) (Gray and Wood, 1991)
- That they have skills or insights to offer (Hinton and others, 1997)
- That the effort is likely to produce desirable results and is worthy of their expertise and energy (Bryson and Crosby, 1992)

Participation can also be induced through forced compliance. Mandel (1984) found that dominant agencies in interorganizational networks can use their formal power and authority to force or induce participation. This could be a legislative mandate to collaborate or a requirement by a funding source. In this type of recruitment, the formal authority uses implicit or explicit references to the control of critical resources to "convince" stakeholders and knowledgeholders to participate. It may not be overtly coercive, but stakeholders and knowledgeholders are aware the formal authority has access to coercive measures, if necessary, to force participation or sufficient mechanisms to reward participation.

Short of forced compliance, the two most critical factors influencing the willingness of an individual to participate in collective efforts are the perceived stakes or interests one has in addressing the issue, and the perceived interdependence with other agencies and groups in effectively addressing the issue. A revealing analysis of several successful public-private collaborative efforts found that an organization or group must realize its interests are achieved by resolving or ameliorating the problem. The organization or group must also believe it has to participate with other organizations and groups for the issue to be effectively resolved or ameliorated. The organization or group must see that its interests cannot be achieved solely through independent action (Wood and Gray, 1991; Logsdon, 1991). In other words, key stakeholders must recognize they have a significant stake in addressing the issue and must believe that participation with other legitimate and resourceful stakeholders is required for any successful action to occur.

Having strong stakes or interests alone does not provide sufficient motivation for an organization to join. It may believe that it can solve the problem independently and that a collaborative, joint effort is not required. For example, a corporation coping with difficulties in recruiting qualified entry-level staff may develop a remedial education program in reading and mathematics, as Motorola did with a $30 million training program (National Alliance of Business, 1989). Individuals or agencies with high stakes but low perceived interdependence will not join a collective or collaborative effort. Motivating them to commit time and resources to join a collective effort requires a heightened sense that the problem can't be solved alone and that it requires a joint, interdependent effort to be addressed successfully.

Similarly, perceived interdependence alone does not provide the necessary motivation. Although the organization may understand that it is tied into a network or web, the issue may not be urgent or salient enough to commit time and resources jointly. Organizations are highly selective in their attention to issues and they attempt to conserve or husband their resources (Laumann and Knoke, 1988). If an issue is not a priority—if the stakes are seen as too small or too ambiguous to warrant participation—then the organization will pay attention to other issues that seem more urgent or critical to its central mission or interests.

The catalytic spark provided by the public leader in convening a working group is often the quality and credibility of his or her relationships. Without adequate credibility, stakeholder and knowledgeholder participation and commitment is unlikely to materialize. Research in convening working groups (Gray and Hay, 1986; Gray, 1989, Pasquero, 1991; Kingdon, 1984) shows that credibility is something that has to be earned in several ways:

- Through perceived expertise combined with political savvy
- Through perceived competence in group facilitation and negotiation generally
- Through an ability to be even-handed and a willingness to consider diverse points of view (but not necessarily be unbiased)
- Through a formal or informal position of authority and influence recognized by potential participants
- Through a reputation, history, or track record of successful collaborative efforts that were clearly not a vehicle for personal gain

For individuals to participate, they also need to feel that the effort is "do-able" and has a potential for success. People will not commit time and energy if the effort seems hopeless or out of their realm of influence. Further, people are more easily engaged when they feel they have something to offer beyond financial resources, such as personal talent, expertise, and skills. An analysis of civic entrepreneurs in several regions and states found that they not only had a sense of the interdependence between the long-term success of their company and the community's vitality (that is, the interconnectedness of the economy and the community), but that they also wanted to contribute their unique skills to "making a difference" (Henton and others, 1997).

Convening the First Meetings

There is no one prescribed set of activities or rigid steps to convene a core working group, although several key elements often lead to successful beginnings. Particularly critical are a safe or neutral space for meetings, especially when the issues are hot, and a credible process for proceeding based on a shared sense of purpose with clear roles and norms. In particularly conflictual areas, it may take several meetings before individuals overcome skepticism or mistrust and feel comfortable committing to a collective effort. They want to believe that the process is focused, not driven by hidden agendas, and is relatively open. Thus, catalysts pay close attention to first meetings and invest considerable time and energy in the initial process of convening.

Safe Space for Informal Exploration

Successful efforts across the country have discovered the importance of investing in beginnings. A common thread in these successful first meetings is that they are convened in a safe space—a neutral location—and that it is understood there is no commitment in first attending. The North Dakota Consensus Council explicitly designed its facilities to provide a safe space that encourages informal exploration and enables groups "to meet comfortably to explore ideas in a neutral, friendly, yet businesslike, environment" (Jones and Siegel, 1993). A major problem with all working groups of diverse stakeholders is getting them to trust each other. Successful initiatives recognize this dilemma and provide opportunities in a neutral way for informal exploring of interests, perspectives, and backgrounds while avoiding paralyzing "lock-ins" at the beginning of the process (Chrislip and Larson, 1994).

First Meetings of the Applegate Partnership

The Applegate River watershed encompasses nearly 500,000 acres of forested land in southern Oregon. It became the site for the establishment of a nationally recognized model for developing community-based responses to the timber conflict gnawing at the economy of the Northwest. The Applegate Partnership began in 1992 over a cup of coffee between an environmentalist and a member of the logging industry. Together they decided to engage a larger group of community citizens in addressing a potentially explosive confrontation between these two opposing stakeholder groups. Nearly fifty guests representing a range of people and affiliations were invited to an evening barbecue. During that first meeting, individuals were asked specifically not to talk about their job, position, or affiliation. Instead, they were asked to share something personal about their background, their pastimes in the communities, and their experiences in the forest. The loggers talked about their love for the woods and for fishing and hunting. Environmentalists spoke of their concern for maintaining the traditions and culture of their towns in this rural area. The first meetings between these very divided stakeholders avoided speeches and debates and focused on what they valued about their forest. They explored each other's hopes and fears for the Applegate watershed and the communities nested in it. Sharing their experiences and concerns during the barbecue helped to begin breaking down long-held stereotypes of each other. Many participants realized that they shared common goals for the forest.

At the end of the first meeting, a smaller group agreed to meet again to discuss common concerns. They planned to explore potential ways to preserve the ecology of the watershed's forest while allowing sufficient timber harvest to maintain economic viability of the communities in the region. The group of fifty was distilled to a group of eighteen, which included individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and interests. A month later, an even smaller group began meeting every other week and became the Board of the Applegate Partnership (Buffum, 1993).

Legitimate Process for Proceeding

Participant commitment hinges on the belief that the process is legitimate, is not dominated by a particular stakeholder or group, and will lead to desirable results. Particularly with public-private efforts, participants desire a disciplined process that is fair, minimally political, and outcome-driven (Henton and others, 1997.) The three most common concerns during initial meetings revolve around purpose, procedures, and timelines. As participants struggle with these issues in first meetings, a more structured process usually evolves for the working group to explore and analyze potential strategies. (For more detail, see Chapter Five.)

Clear Purpose

During the first meetings, there will naturally be differing perceptions of the issue and different assumptions and interests at work. There is typically concern about the group's relation to other groups, agencies, and initiatives around this particular public problem. If the group's purpose remains vague during first meetings, or its activities appear to duplicate the purpose of any member organization, individuals may be unwilling to participate and may even attempt to subvert or sabotage the efforts of the core working group. Successful working groups must have a unique purpose and a sphere of activities that differentiate it from other groups, agencies, and institutions. The sphere of activities can overlap but should not be identical to that of related agencies. This unique quality starts to create an important psychological boundary required for successful joint action by multiple organizations. It establishes a defined niche for the group that can more easily generate the support (or acquiescence) of established authorities or powers (Hood, Logsdon, and Thompson, 1993; Chrislip and Larson, 1994).

Ground Rules and Norms

Typically, groups will want to dive into their work with little thought about ground rules. Expectations about acceptable behavior are imported by the individual members, and only when something dramatic occurs does the group examine and collectively establish core norms to guide member behavior (Gersick, 1989). With effective working groups, procedural ground rules and behavioral norms are established during first meetings, setting clear guidelines about how the group will handle issues, conflicts, and decision making. In particularly difficult areas, it is also essential to discuss and agree how the rules will be revised and how guidelines will be enforced.

Procedural ground rules are the written and understood operating procedures that help create a fair, safe, and legitimate process (Carpenter and Kennedy, 1988). They often cover such procedures as

- Decision-making process (Will voting be by consensus or by majority?)
- Representation (Do individuals represent their respective agencies or are they free agents?)
- Proxies (Can members send substitutes if a meeting cannot be attended?)
- Relationship of the core working group to other external agencies
- Logistics such as minutes and record keeping

In collective efforts that have strong inherent value conflicts, or which have a large web of affected and interested stakeholders, additional time is spent in the first meetings considering additional procedural guidelines, such as What is the appropriate use of an outside facilitator or mediator? and Who is responsible for paying for the services? How will new members to the core working group be selected and invited? What is the structure and process of participation for additional working groups so as to involve the larger circle of stakeholders and knowledgeholders? How will confidentiality of the meetings be maintained? What is the relationship to the media?

One of the more difficult ground rules to address is how new members are to be selected and invited to join. It is very common that once the working group agrees on a common purpose or outcome, participants realize that certain stakeholders or knowledgeholders may have been overlooked and need to be involved. The core working group will need to agree on who is invited to join the core working group, and how others can be involved who are not asked to join but whose input might be relevant and helpful.

Equally important in establishing a safe and legitimate process is the identification of behavioral norms shared by group members. Norms are unwritten or implied rules guiding individual behavior in groups (like those governing behavior in elevators) and exert a powerful influence on the group process. Unless norms are explicitly articulated in the first meetings, the ones that naturally emerge early in the group formation tend to set the tone and culture of the group throughout its existence. Norms common to successful efforts revolve around four areas:

1. How to respond effectively to (or sometimes stimulate) differing perspectives, values, and other sources of conflict
2. How to ensure equal airtime in group discussions (and how to prevent one or more from monopolizing airtime)
3. How to stimulate continued mutual learning among group members
4. How to build in social time, such as lunch breaks, dinners together, and facilities tours, to nurture and sustain personal relationships during the process

Clear Roles

In addition to having explicit guidelines and norms, an effective work group establishes relatively clear functional roles. Role clarity is important for several reasons. Cross-boundary work groups, interagency task forces, and other multiparty groups lack the formal authority that would designate leadership in an hierarchical organization. This leadership ambiguity can be problematic in interorganizational collaboration because group members are typically leaders in their agencies. Without sufficient discussions during first meetings, people will naturally operate on different assumptions about their roles and those of others.

Role clarity requires an understanding about who or what each group member represents. Do individuals represent themselves or represent their group, association, agency, or institution and its particular point of view? Even when individuals do not sit as formal representatives of an organization, some feel they are carrying the weight of representation. They may tend to behave toward others in terms of their corresponding group membership or feel constrained by the viewpoints and policy orientations of their associations (Hood, Logsdon, and Thompson, 1993; Roberts and Bradley, 1991).

A credible process also requires a clear understanding of the role of staff assistance. Staff support may strike some as mundane or obvious, but the presence of sufficient staffing assistance and organizational support dramatically fosters a working group's ability to explore strategies for action (Hackman, 1990). In all interorganizational and intersectoral working groups, and particularly in lay citizen task forces, participants must have easy access to research reports and experts, data, forecasts, trend analyses, and research to invent, generate, and select appropriate strategies for addressing the public problem.

Appropriate Sequence of Activities

Joint problem solving by diverse and interdependent stakeholders obviously takes more time than decisions on simpler issues. Unfortunately, participants face time pressures, external deadlines, and other demanding commitments. During initial meetings, views naturally differ over the possible sequencing of activities, tasks, and related time frames, and there is usually a tendency to jump to solutions. Groups feel driven to rush, meet multiple deadlines, search for solutions, and seek agreement quickly to get visible results. They adjust their rate of work based on time constraints (Gersick, 1989).

Legislative, regulatory, or other types of deadlines compel groups to compress time, limit discussion, and generate solutions without spending sufficient effort to understand and define the issue.

During first meetings, catalysts thus seek agreements on the sequencing of various tasks (but not necessarily on the exact scheduling). A custom-tailored sequence of activities fits the parameters facing a group's unique circumstances, timelines, and authority. It is guided by externally imposed dates, such as legislative timelines, funding cycles, and other expected events. Successful groups, however, ensure they spend more time in problem identification and redefinition than on searching for solutions (Bryson, Bromiley, and Jung, 1990). What matters most is whether or not the group has first spent enough time identifying and defining the problem that needs to be addressed. Throughout first meetings, as more information is revealed, the problem is further refined and redefined. This sequence slows a working group's natural tendency to move too prematurely toward adopting one particular solution.

Public Leadership Summary

Engaging People in the Effort

- Identify the full spectrum of stakeholders and knowledgeholders.
- Enlist core working group members and design multiple levels of participation to ensure a broader reach.
- Convene the first meetings and invest in beginnings.

Once the problem has been elevated to a priority status, the second task of public leadership is to convene the diverse set of stakeholders, knowledgeholders, and decision makers needed to initiate and sustain action. Public leaders bring people together—different factions with often diverse perspectives and sensitivities—to focus their collective attention. Various mobilizing strategies are used, but committing one's time and energy is based significantly on having high stakes and an awareness of the interdependence required in addressing the issue. Key questions asked by catalysts include

- Who are the stakeholders, knowledgeholders, and other resources?
- Who can make things happen in this issue area? Who can block action?
- Who are appropriate newcomers or outsiders with unique perspectives?
- What is an appropriate critical mass to initiate action?
- Who should be invited to participate in the effort to address the issue?
- How can core participants, once identified, be motivated to join the collective effort?
- What other forms and levels of participation could generate quality ideas?
- How can first meetings be convened to create a safe space and legitimate process for problem solving?

Stimulating human effort in pursuit of common goals is an essential leadership task, and public leaders provide an important catalytic role by eliciting the participation and commitment of diverse and interdependent people to address a troubling situation. Merely convening a meeting, however, is not enough to stimulate concerted action. Successful efforts require sufficient investment of time and attention to planning the first meetings, to creating a safe space to informally explore interests, and to offering a legitimate process for diverse and independent stakeholders to engage each other in deliberative discussions. Such beginnings help build trust and a shared perspective—essential components for success. As the process unfolds, catalysts engage the working group in a more intense and reiterative process of problem defining and problem solving. In practice, they facilitate, negotiate, and mediate a pinball-like process of defining the issue, identifying shared outcomes, and developing multiple strategies to achieve the outcomes.