

Convening the New Commons So Place Matters

Chapter on Civic Power in the 21st Century V4: 7/26/06

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This paper was first prepared by Robert Leaver, in 1997, as a report to the Rhode Island Foundation as a result of its investment in *Getting Smart* – a statewide action learning initiative to build more capacity in nonprofits including social entrepreneurship. It has been edited slightly in 2006 for grammar and small changes. The concepts, practices and proposals remain as they were conceived in 1997. There are specific references to Providence and Rhode Island that can be generalized to other places. It currently serves as A pilot project in the making...Calling Providence and the Region to Action...

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Wanted: A New Civic Culture

Our local and regional cultures need more civility and civic mindedness. Historically, nonprofits have led the way. But, the current system of nonprofit, third sector is not structured to get us what we need: civic minded power among diverse citizens to foster the common good. The sector can barely kept the safety net of human services together, never mind take on the bigger agenda of shaping a civic culture.

There is not enough capacity to respond to pressing social needs. A growing mountain of social issues overwhelms most civic leaders and they feel there is not enough time and resources to effectively respond.

The lack of power comes mostly from how the nonprofit sector defines its role based on what is not done – “we are nonprofit.” The motive behind this purpose is to be against something rather than stand for something. As a result, the energy is directed into trying to create what you are not. When you declare a positive result you are more able to create change than by avoiding what you don’t want, in this case, profit. The requisite civic power won’t come from the current nonprofit sector.

But there is a way out: At the end of every century the stories and form that guided it crumble. Attempts to revive the story and form to guide the next century won’t work. The next century needs new stories; new myth and new forms built form the conditions and demands the century calls for in response.¹

Instead of continually feeding a system that can’t get beyond its current design of being against something – profit – we propose a new call to action, a new name for the nonprofit corporation and the sector in which it works: civic organization and civic sector with citizen at the heart of it all. The aim is to have an outcome that is affirming and civic in nature. Thus, the focus is on citizens, community, civility, and the common good – all essential ingredients in the next economy and the culture required to guide it.

Capacity is defined as the horsepower to get something done. Adding capacity equals more power to achieve civic aims. Civic horsepower has four parts: know-how to do something; a stable of relationships in a network that can be leveraged; sophisticated systems to mobilize; and investment capital that can be invested in innovation for a return and outcomes. In the civic sector, more capacity requires expanding the scope of who addresses civic questions, identifying additional civic leaders, like social and civic entrepreneurs, and focusing on innovation and sharing of new best practice. It also includes using more power tools like the use of innovative investments of dollars in the civic realm with expected returns, and fostering continuous change and learning.

This paper examines four areas:

1. Challenges facing the not-for-profit and civic realms
2. Civic innovations practiced in other places to adopt
3. Next generation civic competencies like social and civic entrepreneurship to stretch thinking and practice
4. Learning climates to foster change and continuous learning

¹ The idea of mythologist Michael Meade presented in a talk in 1989.

The idea of region is to think beyond a city, think beyond the metro cities to a region where the common bonds of the biosphere, economy and culture are visible.

I. Twelve Challenges Facing the Civic Realm of Our Places

A place is city, neighborhood, village, Island or region where people live, work and play.

One: Build communities and not just serve individuals

Going into the 21st century, focus less on serving, changing, or entertaining the individual and focus more on healing and shaping communities in cities, neighborhoods, and regions. New core premise: Healthy communities yield more vital citizens. Relationships are the bedrocks of our lives. As civic organizations, nonprofits will be challenged to move beyond human service, beyond art culture, and beyond health care and mental health to become community economic development corporations that hold a systems view and serve as networks of trust. In effect, go beyond specialty-based organizations and become true civic organizations serving a whole place.

The call is for jobs in the neighborhoods. Local businesses, created by neighborhood-minded entrepreneurs, must become more integral to the fabric of a neighborhood. Diverse kinds of employment must be developed ranging from home to micro to socially responsible businesses as well as sources of conventional jobs.

Two: Move from needs or deficit based to asset-based programming

Shift the focus from a client or patron to be served to a citizen whose fire is to be lit, educated, and unleashed. Shift from a focus on what is missing to what is useful or strong, and capitalize on those assets to effect social change. We need citizenship education everywhere.

We hold a narrow definition of who is a civic leader and what is a civic organization and thus don't capitalize on the full range of civic assets available. Historically, nonprofit organizations and government were the primary focus of civic work and of professional development for civic leaders. It is time to expand the definition to be any person or organization concerned about the well-being of others and about responsible citizenship. That could mean a socially responsible businessperson, a state or local government staff member, a legislator or artist who desires to preserve the natural world or build community.

Three: Focus less on activities as the reason for being and attend to outcomes

Answer the question, publicly: What is the impact for the resource invested? This challenge is for those providing the service and those providing the financial resources.

What is required is a new form of reporting results like a "balanced score card"² or integrated measures of community well being. Each of these innovations goes beyond the conventional balance sheet as the sole measure of performance. Instead of measuring only money, a balanced score card report includes customer service, workplace health, innovation, and impact on the community.

² The concept of David Kaplan in the [Balanced Scorecard](#)

Four: Move from single causes to solve to systems thinking

Think and work like a whole system and leveraging systems instead of problem solving where the single cause is isolated and a program is mounted to take care of it. The new rule: use complexity and interdependency for how issues are approached.

Yet, nonprofits own isolated problems and stay in narrow disciplines. The focus is on solving a specific problem like literacy rather than whole solutions like a family, an educated person, a ready worker, or a healthy neighborhood.

There are too many cause and effect responses to meet the need, rather than a focus on the interrelationships of the variables. For example, automation is designed as a system. If you live and breathe technology, then you understand how to think as a system. You also know how to think horizontally instead of only command and control. As a systems thinker, you forgo “going-it-alone” and work with civic colleagues as trusting partners to solve social problems.

There is an over reliance on program development as the primary tool for service delivery. The nonprofit conceptualizes and plans a program from beginning to end. The program is generalized based on the assumption that needs are fixed and people aren't different. All the pieces have to be in place. It tries to raise money to fill the voids in advance assuming it can control the whole service delivery process. As a result, program development is a time consuming, labor-intensive approach. Once a “complete” program is in place, it is hard to change, and must be fed by overhead dollars. As needs evolve and new and different people come for service, a program is hard to change.

There is still too much drive for vertical integration. Vertical integration was a useful and popular business practice in the 60's and 70's; it was abandoned by business in the early 80's. Business discovered virtual companies, supplier networks, and core competencies where the enterprise does what it does best and builds partnerships with those who do the other things better. Nonprofits are still trying to own the whole thing and are sluggish and inefficient as a result.

Five: Capitalize on the present and emerging local economy

Older industrial cities and their regions are an economy of smaller businesses and not the large headquartered companies of the past. This fact makes board recruitment and fundraising different. Most cities are an economy of 10–12 modest economic clusters and will never again be one big Kahuna engine as in the past with manufacturing. Most of the economic measures of successful places attend to, e.g., housing stats, are still drawn from the industrial age. We have to observe the new measures. Focus on the assets, rather than the deficiencies.

In shaping our next economy, live the words of Wayne Gretsky. When asked what makes him such a good hockey player, Gretsky responded: “I skate to where the puck is going to be while most players skate to where it is now.”

We are entering a new economic age where aesthetics, beauty, and soul will partner with commerce. This is an economy of creativity and design that goes beyond and integrates service economy, information economy, and knowledge economy. What role do civic organizations play in learning from and shaping this new economic order?

For example, a city like Providence and most other industrialized cities, have three buckets of jobs to manage, as all must be present. One, are the manufacturing jobs as a small but vital part of any economy—especially those that have a lot of design and technology in the products. Two are service jobs at both ends of the pay scale of entry level like stores and food places as well as professional services. Third, is the bucket of next economy jobs that are producing products and services with high intellectual, design, and aesthetic content. These jobs are more creative and innovative than past eras.

Six: Blend technology and aesthetics

There is a low level use of automation because most nonprofit executive directors were born before the era where technology was taught. Thus, technology is slow to come on-line and there is less capacity.

Improve the use of sophisticated technology, while at the same time deepening the art of reflection, slowness, and soulful inquiry. Technology speeds it up and a counter, slower force is essential to keep it all in creative tension. If not, technology will keep us speeding and thus not able to attend to the changing external factors impacting the work.

Seven: Reduce costs through consolidations

The cost of doing business must be reduced. Yet, nonprofits have become a growth industry in the region. For example, the demands of technological sophistication in every stand alone nonprofit would require an investment in the local nonprofit infrastructure of a city that no state can afford to do. Yet, nonprofit organizations require the technology. Instead, administrative services of multiple entities have to be combined and in many cases co-located.

Or more boldly do mergers of equals or the acquisition of weaker entities by stronger ones. Yet, mergers and acquisitions are more difficult in nonprofits than for profits. In nonprofits, the resistance has to do with loss of control and identity, that is present in business, but not with such force. Not-for-profits are a tad more territorial.

Eight: Getting beyond one size nonprofit fits all

Realize there are many ways to design a civic organization; there are diverse scenarios for success. For too long nonprofit organizations have followed the one right way to success – provide all general services, secure a large powerful board, and fundraise with an eye toward an endowment.

Nine: Partner for discreet know how and not as whole organizations

Learn to work with multiple partners in flexible and temporary networks for learning and change to pursue civic outcomes. The depth of the challenges and scarcity of resources demands that new forms of organization emerge to serve the common good. Collaboration is still in its infancy as a tool to solve social problems. And unfortunately the 80's were about collaboration among entire organizations with few successes. Thus, a bad taste lingers in the mouths of many.

Whether it is virtual or agile, some new ways of working must emerge. The days of the "Lone Ranger" organization are over. Essential to this new form is partnering where one learns to cooperate, where one learns to rely on one or two distinct competencies of

selected partners (and not whole entities), and where the customer feels a seamless experience despite the many partners behind the scenes who provide the service.

The next generation of partners will come in many forms. Water will have to learn to mix with oil: civic and business, and business and aesthetics; commercial enterprises will have to work with public entities and the like.

Ten: Adopt new forms of governance

Governing a nonprofit corporation has become more complex. Directors of boards are less available and more skittish about liability and the ability to serve with distinction. The governance policy issues to debate take more study and reflection because they require fresh thinking and not routine responses, and there is less time to study. By the time a director, sitting on a board, learns the ins and outs of the organization it is time to leave. There is a need to experiment with new governance models.

Eleven: Use diverse sources of financial resources

In a tighter and tighter fundraising market, what role will income earned from providing services play? What is the essential balance between philanthropic giving and civic enterprise? Who will be the first investor to make a social capital fund available for enterprise development? Social capital requires slower and patient return to the investor than conventional capital – the payback is less and over a much longer time period.

Older directors who came of age in the 60's are less enamored with the marketplace or enterprise as a solution to social problems. Instead, government and philanthropy are the preferred solutions. As a result, a source of fuel for civic work – earned income – is not fully used. Earned income is one source of independence for this and the next generation of civic-minded entrepreneurs that appear to value independence more than previous ones.

Twelve: Learn to handle continuous everything

The new order of change is “permanent white water.” It is no longer just understanding change, but discerning how the nature of change is changing. Essential to this understanding is to remember to hold onto and declare what doesn't change – the timeless anchors – as you pursue that which is changing.³ So the future will be continuous learning, strategic thinking, quality improvement, planning, and restructuring. And the civic anchors to hold are not organizational form processes or activities, but core values like caring for people, whole neighborhoods, good work, and so on.

Most nonprofit minds hold fixed solutions rather than the ability to be agile learners. The adage for most civic professionals: learning is something you do in school. When you get out of school, you are done learning. Couple this adage with high reliance on program development and single cause problem-solving which focuses on fixed and static solutions and there is little room for continuous learning. To respond to the dynamics of change civic leaders need an agile, flexible mind to pursue innovation and situational partnerships rather than static programmed solutions.

³ James Hillman in a talk in 1991.

II. Civic Innovations that Create More Civic Power

Successfully responding to the twelve civic challenges will not be done with current tools, practices or processes. For the civic life of a place like a neighborhood, village, city, or a region, to own its power and enhance capacity, innovation has to be the fuel. New fires have to be lit. Out of the box thinkers as change agents have to be encouraged and profiled more as the norm in the civic arena for others to emulate. Innovators will set the course for a rebirth of civil society. Mantra: more power from using new tools and practices like those in this section of the paper. Some are big and some are smaller – and more, yet to be conceived, have to be developed.

Develop a tool for integrated community planning in localities

Wanted in most places is a more community driven, integrated approach to community planning. Most states do require the production of comprehensive plans from every city and town, which aren't really comprehensively designed nor have any ongoing planning associated with them. Instead, they include lots of numbers and zoning maps, but do not reflect all of the disciplines that create a sense of place in a locality. We need a pilot project to craft a more integrated approach to community planning with a city. A usable community-planning tool for use by other cities and towns would result from the pilot project.

Citizens liberated to truly holding power

The term empowerment is used freely in the civic sector. Yet, the programs, by and large, place the participation as a receiver of service and not as full partner or co-creator. There are many exceptions to this way of working, but the dominant ethos is one of doing something to the person in need. Power would accrue to the people served when there is more focus on mutual self-help and partnering for solutions between professionals and the people to be served. Additionally, revive an old 60's practice of boards consisting of more citizens instead of just fund-raisers.

John Mc Knight has a model of unleashing power that is radical.⁴ Citizens convene without any nonprofits in the room. The conversation is facilitated until the folks are clear on three things: their assets, their precise needs for help, and a sophisticated ask for help. Then only nonprofits that fit the profile are matched up with the citizens.

One effective way to introduce market forces in the civic sector is to re-define who has control of the money. Instead of grants to organizations, funders would give vouchers to people in need so they can decide which civic organizations have the most effective services. Investments can be made in citizens who have fresh ideas. In this way, citizens' deeper needs will more fully drive the delivery of service and competition will more truly shape quality and delivery of services.

⁴ This practice was presented by John Mc Knight, in a workshop in New Mexico. Mc Knight is the creator of asset-based work in communities.

Unleash social entrepreneurs and social enterprises

Deepening civic capacity and solving big social problems like a local job requires bolder solutions beyond just a program. If the civic sector is predicated on making tangible changes in the lives of people like neighborhoods of people relying on each other for mutual aid or people owning a home, then the social entrepreneur and the building of social enterprises will become a cornerstone of the requisite capacity.

Entrepreneurs are driven, often possessed, by a dream. They will do anything to make such a dream real. In markets and organizational processes, entrepreneurs are rule breakers and rule makers. In the process, they shoulder all burdens just to see some light at the end of the tunnel. There is a fire, burning deep inside, that wants to be directed toward something powerful. And they pursue outcomes without having all the resources lined up at the start.⁵

Conventional entrepreneurs are not only in it for the money; they see money as a way of keeping score. Their true motivation is to do something better than it is currently being done. They will even “creatively destroy”⁶ what is in place to bring about a new order of doing things.

In contrast to commercial entrepreneurs, civic entrepreneurs are most often called to do work on the invisible, the forgotten, the endangered, and the messes. They envision communities where there is full integration of home, heartfelt relationships, work, learning, and neighborhoods. The civic entrepreneur relies mostly on grants as the fuel.

A social entrepreneur applies his/her talents to building a local business in a neighborhood. They use the market to solve social problems. A social enterprise has, as its reason for being, the service of the common good for others in a locality. Social enterprise integrates profit and service to others. He/she holds a social purpose as the end state of enterprise development. The social purpose could be a healthy community, job creation, or preserved habitat.

Our places need more social entrepreneurs, because the pressures of social change significantly out-strip the capacity of the current delivery system. Every study from the United Way’s *Needs for the Nineties in Rhode Island* and the rest, point to one vital missing ingredient in the human service equation: some form of economic self sufficiency and local economies. People in our neighborhoods need local jobs, local homes, and a sense of rich neighborhoods where they live. There are many healthy forces already at work toward these noble ends. Yet, what is missing is a critical mass of community-based businesses – founded and driven by local social entrepreneurs.

Deploy agile networks to deliver big outcomes. Instead of using a collaborative model, consider experimenting with agility – an emerging form of how to mobilize a network of partners. With agility, the whole organization is not involved, but only the competence that is required in the network to solve the problem. An agile network is a flexible, temporary formation of players, who possess the right skills, who come together to get the results and solve the problem. When the problem is solved, the network disbands or

⁵ The idea of Randy Komisar, virtual CEO and author of the [Monk and the Riddle](#)

⁶ The economic theory of Joseph Schumpeter.

reconfigures around the next problem. Agile networks are most wanted to create places of work in the community; help families come together to heal; learn to develop job skills for the next economy; own a home; and connect with other citizens as a local community. Such big civic ends must become the reasons why resources are allocated or partners are brought together. This innovation significantly reduces duplication of efforts.

Do outcome based funding.⁷ Bring multiple funding sources together where each funds an organization. Through dialogue, get the fundors and the organization to agree on the collective outcomes that change the lives of clients and communities, the organization will deliver to all the fundors. Next, formulate the one integrated report that will satisfy all fundor requirements. Several pilots can go a long way to demonstrate the impact of this model.

Use new forms of governance. Current governance practices place too much emphasis on size of the board and static committee structure. The region needs some governance experiments like citizen or client driven boards, problem-solving boards that have the directors and the manager working together to make something happen. In John Carver's model, the board defines the ends and prescribes the limits and constraints. Management is then set free to devise the means that serve the ends and stay within the limits. Another governance innovation would have directors serve a six-year, fixed term and then leave.

Deploy Financial Resources More Creatively

Continuing to give money, either philanthropically or by providing grants is not the only answer. These mechanisms will not go away, nor should they. But money is a scarce resource and the human need continues to outpace the supply of resources to help it. Financial resources must be creatively deployed. The focus is less giving it away and instead investing it for a return based on the social problem solved.

This was the research question posed to ten Rhode Island Community leaders in 1997 that understood the finance side of the civic sector.⁸ Each person supported the working assumptions that a variety of new financing tools had to be used to build capacity in the civic sector.

In the course of these far ranging interviews, the interviewees reaffirmed the development of four new ways of applying financial resources. To the person, each interviewee said: "We need civic investments that produce returns."

Currently, fundors fund a single discipline like education rather than whole solutions. There are more than enough programs in a city. What are missing are integrated whole solutions for people or a neighborhood. The single-focus program becomes a haven for people to go through. Many of these programs are effective while many are not. Yet fundors are seduced into thinking another program or another step on the continuum is the answer. What is powerful about the program approach is what happens when you unbundled each of them: embedded in all programs are skills, tools, and practices that can be continuously re-coupled to respond to current demand. Fundors should stop funding overhead of all of these uncoordinated programs. Instead, invest in those who band

⁷ Outcome-based funding is an innovation of Hal Williams at the Rensselaerville Institute. 1991.

⁸ A component of an action-learning project, "Getting Smart" conducted by the author, and funded by the RI Foundation and United Way in 1997.

desired skills together in an agile network that is directed toward a specific outcome like a job, a home, a whole family, or a neighborhood where people rely on each other.

Financing Tool #1: Develop a Revolving Loan Fund

Not all problems require a grant. Some social problems can yield repayment, once they are solved. Other problems like cash flow are inevitable and require a source of dollars to carry nonprofits over during tight cash times. The revolving loan fund is a pool of dollars which is drawn from multiple sources, that is directed toward a loan to solve a social problem or cash flow problem.

Financing Tool #2: Create a Civic Innovation Fund

The innovation fund has to be flexible money, which is at risk. It is target for the bold ideas outside the box of current thinking. With this money the bet is on the innovator more than the organization. The bet is on a proposed innovation like using a network of partners; pursuing integrated outcomes; or using new forms of civic governance where citizens affected are governing.

Financing Tool #3: Expand the Micro-Loan Fund

A micro-loan fund is patterned after the Grammeen Bank in Bangladesh. The working premise: place small amounts of capital in the hands of poor people who have skills to create their own wealth. The investments are in micro-businesses like cleaning, gardening, and small-scale products that foster a local economy and a whole neighborhood. There is no program or middle person to invest in, just the local citizen who wants to make a living. The micro-loans are invested in a group of people who agree to support and challenge each other as they move forward with their small enterprise. The guiding principle: “if one of us fails, we all fail.”

Financing Tool #4: Establish a Social Investment Fund

The big civic ends like jobs, homes, and lively neighborhoods will require equity investment money. Banks and other conventional sources view such investments as too risky. The social investment fund is investment money with a market return, but with a more patient pay back period. The fund is managed by an independent board and is comprised of those who are willing to invest for the long haul. The most likely investors are those like hospitals, the Foundations, the United Way, and universities who hold a civic purpose and see the benefits of such an approach.

By current estimates, there are at least \$2.5 billion dollars in endowment money invested by Rhode Island charitable institutions in a variety of market rate investments. What if 5% of such endowments - \$125 million – were redirected from current portfolios to form a social investment fund for local investment in social enterprise?

The decisions of who to invest in would be based on pre-determined criteria. The bet is on people with talent that are change agents, more than institutions. Criteria like social entrepreneurship skills are one measure of who to take a chance on with this money. Each idea would require a business plan driven by a social purpose.

Instead of building up such a fund all at once, identify five to seven of the most likely social entrepreneurs or enterprises to be considered as experiments. These entrepreneurs

provide the pilot experience to test the viability of this concept and develop the core process that can be then used on a larger scale.

III. Civic Competencies for Creating Civic Power

No one change agent or social or civic entrepreneur will possess all these competencies. But these are the kinds of competencies we should be teaching and investing in as part of the grant making and technical assistance processes in use.

Competence #1: Economist/Business Practitioner

- Understands forces shaping Rhode Island and the region's next economy
- Molds a local economy of creativity that builds upon, but goes beyond an economy of knowledge and services
- Delivers outcomes defined as a marked change in circumstances and behavior
- Is a financier for the good of the community
- Builds community-based enterprises in neighborhoods

Competence #2: Developer of Communities of Trust

- Creates healthy communities with diverse cultures living together
- Embraces and acts on values of people and community matter
- Develops assets of people and communities
- Animates democracy by igniting citizens to act independent of formal organizations

Competence #3: Innovator

- Uses new organizational combinations not seen before
- Brings about new products and best practices
- Applies new forms of governance
- Uses creativity in problem-solving
- Uses technology as a power tool
- Consolidates administration of several entities in one shared resource unit
- Works with creative tensions and paradoxes

Competence #4: Change Agent

- Is a continuous learner
- Is a systems thinker
- Ensures mutual and continuous learning of staff, citizens and clients
- "Creatively destructs" to provoke bold thinking and action

Competence #5: Marketer/Advocate

- Positions organizational identity
- Champions true underlying needs of citizens
- Promotes a common agenda for the sense of place
- Teaches advocacy from the heart

Competence #6: Project Manager/Agile Collaborator

- Hones best core competencies and finds partners to do other parts
- Mobilizes diverse resources at a moment's notice—inside and outside the organization
- Uses many and diverse partners
- Trusts others
- Applies a project management protocol

Competence #7: Artist Who Is Civically Curious

- Brings in aesthetics to the process of change
- Encourages reflection and slowness so new ways of thinking and working evolve

As with the civic challenges, the competencies will not be universally embraced. For some civic leaders, the skills represent areas that are too-business like. For others the list fails to encompass the current skills demanded of an executive director like fundraising. The intent is not to present the complete list, but to state the next competencies to stretch civic leaders to move beyond current ways of leading and managing civic organizations. The seven competencies represent the next added capacity for the civic sector to respond to the civic challenges facing Rhode Island and the region.

IV. Ways to Invest in Learning for More Civic Power

The learning approaches proposed here are not classroom or credit courses. Instead the focus is learning from action/learns by doing. Learn in conversation with and from others. Learn by tackling big civic problems. In effect, learn through mutual aid among civic innovators.

Convene a regional summit on the future of civic leadership and fostering the civic realm

This conversation is among all players: business, labor, government, and nonprofits. The intention is to discover where we can take pride in the region; where we can reclaim citizenship for our collective concerns; where citizenship and civic leadership can be about “our collective concerns, and not just my section or particulars.” The conversation leads to a written compact and charter for building the capacity of a civil society in the region. The charter will state who does what: business, government, and nonprofits. Public Radio Rhode Island will play a vital role in this conversation.

Form a Civic Leaders Network

Our many kinds of places – Cities, towns, and regions – need to import innovative practice from outside. Civic leaders need to be challenged to be innovative. These innovative practices, in part, will come from well-known, veteran practitioners from many disciplines from other places.

Participants will include executive directors, board members, emerging leaders, staff, and citizens. Civic leaders can learn from each other and mutually solve capacity building problems. Civic leaders can benefit from a reflective conversation. Civic leaders require a forum for continuous learning and skill development and to engage in dialogue with their

peers from many disciplines. Civic leaders need opportunities to think big thoughts and “rev up” their ambitions.

Resources will be used to focus on building the capacity of an organization or a network of organizations to lead change and exercise power, rather than developing more social programs. Create think tanks to take on huge civic issues.

Some of the program that is offered is planned in advance by the network while other program offerings will come from “unsolicited,” but encouraged proposals from others. The program will include a “lecture” series of known practitioners of civic leadership. Create formalized ongoing learning communities among innovators as professional learners. Foster participation in self-directed or guided learning experiences: courses, personal retreats (e.g., Center for Creative Leadership), tutorials, reading group, facilitated learning communities, and think tanks in other areas.

Some learning experiences are “mini” or one-shot learning opportunities such as a workshop or conference. Some learning experiences are longer and require a learning plan, learning coach, and participation in a learning community.

Obligations of participants: An individualized learning plan (to be submitted in advance). Use a trained learning coach from the network. Participate in ongoing learning community (4-6 times per year). Prepare a reflective essay on how to use new practice (against civic competence). Become a resource for future learning opportunities for others.

Use “Guild Schools” to Accelerate Learning

New Commons envisions a series of guild schools emerging to educate groups of civic leaders to accelerate their learning and skill building. In the guild the elders and next generation mix it up.

Three schools are most essential for developing the civic realm of our places: one school for citizens, one for social entrepreneurs, and the third for emerging executive directors.

The schools are part virtual and agile; there is no building or permanent curriculum to sustain. The guild schools come into being to solve a specific problem and then disappear when the task is complete.

For example, a school would form around a group of pre-identified up and coming executive directors. These directors would be grouped in classes with each class forming a tight group. This intense, multi-year program would be part boot camp and part support group. The focus of the directors school is to identify and develop the best and brightest future directors. They will be drawn from two sources: current directors who want to leap forward with their skills and the next generation, currently in lower positions who want to make civic leadership their calling.

The school would be designed around achieving civic competencies like those seven presented earlier for civic leaders. The competencies form the basis of a certificate of mastery. A person can test out the requirements at any time, as many times as they need to achieve mastery.

The “program” of continuous learning would include an up-front, individual competency and psychological assessment, which would include both group and one-on-one work. There would be a set of assessment instruments to complete, including a customized assessment that reflects the seven new competencies of a civic leader. The result of this assessment would be a clear statement of a person’s strengths and weaknesses.

Next in the program comes the development of an individual learning plan. Each plan would build on the strengths and provide for specific learning activities to address the vulnerabilities. The plan could include projects, local classes, online learning, and tutorials. The learning activities are drawn from many offerings throughout the region; no one person or organization provides the whole program. The person’s learning plan is updated as results are achieved or new challenges emerge.

Members of the school meet every other month in a facilitated community of practice (COP). The focus is on mutual learning and problem solving where people help each other learn and deepen their skills.

As part of the learning plan process, each person is assigned a learning coach who guides his or her continuous learning process. The coach helps the learner assess and reflect. There is also a mentor for each learner. The mentor is an elder from the civic or business sector – “someone who has been where the learner is about to go. The mentor holds and opens access to inner resources the learner has yet to discover. The mentor teaches survival training. The learner chooses the mentor they want to engage.”⁹

Developing a community of practice among civic innovators

Addressing social problems requires more capacity for innovation. An innovation outperforms current practice.¹⁰ Investment in individual innovators yields probable impact and change for the organization as a whole. Transferring innovation from one organization to another accelerates capacity building of the whole civic sector.

The approach is to form communities of practice, among civic innovators, to develop, perfect and share practices. Resources will be used to focus on building the capacity of an organization or a network of organizations to lead and make change, rather than developing more social programs. Any civic leader who is innovating is eligible. The objective is to develop a civic competence. Innovators prepare a plan for innovation (a mini-business plan).

Innovators pick from a menu of promising innovations such as these:

- Formulate requirements for economic self-sufficiency in a civic organization, i.e., what would economic self-sufficiency look like?
- Effective methods of demonstrating continuous strategic thinking and not the production of five-year strategic plans
- Ready a whole organization for change

⁹ This is how the mythologist, Michael Meade defines the mentor

¹⁰ This is how Hal Williams defines civic innovation. Hal is the president of the Rensselaerville Institute in Rensselaerville, NY.

- Formulating an intellectual framework and tools for helping people really live their full potential
- Application of new governance models
- Formation of agile networks
- Use of radical, internal organizational structures
- Partnering with some usual and unusual partners – in many sectors and across disciplines
- Maximize impact of current technology for greater productivity with an organization
- Use of new shared technology applications that would enable communication among multiple organizations
- Earned income projects
- Outcome based funding
- Outcomes-based evaluations, e.g., scorecard of indicators of performance
- Planning for your succession as an executive director
- Organizing the civic sector by teaching lobbying
- Integrate professional human resources function to include new ways of hiring, (e.g., for attitude not skill) and developing competitive compensation models
- Operation of a shared resource center, among multiple partners, to deliver all backroom operations
- Form a community of practice across many organizations and sectors to explore the application of any of the seven civic competencies

Collect and distribute best civic innovation practices among those ready to change or learn. Too many innovations remain isolated in the hands of the creator. Instead, require a formal distribution of best practice with any grant or investment. Additionally, there are some priority tools to develop or buy and then distribute: new forms of governance; the practice of systems thinking; how to organize and lead a learning community; and practical business planning.

When applying the practice back home participants will find help by using a trained learning coach from the Civic Leaders Network. Participate in a regular facilitated learning community among all of the COPs. Prepare a profile of the innovation once the project has been completed. Give an organized presentation in the Civic Leadership Network to share new know-how. Become a resource for future learning opportunities for others.

Develop Civic Leadership through Sabbaticals for Executive Directors

Many executive directors are tired and need rest. Organizations need the opportunity to cultivate a broader internal base of leaders and leadership skills.

A six-month sabbatical is to be used for travel and reflection. Resources will be used to focus on building the civic capacity of an organization rather than developing more social programs. Participants will go on sabbatical with a new question drawn from how they want to deepen a civic competency. Participants will engage a change agent oriented consultant who prepares the organization for the impact of their leaving for and then returning from the sabbatical. Participants will work frequently with a learning coach to help them with integration of learning and development of new competence.

Obligations of participants: Prepare an organization plan for the impact of the executive director on leave. Prepare an essay for publication. Deliver a talk or learning experience as part of the newly formed Civic Leaders Network of Providence or the region. Formally mentor another director, chosen in advance, for one year after return from sabbatical. Become a resource for future learning opportunities for others.