

public Innovators

Forces for Social Change
and Civic Renewal

By Scott London



Prepared by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation
with the support of the Kettering Foundation

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The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation helps people in communities imagine and act for the public good. We seek nothing less than to spark fundamental change in American public life — to strengthen the conditions whereby people can tap into their own potential to make good things happen and join together to build a common future. The Harwood Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works within a long tradition of small, catalytic, and public-spirited organizations in American history that have sought to improve public life and politics.

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FOREWORD

By Richard C. Harwood

In our society, change is often lauded and routinely talked about. But who in our community can help spark and sustain the hope and change we seek and need? Who can ensure that such change emerges from the community, rather than being imposed upon it? And who holds the credibility in communities to help marshal civic resources and make change a reality? This report provides some answers.

Over the past twenty years, my colleagues and I at the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation have sought to understand and support “public innovators,” individuals who create conditions for people to tap their own potential to make a difference and join together to build a common future. This study offers insights into who these public innovators are, what makes them tick, what enables them to keep going, and why they do what they do.

There is something remarkable about public innovators — as the people you will meet here can attest. Maybe it is how inspiring they are, or the promising efforts they undertake. Or, perhaps it is their need to connect their deepest personal motivations with the public work they do, and how attempts to neatly separate and categorize such facets of their life misses the essence of who they are and what they do.

Public innovators are not easily identified: they need not share a common educational background, or title, or pedigree of any sort. But, what they do share is a set of defining personal characteristics made up of the nature of their ideals, their pragmatism, and their level-headed risk-taking. These characteristics transcend

boundaries of race and ethnicity, age and gender. No one holds the power to bestow these characteristics upon another person, or to take them away. My experience is that these characteristics can be found in people in every corner of our country, and in individuals of all sorts.

To me, public innovators represent something universal and democratic. Anyone in any station of life can be a public innovator. And they represent the possibility that anyone can step forward and make good on their urge to do good. These public innovators remind us of something we already know, but sometimes forget or ignore in our own busyness, inwardness, and specialization: when civic efforts are genuinely rooted in communities, change can happen.

At the Harwood Institute we've long been dedicated to helping public innovators step forward, grow, and create the conditions for change. Thanks to our collaboration with Scott London, we are able to deepen and expand that commitment.

We are grateful to the Kettering Foundation for the support to undertake this study.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation has always been a hallmark of American culture. From the first settlement at Jamestown through the founding of the republic and right up to the present day, we have been a nation of pioneers, inventors, experimenters, and risk-takers. We are a people who thrive on new ideas and who, by force of habit if not by temperament, are continually transforming and reinventing ourselves.

While the great industrial success of America owes much to its culture of entrepreneurship and small enterprise, the spirit of innovation is not limited to science, technology, or business. It is as vibrant an aspect of our public life as it is of the private sector. In cities and towns across the country, people are constantly finding new and inventive ways to address long-standing problems. It is the American way — ordinary people acting together to produce extraordinary change.

Sometimes the innovators are leaders in the formal sense — city managers, school superintendents, chamber of commerce directors — but just as often they are people whose only credential is a passion for change. They may be neighborhood activists, church leaders, nonprofit directors, schoolteachers, or simply concerned citizens. What sets their work apart is that they are not just committed to advancing the common good but to serving as agents of real change and lasting impact. They act as a kind of leavening agent in the community that helps to mobilize people from engagement to action on pressing issues.

We call them public innovators. Over the past two decades, the Harwood Institute has taken a special interest in these change agents. Our research has found that they play a crucial role in revitalizing America's communities. They connect

people, carry and spread new ideas, and span divisions between people and groups. They align talents and resources, identify promising strategies, and spearhead new initiatives. But some lingering questions have remained. How do they see themselves and their work? How do they think about change? What drives them to take on intractable public problems? How do they mobilize people and generate impact? And how do they respond to the persistent challenges inherent in public work?

With the support of the Kettering Foundation, the Harwood Institute launched an initiative in 2007 to examine these questions. The project was originally conceived as an inquiry into the nature of civic *initiative* — how some community leaders are able to marshal a combination of individual initiative and collective action to achieve significant impact. Early in the research, however, it became clear that traditional leadership frameworks could only go so far in describing the unique function of these individuals in the community. Terms like civic leader, community organizer, and social entrepreneur each conveyed an aspect of their work, but these categories were freighted with a host of associations that were sometimes unhelpful and often inaccurate. We also found that while the people in our study performed a range of vital leadership functions in the community, they were often hesitant to call themselves leaders in the traditional sense. While they organize and coordinate local change efforts, they shy away from the term “community organizer.” And while they combine creative out-of-the-box thinking with a passion for innovative ideas, they do not see themselves as social entrepreneurs.

The Harwood Institute’s concept of public innovator was fitting because it represents a broader and more inclusive category of change agent. An innovator is more than just a concerned citizen but less than a public servant, someone deeply engaged in the affairs of the community but without necessarily being a leader in any formal sense. It is a person for whom the private and the public are not separate worlds, but intertwined and indivisible, someone whose public identity informs his or her private life, and whose private ideals and aspirations are writ large in the public sphere.

The study was designed around a series of in-depth interviews with a carefully selected group of ten people. We looked for individuals across a wide range of roles and contexts who had a track record of public innovation. What we ended up with was not a statistically representative sample of public innovators (if there is such a thing), but a broad and diverse cross-section of changemakers from

communities across the country. The group consisted of a public library director, a civic outreach officer, a local United Way president, the head of training for an innovative national school program, a community foundation executive, a volunteer coordinator, the director of a leadership initiative, an inner-city nonprofit executive, a community organizer who works with immigrant women, and a college professor committed to service learning and community dialogue.

Over a one-year period, we traveled to each of their communities to see their work at first hand. We also brought them together for a roundtable discussion in Washington D.C. to explore a set of emerging themes in our research. But the core of the study was a series of four in-depth interviews, carried out at three-month intervals, exploring how these individuals see themselves and their role in the community, how they think about change, how they achieve significant impact, and what keeps them going in the face of discouragement and adversity.

As we learned in the course of our research, public innovators are pragmatic idealists. They thrive on change and are impelled by a strong sense of urgency, but they are not satisfied with minor or incremental changes. At bottom, their work is impelled by an animating sense of public purpose and moral responsibility. Change and renewal in the community is meaningless, they believe, unless it is rooted in some deeper and more fundamental change in the human condition. For this reason, their work focuses not just on making change in the community — important as that may be — but on the deeper work of elevating and transforming people.

The work of public innovators stems from a set of basic assumptions about the nature of change, assumptions reflected in their everyday practices and habits of mind. These include 1) the tendency to think of change in systemic rather than piecemeal terms; 2) the perception that community engagement is vital to everything they do; 3) the understanding that community problems are not resolved by applying fixes but rather by learning and adapting together; 4) the perception that change is not created by solving problems but rather by seeing possibilities; and 5) the conviction that the ends are inherent in the means, that the act of coming together to make change happen in the community goes a long way toward creating community.

We found that public innovators follow a number of practices that set their work apart and allow them to achieve real impact: 1) they advance on many fronts at

once; 2) they emphasize the importance of relationships and networks of trust; 3) they span boundaries and incorporate diversity; 4) they ensure widespread participation in the decision-making process; 5) they make good use of research and best practices; 6) they identify and engage community “agitators”; 7) they unite and focus the community; 8) they cast a wide net to engage new people; and 9) they embrace a long-term mindset.

The challenges facing public innovators take many forms. In some cases, they are practical in nature — how to get people motivated, how to sustain momentum, how to strengthen impact, and how to ensure accountability. In other cases, they are deeply personal. Hopelessness, stress, and burnout are not uncommon among those committed to social change. Of course, the greatest challenges combine aspects of both — they begin as practical problems or frustrations but lead over time to personal doubts about the meaning and overall effectiveness of the work. In the course of our study, however, we found that public innovators do not think in terms of setbacks or defeats so much as openings for people to return to the drawing board, to clarify their goals and aspirations, to experiment with new ideas and strategies and, above all, to learn and evolve together.

In the following pages, we look at the recurrent themes and common patterns in the interviews to describe public innovators in greater detail. The report is organized into four sections. In the first, we take a stab at defining public innovators in order to better understand their function in public life (and to distinguish them from civic leaders, community organizers, social entrepreneurs, and others). The second section looks at how public innovators see themselves and their role in the community and, specifically, what impels them toward public work. Section Three examines the concrete strategies by which public innovators generate impact. The fourth and final section looks at how public innovators think about and work through challenges. Also included in the report is an appendix with biographical profiles of the ten individuals who took part in the study.

WHAT IS A PUBLIC INNOVATOR?

A public innovator can be defined as an individual working to effect social change and civic renewal, someone whose work is charged with public purpose and who brings to it a pragmatic idealism coupled with a strong sense of urgency. This is how the Harwood Institute has come to define public innovators over the years, and this report deepens and amplifies that understanding.

Public innovators are stewards of public processes within their organizations and communities. They are not quite civic leaders, not quite community organizers, and not quite social entrepreneurs, but something of all three. Their work is aimed at engaging people, catalyzing conversations, articulating questions and common concerns, aligning people, organizations, and resources, and holding people accountable for their commitments.

They are inveterate risk-takers who understand that change always comes at a price. Sometimes regarded as “agitators” or thorns in the side of the powers that be, they are forward-thinkers who bring new perspectives and fresh ideas to the table, ideas that energize people, inspire hope, and open up pathways to change.

While most of the public innovators in our study did acknowledge themselves as leaders in their communities, it was not in the traditional sense. “For me, it’s not about being at the front or at the top of things,” said Leslie Ann Howard, president of the United Way of Dane County in Madison, Wisconsin. “It’s more about helping to facilitate change. If it means I have to stand up and talk to a lot of people, I’m happy to do that and I love doing it.” Others were wary of the term *leader*, saying that it carries with it a host of troublesome associations. “I prefer to do my work in the background,” said Malikah Berry, an independent consultant

with a history of civic engagement work in inner-city Atlanta. “If we do our jobs well, we will not be perceived as leaders. People in the community will say they did it themselves.” Carlton Sears, director of the Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County in Ohio, struck a similar chord. “I don’t really care about the stature piece,” he said. His function has more to do with stewardship than leadership, he thought. By stewardship, he meant an ethical obligation to care for the resources that have been entrusted to him and to make the most of them. Daniella Levine, president of the Human Services Coalition in Miami, also described a sense of holding something in trust for other people. “Being a public innovator,” she said, “means you are a steward for cultivating and nurturing public trust.”

The innovators we studied told us in no uncertain terms that old-fashioned, go-it-alone leadership simply does not work in addressing the most pressing issues facing their communities. “It can’t be a one-person thing,” said Dick Puffer, executive director of the Byerly Foundation in Hartsville, South Carolina. Whatever credibility he has as a leader, he said, comes from a high level of personal engagement and commitment, not from formal authority. While being the director of a community foundation and a professor at the local college gives him the mantle of authority in some situations, “most of the leadership that I have comes from being involved, not from having a specific position.”

It was a theme that came up again and again in the interviews. Public innovation, they told us, is not a specific set of activities. It means playing whatever role is necessary to bring about real change and lasting impact in the community. It means being a catalyst, a spark plug, and channeling people’s energies toward some common goal. Maya Novak, national training director for the Oakland-based Sports4Kids, invoked the metaphor of a prism. Public innovators, she said, focus people’s energy much like a prism refracts light. “They take a diversity of colors and hues,” she said, “and concentrate them into a single ray of light.”

For all the talk about bridging divides, spanning boundaries, and embracing diversity, the people in our study insisted that effective change hinges on identifying and drawing out commonalities among people. It’s not so much that they have to reach consensus or share the same values, as conventional wisdom would have it. Rather, they have to be working toward a common objective. “It’s about collective action, not common values,” as Dick Puffer put it. All too often, he said, communities get mired in conversations about *why* a change is needed instead

of focusing on *how* they create it. “Most of the time, I don’t care what people are thinking or what their attitudes are, as long as they are part of the change we need to have.” Malikah Berry agreed, saying, “I don’t care about your values; I only care that you and I have the same goal.”

The public innovators we talked to were clear on one thing: the theories of change handed down from traditional leadership theory are inadequate, if not outright misleading. Consciously or not, most people tend to think about change in instrumental ways. They believe that influence occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one person to another. They engage in complex planning processes in the hope of producing predictable results. And they continually search for better methods of objectively perceiving and measuring the world. This is reflected in the predominant approach to change-making: organizing committees and task forces, creating new programs, establishing stricter regulations or more oversight, and, perhaps especially, hiring or electing “better” leaders. But, as the innovators we studied told us again and again, the realities of public life are dynamic and complex and do not lend themselves to mechanistic solutions. They require rigorously multidimensional approaches that are iterative, flexible, and open-ended.

The work of public innovators is reflected in a set of everyday practices and habits of mind. In the course of our interviews, we identified five in particular that were common to all ten participants of our study: 1) they see public problems in broad, systemic terms; 2) they put a premium on participation and inclusion; 3) they see themselves in the role of clarifying issues and negotiating complexity 4) they seek to identify common values and aspirations rather than solve problems; and 5) they actively solicit ideas and perspectives from outside their own ranks.

- *Thinking systemically.* A recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of connections, of coherent patterns, and how actions taken on one end may produce a cascade of results on the other. This habit of mind is reflected in the innovators’ almost universal respect for diversity — not as measured simply in terms of race or ethnicity, but as an essential barometer for whether all of the community’s constituent parts are brought to bear on an issue or in addressing a public challenge. They often referred to themselves as boundary spanners, bridge-builders, civic connectors, and inveterate networkers. This habit of holistic thinking was also reflected in their understanding of how order in a system cannot be imposed from

without, that it must emerge organically from within the system in order to remain viable and robust.

- ***Putting a premium on participation.*** One of the defining characteristics of the innovators in our study was an insistence on the principles of participation and inclusion. Too often, they told us, leaders attempt to act “on behalf of” people in the community without ensuring that those people have a real voice in the process. Initiatives invariably falter when people feel excluded, or when they feel their needs have not been adequately heard. Innovators seem to sense intuitively that effective change efforts require widespread participation and genuine engagement on the part of not only the public but also other agencies and leaders in the community. Without a critical mass of people engaged in identifying the issues and establishing priorities, you cannot produce lasting impact. You can create small changes that may benefit a few, but it will not have a sustained impact on the system as a whole. Getting everyone involved is time-consuming and sometimes the pace of change is painfully slow, but it is the only way to ensure real and lasting impact.
- ***Negotiating complexity.*** Public issues are messy. They involve values and beliefs that must be brought into the open, acknowledged, and discussed before they can be acted upon. For this reason, innovators are skeptical of instrumental approaches and technical fixes. They are weary of people adopting “proven strategies” or announcing “five-point plans” to address public ills. These methods may be useful in dealing with technical problems, but in situations where beliefs and values come into play, technical fixes only exacerbate the underlying issue. Many community problems reflect a disparity between values and circumstances, the innovators told us. They see it as their job to help close the gap. This may involve marshalling energy, resources, and ingenuity to change the circumstances. But just as often it requires that people change their values. The work therefore involves taking action to clarify and articulate values, not providing ready-made answers or laying out a vision for the community.
- ***Seeking opportunities for change.*** The public innovators we spoke with told us that their work is not defined by problems that need to be solved so much as possibilities that can, with focus and a bit of hard work, be realized by the community. The shift of focus is an important one, they said, because how

you do your work changes when you shift from a problem-solving to a possibility-identifying mindset. Suddenly you are no longer occupied with defining, analyzing, and studying problems so much as focusing and uniting people around common values and aspirations. “What we’re really talking about,” said Daniella Levine, “is creating a *readiness*, not the actual solving of problems. It’s about creating a space where people can find their way into new possibilities.”

- ***Inviting outside perspectives.*** It is an axiom of community building that grantmakers, consultants, volunteers, and other outsiders can, despite their best intentions, obstruct and even thwart efforts to create local change. All too often, outsiders fail to listen to the real needs of communities, develop lasting relationships, and take their cues from the wishes of those on the ground. It came as something of a surprise to us, therefore, that the public innovators we spoke with all expressed an openness to influences from outside their own ranks. In some cases, they said they could not do their work without that support. External individuals and organizations not only provide new ideas and perspectives, but their enthusiasm and support can be vital to sustaining an initiative and spreading its influence.

THE CALLING OF PUBLIC WORK

In the course of our research, we found that public innovators share a similar way of thinking about and addressing themselves to public problems. Their work is best described not in terms of skills or competencies so much as distinctive *habits of mind*. It was reflected in the interviews in a variety of ways. For example, they often spoke of their efforts in the community in terms of ongoing commitments rather than isolated projects. They referred to roadblocks and setbacks as opportunities for honing and fine-tuning their efforts. And they consistently took the long view when asked about their achievements, saying that social change is meaningless if it doesn't lead to substantive improvements in people's lives over the long haul.

With this in mind, we focused much of our attention in the initial phase of the study on understanding their basic motivation and rationale for doing public work — why they feel called to it, what prompts them to take action, where they look for inspiration and support, and why they stick to it in the face of inevitable challenges. We wanted to understand how they think the way they do and in turn how that is reflected in their work. The goal was not to probe the psychology of public innovators so much as understand their basic intentions and how they may differ from those of people doing other kinds of civic work.

Public innovators are impelled by a sense of inner obligation and moral purpose.

To some extent, those called to public work are motivated by an obvious desire to change a situation and make the community a better place. But our research found that public innovators, no matter how badly they want to make change happen, are motivated by a stronger and more fundamental impulse. At bottom, they are guided by a sense of moral responsibility for the community. Their purpose, which

might start out as separate but related to those of others in the community, become joined. The literature sometimes uses disparaging language to describe this kind of relationship — “elevating,” “uplifting,” “preaching,” “evangelizing” — but it is not moralistic so much as transformational. The goal is to help people imagine new ways to do act in the name of change and renewal.

“I’m driven by an inner sense of obligation,” said Jerome Threlkeld, Coordinator of Special Projects and Community Partnerships at the United Way of Genesee County in Flint, Michigan. The struggle, he explained, is to turn people’s anger and hopelessness into a strength — to help them draw on their deepest inner resources to work for a better tomorrow. He sees himself not as a thermometer, but as a thermostat. “A thermometer reads the temperature in a room,” he said. “But a thermostat can change it. It can cool it down or heat it up. I see myself as a thermostat, someone whose purpose it is to change the atmosphere wherever I happen to be.” Jerome feels that public innovators, at their best, elevate and inspire. Their purpose is to create opportunities for their people to succeed, not only for themselves, but for their organizations and communities.

Some of the individuals in our study brushed aside the notion of that there is a moral underpinning for their work, emphasizing that the effort is worth making for its own sake. But in all the interviews, it was clear that the work was motivated by something greater than self-interest and something far more than a vague desire to “do good.” Daniella Levine summed it up with a quote from Jim Wallis’s book *The Soul of Politics*: “We can find common ground only by moving to higher ground.” It takes a certain kind of moral leadership to find that higher ground, she said. That leadership must be grounded in a recognition of our innate capacity for understanding and in our highest potentialities as individuals.

Public innovators think of the community in terms of its people.

The innovators we studied made no distinction between the community and the people of which it is made up. If there is something wrong with the community, they told us, the remedy always has to involve people. It’s not enough to make structural changes or implement new systems in the community. At its core, the work they do is aimed at building relationships and developing people. It is about helping individuals grow, cultivating new capacities, and learning together.

For Peter Sawyer, Director of the Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement at Hudson Valley Community College in upstate New York, the goal is to “enable growth.” The work is about recognizing possibilities in people and situations and bringing out the best in them. “I want to see the potential of each human being to help them understand who they are,” he said. “Each of us is given gifts. As a sociologist, I think we need to design a society in which we have the best opportunity to express those gifts.”

Helping people grow and realize their fullest capacities is important not just for the individuals themselves but for the community as a whole. A community can only change and evolve to the extent that its people do. Maya Novak underscored this point by distinguishing between “shallow” and “deep” impact. For a community initiative to be successful in the long run, she said, it has to have a deep and lasting effect on people. An effort that touches a handful of people in a profound way is more effective than one that has a superficial impact on many people.

But ultimately, the goal of change must be to affect everyone in the community, not just a select group of people. Too many programs help some people but fail to create the positive change that is needed in the community as a whole. The best efforts, therefore, begin by making change happen at the individual and neighborhood level and are then taken to scale.

Innovators bring to their work an animating sense of hope and possibility.

A word that came up again and again in the course of our research was *hope*. Innovators recognize that the key to making change happen is to actualize a sense of possibility. In order to create something new, people have to first imagine it. They told us that too many community conversations revolve around issues to be confronted and problems to be solved. And too often people talk about change in terms of negotiating compromises. “The way change happens,” said Dick Puffer, “is to find a way to do things that allows everybody to win”:

I hate to use those kinds of clichés, but somebody has to be around who can try to look at that big picture to see if there isn’t a possibility for the win-win-win. If you can find the win-win-win, it really is amazing how quickly people just flock to make it happen. It really does happen that

way — you watch people get excited about something they know can be achieved, and it does happen.

Being an effective innovator requires that you help people overcome the belief that change is impossible. You have to become a champion of hope — even, and especially, in situations that seem hopeless. “You have to ignite passion and enthusiasm,” Jerome Threlkeld explained. “Someone once said, ‘you’ve got to keep the main thing the main thing.’ Inspiring hope has to be the *main thing* in everything you do. You have to always keep it at the forefront. Without that, change doesn’t happen.”

Innovators are sustained from within.

One of the most common refrains in our discussions with public innovators was that they are not in it for external rewards — for accolades, prestige, or personal power. When pressed on their personal motivations, they tended to speak of personal values, often deeply felt, that give meaning and direction to their work. For a number of them, these values are explicitly spiritual. They see their work as an outgrowth and direct expression of their faith. For others, the wellspring is tied to an inner sense of promise — one that may and may not be faith-based but nevertheless expresses itself in a commitment to act for the betterment of the community. For still others, the sustaining impulse stems from a genuine belief in people — in their capacities to actualize their potential and achieve great things. The rewards also come in the form of other intangibles that are not necessarily spiritual but nevertheless profoundly meaningful to them personally: a deep and affirming sense of purpose, engagement, connection, learning and inner growth.

When asked about the philosophical underpinnings that guide his work, Carlton Sears said that his Christian faith has been a defining influence. “I have a strong Christian religious belief,” he said. “I don’t wear it on my sleeve. I don’t advertise it. But it’s very much part of my fabric. There’s a motivation there.” Malikah Berry responded much the same way. “I’m a person of faith,” she said simply. “I pray. God is very important in my life. And I’m learning, as I get older, that there are very few steps I make without God’s presence.”

For Sterling Freeman, executive director of the Wildacres Leadership Initiative in Durham, North Carolina, the question of faith is a tough one. But he said it’s one that he’s determined to speak openly about. People working for the public good

must be willing to talk about how their spiritual values inform their work. “I know that it may make some people uncomfortable,” he admitted, but “that’s the place where we need to be. We need to be all right with being uncomfortable in order to really dig down and listen to people’s narratives, to see people for who they are, and to take the conversation forward. If we stop the conversation the moment we hear the word *faith*, then we’re short-changing ourselves.”

MOVING THE NEEDLE

As we have seen, public innovators see themselves not as community leaders so much as community catalysts. Their work is informed by a way of thinking about change that is dynamic and multidimensional, one organized around possibilities to be lived into rather than problems to be solved. But how is this expressed in their everyday practices? What are some of the concrete ways they create impact and achieve significant change in the community?

One of the common refrains in the interviews was the difficulty of effecting change using conventional political strategies. The men and women in our study often described their work as *politics by other means*. For example, Sterling Freeman told us that for him building and strengthening community means breaking down the barriers that separate people and developing authentic relationships. At bottom, he said, that is a political act — one that will shape how decisions are made and policies are enacted. Yet, as he saw it, he could work more effectively toward that end as a public innovator than as a public servant. “In the work I do now, I have an opportunity to infuse civility into politics. I wonder if I could be as effective at that if I were in politics.”

A number of participants commented that making things happen in the community is best achieved by working around traditional leadership structures. For example, Carlton Sears spoke at some length about how the experience of working for government for ten years may be partly responsible for his creative approach to community development, if only because he now feels “liberated” from the constraints of the political system. Similarly, Dick Puffer recalled how being chair of the school board in Hartsville, South Carolina, was an exercise in the frustrations of politics where the first order of business is about protecting your

turf and winning approval. Jerome Threlkeld was perhaps most succinct on this point, saying that working outside of government and avoiding talk of political solutions has been one of the keys to mobilizing a sense of real hope and possibility in Flint where people harbor a deep skepticism of government.

In the course of our research we identified a number of distinctive practices that set public innovators apart, concrete approaches they use to create change and lasting impact: 1) they advance on many fronts at once, 2) they emphasize the importance of relationships and networks of trust, 3) they engage others — especially those with differing views — in dialogue, 4) they ensure widespread participation in local decision-making processes, 5) they look deeply at research and best practices, 6) they identify and engage community “agitators,” 7) they unite and focus the community, 8) they cast a wide net to engage new people, and 9) they adopt a long-term mindset.

- *Advancing on many fronts at once.* The public innovators made it clear to us that there is no one right way to work for change. Community leaders often push for one approach over another, such as direct-action organizing, consensus-building, issue advocacy, or public deliberation. Often advocates of one approach will quibble with those who favor another. What works best, however, is usually a combination of strategies, — preferably all at once. “I find that people tend to get stuck in one methodology or strategy,” said Daniella Levine. “Most people are not eclectic in their approach. Organizers want to go neighborhood by neighborhood, because it’s about power and confidence-building. Advocacy-folks may want to go more shallow and broader because they are focused on short-term change opportunities. But, you know, we don’t have time to do this work in some sort of thorough, methodical way. We have to short-circuit the system.” The best way to do that, she insisted, is to mobilize people on several fronts at the same time — to advocate and serve, to dialogue and deliberate, to organize and build relationships, to push for policy change, and to engage in direct action.
- *Putting relationships first.* Another recurrent theme in the interviews was the importance — perhaps even the centrality — of strong relationships. Relationship-building is at the heart of the work, they said, because community development depends on trust and reciprocity among people, groups, and organizations. It also requires a willingness on the part of

different players in the community — stakeholders who may see themselves at cross-purposes — to band together and make common cause.

“I’m interested in hanging out with folks,” said Sterling Freeman. “I’m talking about making sure that we have strong, authentic, transparent engagement. I think that’s very important. That’s what makes lasting and authentic relationships, even if we don’t agree on everything. And I think those kinds of relationships are what lead to systemic change.”

For Rosemary Flores, who works with immigrant women in and around Las Vegas, the work is best done one-on-one. Nurturing those connections is vital, she pointed out, because people are reluctant to engage unless they feel they have a voice and can be heard.

I feel as if I’m developing people. Many of them don’t know that they have talents within them or that they have anything to offer the community. As I listen to them and just ask them questions, they begin to realize that they do have something to contribute and that they can be a part of something. When I work with people in the immigrant community, many of them believe they don’t have anything to contribute. Something holds them back. But as I begin to talk to them, something sparks inside them and they say, “yes, I would like to do that,” and “I would like to be involved.”

- ***Engaging diverse perspectives.*** There was broad agreement in the group that the first step in tackling difficult problems in the community is by engaging in dialogue — not just any dialogue, but the sort aimed at including everybody, especially those that who have traditionally been excluded from the process, those who perceive themselves as having different goals and objectives, and those who may not think of themselves as having a direct stake in the issue. In some cases, it means one-on-one conversations of the kind Rosemary Flores described. In others, the conversations that need to happen are among and between different community groups. More than half the people we interviewed described specific projects they have done, or are currently doing, aimed at bringing people and organizations together — often across boundaries of class, race, background and other differences — to engage with one another in dialogue. In Peter Sawyer’s words, “I’m trying

to get different organizations and networks to work together, both to define the problems and needs in the community, and to think about what the resources are and how to move things forward.”

- ***Ensuring widespread participation in decision-making.*** While it is important to get diverse people and organizations engaged in a public process together, it is just as important that they have a real hand in making the important decisions. It’s not enough, in other words, to hold public hearings or solicit citizen “input” and “feedback.” People have to have to play a role in framing the options, deciding between them, and in turn taking concrete action. In those cases where a community conversation is not aimed at developing a plan for action, people still need to feel that they have some sense of ownership of the process. That energy is crucial to creating a sense of possibility in the community and sparking people to get involved. The best initiatives, the innovators told us, are the ones that creatively harness that enthusiasm and channel it into concrete projects and initiatives.
- ***Conducting research and studying best practices.*** Some of the individuals in our study made a persuasive case for the importance of good information and sound research. It is the key not only to developing effective change strategies, they said, but also to helping people see possibilities and imagine solutions. In Madison, for example, Leslie Ann Howard has worked closely with journalists and academics at the University of Wisconsin as part of her community development work. They have done much of the initial work of identifying the scope of specific problems facing the city and mapping out a range of alternatives for addressing them. According to Howard, research and best practices are “the magic ingredient to getting people aligned.” They are crucial in helping people overcome their initial disbelief that something can change, she said. “Once people understand the scope and the dimension of the problems, and that there is a conceptual ‘way out,’ they get on board. Then they bring their time, their energy, their money, and whatever, to do it.”
- ***Identifying and engaging community “agitators.”*** Methodical and comprehensive engagement strategies tend to be costly and labor intensive. They take time. The public innovators we spoke with said the urgency is too great to take that route. “We don’t have time to make sure everybody is there,” as Daniella Levine put it. For this reason, they are selective about

who they seek out as partners in making change happen. “We need early adopters, and we need them to come from every cross section, because that’s part of the what will drive the change,” Levine said. A couple of them referred to it as “cherry-picking” among those in the community who have the greatest potential to become evangelists for change. “We have to be discerning about how and who we involve in our efforts,” said Malikah Berry. “I’m biased toward action, so I don’t shy away from the agitators. I look for them. They are the people we want. They are the loose cannons, the live wires. They are the actors you’re looking for. They are the innate leaders who ‘have it.’”

- ***Uniting and focusing the community.*** Much of the work of making change happen in the community involves helping people and resources arrive at a common understanding of the problem at hand and how to address it. For Leslie Ann Howard, the toughest challenges involve “aligning around priorities, aligning around what to do, and aligning around resources.” She told us she has several staff members whose primary function is to network and bring people on board on community projects. Their job description is to “unite and focus the community,” in her words. “What I’ve learned through this work is that a lot of times it’s not about resources. A lot of times it’s about finding the right strategy and getting everybody aligned behind the strategy. A lot of times you don’t need more money, you just need to be using the money *differently*. And I’m not saying that you don’t need money, because you do. But many times the key thing is redirecting the resources to a better strategy and getting them focused at scale.”
- ***Scouting for new talent.*** While traditional community revitalization efforts tend to focus on new initiatives, partnerships, and organizations, public innovators emphasize the importance of connecting people and nurturing leadership. In their view, a community’s greatest resource is its people. What are some of the ways they engage people, sustain their involvement, and continually widen the circle? The innovators in our study mounted a variety of responses to that question, but they typically came down to identifying other potential public innovators and inviting them to be a part of the effort. They recognized that people are not complacent so much as unsure about how best to get involved. Oftentimes they don’t see a connection between themselves and the larger needs of the community.

For this reason, public innovators tend to be civic talent scouts, always looking for creative ways to connect people with the right projects, organizations, and teams. Several of them spoke eloquently of the power of networking and extending personal invitations. A very effective question, said Rosemary Flores, is the simple: “won’t you join us?” Setting inspiring goals make it difficult for people *not* to get on board, she explained, because people do not want to be perceived as being opposed to worthwhile projects.

Peter Sawyer said he spends a lot of his time actively seeking out people and organizations that might be sympathetic to his service learning and public deliberation efforts. The goal is not only to magnify the potential impact of his work, he said, but also to reach out to and engage people who feel a similar passion but don’t know how to act on it.

Carlton Sears said that one of the most effective strategies he has found for engaging other public innovators is to organize around grant opportunities. Grants can be powerful agents of change by creating formal structures for collaboration which can then continue after the funding cycle is completed.

- *Adopting a long-term perspective.* Working for change in the community is a slow and gradual process, often painstakingly so. Being a public innovator can be like driving with the brakes on — there is a heightened sense of urgency that gives impetus to the work, yet also a recognition that real change takes time and that it requires an almost infinite patience.

In the interviews, participants referred again and again to the fact that impact is often imperceptible — especially in the beginning — and that patience is a critical habit of mind for people like themselves. This is a difficult thing for people driven by a strong need for tangible outcomes and measurable impact.

In Sterling Freeman’s words: “We’re fooling ourselves when we’re out in the community and we think change is going to happen tomorrow. Some of the changes are ten, fifteen, or twenty years down the road. But if there are changes in individuals happening everyday and those individuals multiply, then bigger changes happen. ... The more I do this work, the more I understand that it takes time. We don’t often like to hear that. But it takes time, it really does.”

MEETING RESISTANCE

A significant part of our study revolved around the challenges confronting public innovators and how they rise to meet them. These challenges take many forms. In some cases they are practical — how to get people motivated, how to sustain momentum, how to strengthen the impact of the work, and so on. But the challenges can also be deeply personal. Hopelessness, stress, and burnout are not uncommon among those committed to social change. Of course, the greatest challenges combine aspects of both — they begin as practical setbacks or frustrations but lead to personal doubts about the meaning and overall effectiveness of the work. These challenges are of more than just a passing interest since they raise questions about how public innovators negotiate the tension between the private and the public, between their personal needs and those of the community. To some extent, we have already touched on the dilemmas of being a public innovator — its inherent stresses and insistent demands. But what did they see as the greatest challenges and how did they wrestle with them?

The value of public work is difficult to assess.

Impact is notoriously difficult to measure, especially in the civic realm. Several of the public innovators we interviewed said they spend a lot of time and energy struggling with the issue. As a practical matter, how they measure the effects of their work is an issue of considerable importance to funders, agencies, partners, and other stakeholders, not to mention members of the community who want to see some tangible results. Not surprisingly, there was a good deal of handwringing about how difficult it is to assess the impact of community revitalization efforts using the blunt instruments of social science. In fact, some of the people we spoke with have been involved in developing better assessment criteria — including such measures as political efficacy, activist identity orientation, and community

connections — to help grantmakers better understand the effects of their work. Others stressed the importance of choosing public issues over which they can have a clear and obvious influence, ones that lend themselves to measurable improvements over time. Daniella Levine went so far as to say that good public innovators know intuitively that “you have to pick issues that are going to allow you to have some quick successes.” She cited a colleague of hers who claims that people have just 24 hours to stay motivated on a topic before they begin to get discouraged about the lack of progress and movement. That may be exaggerated, but there is no question that concrete results are vital to the community’s sense that change is in fact occurring.

But the question of impact also extends to the deeper motivations for engaging in public work. For some of the people we interviewed, the matter is one of personal integrity. Are they doing the right thing, and if so are they doing it well enough to make a real difference? Maya Novak explained that when she started working for her organization Sports4Kids, she spent her days working on schoolyards. She could see the direct results of her work on the faces of the kids. But over time, as she moved up the ranks in the organization, she became increasingly removed from hand-on activities at the schools. Today, she has to take it on faith that she is doing the right thing and that her work is having the intended effect. But some days, she said, her faith is a little shaky.

When asked to describe themselves, the innovators in our study often used words like “determined,” “passionate,” “tenacious,” and even “driven.” Yet they were also insistent that the value of their work could not be measured in terms of their achievements — impressive as they may be in some cases. What defines their work is a quality of engagement, caring, and commitment that expresses itself as much in their daily interactions with people as in the larger changes they are able to create in the community. The work, they told us, is done for its own sake. The means and the ends as inextricably bound.

They expressed this idea in a variety of ways. Some spoke of the “reciprocity” of work undertaken for the common good: while it is carried out for the benefit of others, in a paradoxical way it ends up conferring rewards on the giver. When asked about the ends and means of public work, Malikah Berry cited Martin Luther King Jr.’s sixth principle of nonviolence which says that while the outcomes of our efforts may not be visible, work carried out with dignity and grace ultimately produce more of the same. “I don’t ever know what contagion will happen because

of the work I do,” she said. “But I believe in doing it well and trying to do it as mindfully as possible, with the right conversations and right communication. I try to let my intentions be known so that if something goes awry, someone will come to me and say, ‘Hey, Malikah, is this what you intended to have happen?’ And then we can clear that up because there is a relationship there.”

The difficulty of sustaining hope

It goes without saying that people who work on behalf of the common good are bound to have occasional spells of resignation, bewilderment, and burnout. One can perhaps make too much of such feelings — after all, they are prevalent in a wide range of occupations. But one can also make too little of them, dismissing them as a minor dip in mood or passing phase when, in fact, they can harden into the kind of chronic pessimism that becomes a hindrance to effective work. How do the innovators deal with these ups and the downs, how do they sustain a sense of hope and possibility when dealing with complicated, often intractable, public issues?

For some, it was largely a matter of achievement. Success tends to be self-reinforcing, they said — it produces more of the same. It is not hard to sustain hope when you know from experience that change is not only possible but inevitable with a bit of focus and hard work. For others, that sense of hope was not rooted in experience or achievement so much as a vision of how things can be different. Malikah Berry described it as “a bit of an intuition about what is worth pushing for.” This vision is a very important quality, she said, because “most people get intimidated by the breadth and depth of the issues in front of them. They look for someone to cut a path.” For those with vision — and she believes they exist in communities all across the country — providing some guidance and encouragement can make the difference between success and failure. The trouble comes when she doesn’t “see” it, she said. “When I don’t have a vision of where we’re going, I actually have a hard time getting there. I have a hard time being motivated.”

Sterling Freeman said that hope is a vital ingredient of everything he does. “I deal in the business of hope,” he explained. “I really feel that if you appeal to people in a way that affirms who they are, in a way that shows that they are important and valued, that everybody can offer something that will move us forward as communities.” For him, that hope is rooted in his Christian faith. He does not lose

it or succumb to discouragement, he said. But he does find himself getting impatient sometimes. The challenge then is to remember that change takes time.

I know a lot of people want the home run. But I have to look at the base hits. I've got to look at the small victories in this work and understand that they represent progress. It's a way to keep myself from being discouraged, to keep myself from saying, "Hey man, nothing is happening. What are you doing?" I do think something is going on. But it may not be apparent to those on the outside who are looking. Seeing, everyday, those small connections that are being made, the small breakthroughs, the new partnerships that are happening, that's the groundwork for some stuff that I know is going to happen later on. I think that to ignore those small things might be to overlook the most important work.

Jerome Threlkeld illustrated his relationship to hope with a powerful story of personal tragedy. Between the time of our first and second interview with him, he lost a close personal friend in a gang-related shooting. "I really had a hard time with that, somebody that close to me being senselessly shot," he observed. "Here I am out telling people about neighborhood watches and crime watches, about how 'this can be a better community' and 'let's just all work together.'"

My hope for the city was challenged. I wasn't even sure I wanted to be here. I mean, it just shakes your whole foundation when something like that happens. I had to pray hard about it. I was really confused. I said, "I can't be authentic in this state that I'm in, because I don't know if I even believe in the possibility of change." But I got to really thinking about it. I realized there are so many things that can come out of even his death. This was a story that we can talk about and say, "This has got to stop." And now, after having gone through it, I really do believe that. And now I've got to work for that, for his sake and for his legacy. I've got to do this now. I've got to do this work. This has got to be a better community, and we can do it. We've got to do it. I've got to do it because of him. He was a martyr, so to speak, for this change that must happen.

For Threlkeld, just as for the other public innovators, hope is not just something that you wake up with in the morning. It is a personal choice, a commitment you

have to make and remake everyday — to yourself, to others, and to the community as a whole.

The blessing and the burden of public work.

One of the overarching themes of the interviews is that being a public innovator is not an activity or occupation so much as a calling. Obviously people can be taught the “skills” of social change and civic renewal. But the people we studied said they found their way to the work over time, that it involved a personal journey of some kind. While there have been countless rewards along the way, they said, the work has often been challenging, it has carried with it personal risk, and often come at a cost.

For example, they noted that family and friends often fail to understand their passion and dedication to the work. “I’ve found that the people who are closest to me oftentimes don’t understand what I’m doing in the world,” said Sterling Freeman. Daniella Levine and Rosemary Flores both echoed the point, saying that even their own family members have expressed confusion about why they do what they do. For Malikah Berry, the *vision* that things can be different and that change is possible has not always been easy to bear. “The problem with vision is that nobody can see what you’re talking about,” she explained. “So you look silly. You look crazy. And I’ve made a little peace with the fact that I look like a nut to most of the people I talk with about what I do. I know it makes no sense to them.”

But ultimately the public innovators we studied saw their work as a blessing, not a burden. They spoke less of sustaining the commitment than of being sustained by it. Being a public innovator, they said, means being a steward of change and an advocate of possibility. It means being a champion for our capacity — as individuals, organizations, and communities — to change, renew and evolve.

Appendix:

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Malikah Berry is the director of community and civic engagement at Hands On Atlanta, a nonprofit organization that coordinates volunteer opportunities at more than 400 service organizations and schools in the greater Atlanta area. Hands On Atlanta's 30,000-plus volunteers work every day of the year meeting critical needs in schools, parks, senior homes, food banks, pet shelters, and low-income neighborhoods. For Malikah, the work of building and strengthening community comes down to cultivating relationships — getting to know people, listening to their needs, building trust, and sustaining the commitment over the long haul. Before joining Hands On Atlanta in 1996, Malikah worked at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. King's vision has been a rich influence in her life, she says, especially his principles of nonviolence and his concept of the "beloved community." Malikah believes, as King did, that the ends are always inherent in the means. In practical terms, that means that while the outcomes of our efforts may not be visible, work carried out with dignity and grace ultimately produce more of the same.

Rosemary Flores is a Las Vegas-based leadership trainer, consultant, community activist and long-time volunteer. Much of her work is aimed at providing training and development to the immigrant community in and around Las Vegas. The city's population has increased dramatically over the last decade and with it the percentage of immigrants and migrant Hispanics, most of them from Mexico but also from other parts of the world. In many cases, the immigrants arrive without any knowledge of English, with few job skills, and without much in the way of economic opportunity. Reaching out and engaging them is vital not only to the individuals and their families, Rosemary insists, but also to the social and economic welfare of the community as a whole. As people step forward to participate, to acquire training, or to volunteer in neighborhoods, they start to see themselves as members of a community with valuable skills to contribute. Once they become engaged, she says, they often give more to the

community than they ask in return. After years of working under the banner of Educational Achievement Services, a private leadership development and diversity training company, Rosemary recently launched a stand-alone entity, the Family Leadership Initiative. As a 501(c)3 organization, its mission is to provide information and training, foster small-group dialogue, build relationships, develop civic leaders, and create a platform for effective change in the greater Las Vegas area.

Sterling Freeman is executive director of the Wildacres Leadership Initiative in Durham, North Carolina. For over a decade, the initiative has sought to build community among diverse groups of emerging North Carolina leaders and, in turn, to leverage those relationships for the good of the state. Building and strengthening human relationships is at the core of Sterling's work. He believes that addressing today's pressing social and political challenges requires a level of understanding that can only emerge from authentic engagement with other people and other points of view. It's tempting to think that all you need to be an effective leader is a good blueprint for change, Sterling says. But a five-point plan can only get you so far. Fundamental change grows out of a culture of trust, care, dialogue, and understanding. It happens one individual at a time. When sweeping changes occur, they are often the result of large numbers of people changing their minds just a little bit.

Leslie Ann Howard is president of United Way of Dane County and a dynamic and much-respected community leader in Madison, Wisconsin. One of the most innovative and entrepreneurial United Way executives in the country, she sees her organization not as a grantmaker so much as an agent of change and possibility. In the mid-1990s, she spearheaded the Schools of Hope program, an initiative aimed at narrowing the racial achievement gap in Madison's public schools. The program put volunteer tutors in the schools through partnerships with the school district, teachers, the University of Wisconsin, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), 100 Black Men and others. The key, they found, was taking a direct and proactive approach. Not just donating money to the needy, but identifying those people ahead of time and keeping them from needing. The program succeeded in doing away with the racial achievement gap in Madison — the only city in the United States where this has been achieved — and is now being replicated elsewhere in the country. For Leslie and her colleagues, the success of the program transformed their understanding of how change happens and how to make it happen.

Daniella Levine is the founder and director of the Human Services Coalition, an organization bent on monitoring health and human service needs, providing reliable

information to the public, and catalyzing community planning and development in Miami, Florida. Since its founding in 1995, the organization has become a vital clearinghouse for community collaboration and mobilization around anti-poverty strategies and programs. It has also established Daniella as one of Miami's most energetic and inspiring community leaders. She sees herself as a bridge-builder, someone in the business of "connecting people to people, group to group, and neighborhood to neighborhood" while, at the same time, spanning the barriers of race, class, nationality, and geography. In her view, the way to create change is not so much by focusing on problems and challenges as by discovering and harnessing a shared vision. "Common purpose," she says, "is about possibilities and solutions, not problems."

Maya Novak is the national training director for Sports4Kids, an innovative nonprofit organization that promotes safe and healthy play on school playgrounds. Schoolyards are supposed to be places where kids are active and have fun, she says. But in many places — especially low-income communities — kids come to school not really knowing how to engage in healthy play. They don't know how to make up and follow the rules to games or how to resolve conflicts. Too often, games end in fights, and more complicated games break down before they can really get started. Most kids end up on the sidelines, disengaged. And many schools feel they have no choice but to cut recess. The result is that kids are at greater risk for obesity, diabetes and attention difficulties. And they're showing signs of increasingly anti-social behavior. Maya believes that how children play on the schoolyard goes a long way toward determining what kind of citizens they will become as adults and how our communities will look a generation from now.

Richard Puffer is a professor of communication at Coker College and the executive director of the Byerly Foundation in Hartsville, South Carolina. Founded in 1995 with the proceeds of the sale of a private hospital, the Byerly Foundation gives out over \$1 million in grants each year to improve the quality of life in Hartsville. The organization's mission is to be an instrument of positive change in the community. But creating real change can't be done one small grant at a time, according to Dick. Piecemeal strategies create piecemeal changes. "Unless things are being made better for everybody in the community," he says, "they are pretty much staying the same for everybody in the community." While he admires community leaders who commit themselves to a single issue and do whatever it takes to advance the cause, he sees himself more as a collaborative leader — a convener whose role is to foster dialogue and identify common goals and aspirations in the community.

Peter Sawyer is chair of the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, New York. Hudson Valley is one of 30 community colleges that make up the State University of New York system. As a political scientist, Peter sees a close connection between higher education and the public good. Colleges and universities have a vital role to play in educating the citizens of tomorrow, he says. At many institutions, however, that goal has been overshadowed by other presumably more pressing demands, from preparing students for the job market to simply making financial ends meet. Peter would like to see a renewed commitment to civic and social responsibility at Hudson Valley and has pushed for programs that emphasize diversity and access, volunteerism and service-learning, learning communities and leadership training. While some of these efforts have borne fruit, it's been an uphill battle. The institutions of higher learning seem to be somewhat impervious to change, he says. But even if innovation and renewal take a while, he is confident that his efforts bring good changes in time.

Carlton Sears is director of the Youngstown and Mahoning County Library in northeastern Ohio. He sees the public library as a vital institution in the community. It serves not only as a neutral space for people to interact and discuss issues of common concern, but also as an incubator of public participation and civic engagement. Over the past decade, he has transformed the Mahoning County library system into a catalyst for change and revitalization. He has also become a key player in the civic affairs of Youngstown through his involvement with the Rotary Club, United Way, Salvation Army, Red Cross and other organizations. He describes himself as a connector and a boundary-spanner, someone whose function in the community is to weave a more robust and cohesive social fabric.

Jerome Threlkeld is a community liaison at the United Way of Genesee County in Flint, Michigan, a city hard hit by the collapse of the American auto industry. A tireless champion of change and possibility, Jerome works with church groups, neighborhood associations, after-school programs, youth groups and others to build trust, foster public awareness, stimulate dialogue, and strengthen people's capacity to participate and make their voices heard. The struggle, he says, is to turn people's anger and hopelessness into a strength — to help them draw on their deepest inner resources to work for a better tomorrow. A talented gospel singer and choir-director, Jerome believes that the helping people find their voice is a powerful step toward creating change from the ground up.

About the author

Scott London is a California-based journalist and consultant. He is the former host of "Insight & Outlook," a cultural affairs program heard on many National Public Radio stations. He has contributed to more than a dozen books and published widely in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. He has also authored reports on a range of important public issues, including the state of American journalism, the social responsibilities of higher education, and the political ramifications of new communications technologies. His website is: www.scottlondon.com



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