INFORMAL NETWORKS

The Power of Organic Community Groups

Informal Networks: The Power of Organic Community Groups
A Report by Scott London

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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

Over the past twenty years, I've seen the enormous power of informal networks to get things done in communities. In places as divergent as Flint, Michigan, Las Vegas, Nevada, Hartsville, South Carolina, and scores more, the Harwood Institute has worked closely with groups and organizations to build capacity and create the conditions for long-term change. We've found that these efforts nearly always center on the need for a different kind of public space, one in which people from different perspectives and walks of life can learn from one another, generate new ideas, and build the relationships and trust they need to bring about real change.

This approach runs counter to the prevailing trend in our communities. Our first impulse is often to coordinate people and get everyone moving in lock step. My point is not that formal groups and institutions are not important — they are — only that people also need informal spaces to come to know their community, try out new ideas, explore creative alternatives, and marshal their collective resources. This kind of informal group activity is essential for communities to move forward.

Over the years, my colleagues and I have seen how informal networks take form, how they evolve, what happens within them. At each turn in our community work they have been front and center. We've helped shape new informal networks and seen the results first-hand. We've also felt the sense of possibility and hope they generate within and among people. But until now we've never made a systematic inquiry of these networks and how they operate.

This report documents the findings of an in-depth study of four informal networks. It shows that they play a range of crucial roles in a community. They serve as 1) *circles of learning*, spaces where people can get to know each other, understand issues of common concern, and expand their own civic capacities; 2) *networks of belonging*, which provide personal support and affirmation to people as they make their way through community and public life; and 3) *seedbeds of innovation*, from which creative disruptions for new ideas and possibilities emerge.

There is a lot that this report sheds light on. It underscores the important role informal networks play in creating a fundamentally different kind of space in communities: where people learn from one another, span boundaries, and cultivate innovation and creativity. It also illuminates the critical nexus point between people's public and personal lives. Informal networks provide a special kind of nourishment, the sort that allows people to discover and fulfill their own sense of purpose and, in turn, step forward and remain engaged over time.

But most importantly, the report challenges our conventional understanding of how innovation takes place in communities. Too many change efforts fail because they are overly rigid and formalized — circumscribed by rules, processes, and organizational dynamics that prevent people from discovering a sense of common purpose and creating viable solutions together. A community needs strong institutions and effective mechanisms for people to work together, but these must never take the place of the informal activities that allow people to learn from one another, develop capacity, and innovate together.

The learning that is documented in this report was carried out in partnership with sixteen individuals, four people from each of the four communities, where they are actively involved in informal networks. Over the course of a year, they generously made time for ongoing interviews, conference calls, and site visits. They gave of their time and heart. I am grateful for their involvement in this learning effort, and inspired by the authentic leadership they show in their communities. I also wish to thank my two colleagues, Scott London and Aaron Leavy, for their work on this study. Above all, I want to thank the Kettering Foundation for its partnership in this learning endeavor, especially its president, David Mathews, for his wisdom in suggesting that the effort take place.

Richard C. Harwood
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INTRODUCTION

One of the recurring themes of the Harwood Institute's work over the last two decades is the vital role played by informal networks in building strong and healthy communities. In a series of studies and published reports, we've examined informal groups from several vantage points. In a 1993 study for the Kettering Foundation, for example, we reported that these networks were critical to the way people formed relationships with public concerns and became involved in their communities. In a later research project on "public capital," we found that informal networks bound together people, groups and organizations and allowed them to forge a sense of trust and common identity. In a more recent report, we described how public innovators — leaders who catalyze conversations, articulate questions and common concerns, and serve as stewards of change in the community — often relied on informal networks rather than established institutions to mobilize action and generate impact.

In 2009, the Institute launched an ambitious study to investigate these networks at greater depth. Through a joint learning agreement with the Kettering Foundation, we conducted a year-long study of informal networks in four geographically diverse cities. We looked at: 1) a circle of community leaders in Durango, Colorado; 2) a group of nonprofit professionals in Flint, Michigan, 3) a team of child and family welfare activists in Las Vegas, Nevada; and 4) an environmental sustainability network in Louisville, Kentucky.

We examined how these groups came into being, the nature of their conversations, how they changed and evolved over time, and the outcomes, both tangible and intangible, of their activities. We also looked at how informal networks come into contact with and relate to more formal entities in the community — what prompts these interactions, what purpose they serve, and the pressures, obstacles and opportunities that are created as a result.

In the course of our research, we learned that informal networks are vital not only to the personal and professional lives of their members but also to the broader civic milieu of their communities. They build and strengthen relationships, span social divisions, and forge a sense of trust and common purpose in the

community. They do this by serving as casual yet close-knit learning environments — spaces where people can share information, cross-pollinate ideas, make unexpected connections, and cultivate new knowledge together.

For the people we interviewed, being part of an informal network was not only personally rewarding, but it infused their other activities with greater meaning and purpose. It allowed them to generate new ways of thinking together that they couldn't do in more formal settings. This in turn brought increased clarity and effectiveness to their work outside the group.

For all their benefits, informal networks usually operate under the radar, unnoticed by others in the community. They are often invisible even to the people within them. This can be a downside — informal networks have no public face and therefore no standing in the community — yet it's also one of the keys to what makes them so valuable. They exist in the gaps between formal organizations, taking advantage of opportunities, adapting quickly to changing circumstances, and responding to needs in the moment, as they arise. They are inherently creative and dynamic.

Many of the people we interviewed found their way into informal networks only after years of work in more structured settings. In fact, interest and involvement in these groups often came as a reaction to the perceived shortcomings — in some cases, outright failures — of formal efforts to bring about change. They told us that small and informal groups were a welcome change, perhaps even an antidote, to the frustrations of conventional groups. They are a disruptive influence in the sense that they challenge formal groups while at the same time holding them to a higher standard and infusing their work with creativity and innovation.

Informal networks differ from their formal counterparts in that they are not aimed at launching initiatives or taking action. While informal group activity sometimes leads to action, people value it for different reasons, seeing it primarily as a vehicle for building capacity, for solving problems, and for learning together. When groups that have been meeting informally are ready to mobilize and take action, they either adopt a formal structure or they carry their ideas back into existing organizations to get the results they want.

The groups we spoke with were often reluctant to rush into action, emphasizing the importance of *being* rather than *doing*. All too often, groups and organizations start implementing solutions before there is clear agreement about what the problem is. Informal networks foster a different kind of activity, the sort that typically *precedes* action. They are spaces for discovering common purpose,

articulating shared aspirations, and cultivating the collective will needed for actions to be meaningful and effective.

Organization of the Report

In the following pages, we discuss the findings of our research in greater detail, drawing from our interviews and conversations in the field. The report consists of four main sections:

1. *What Are Informal Networks?* Here we describe informal networks in the most general terms, discussing how they differ from more formal entities in the community and the crucial role they play in sustaining a robust social fabric.

2. *Circles of Learning.* This section looks at how informal networks serve as spaces where people can get to know each other better, assimilate new information and ideas, expand their capacities, and create knowledge together.

3. *Networks of Belonging.* This section describes informal networks as spaces of support and affirmation — as settings where people can strengthen their identities as public actors and where their aspirations for the community can be nourished and given full expression.

4. *Seedbeds of Innovation.* Here we examine how informal networks serve as forces of creative disruption by challenging the status quo and the accepted way of getting results, and by always experimenting with new ideas and possibilities for action.

Interspersed throughout the text are brief profiles of the four informal networks we investigated — who their members are, how they came together, the nature of their interactions, how they have evolved, and what they take to be their principal achievements.

A Note on Methodology

We selected our sample groups from an extensive list of networks known to us through community leaders either directly or indirectly affiliated with the Harwood Institute. We picked networks that were geographically diverse, that operated within different community contexts, and that had sustained themselves

over a reasonable period of time. Despite the differences among them, the groups were all loosely structured, organic, and decidedly informal in nature. Each reflected a passion on the part of its members to make the community a better place, a desire to get involved and help others, and a commitment to the common interest.

After identifying our four networks, we chose a point-person from each one to recommend three other participants for the study. We then conducted a series of telephone interviews with each member. Over a period of eight months, we carried out four rounds of interviews with four members from each group, for a total of 64 interviews. We also traveled to each city to meet the participants face-to-face, observe their group interactions, and learn about the community dynamics that gave impetus to their activities. Finally, we brought all the groups together for a series of lively conference calls where we raised questions, explored tentative findings, and allowed members of the various networks to listen and learn from one another.

WHAT ARE INFORMAL NETWORKS?

America's social fabric is woven from many strands, from families and neighborhoods to schools and communities of faith. Among the most crucial of these threads is the rich array of civic associations that bring people together in the pursuit of common goals and aspirations. They range from highly organized national federations like the Sierra Club and the League of Women Voters to unassuming and loosely structured neighborhood associations, such as choir groups, bridge clubs, Bible circles, and twelve-step programs.

These groups go a long way toward creating what President Obama has called the "civic infrastructure" and "bonds of trust" that hold us together as a people. America is founded on a rich tradition of group involvement. It's not only good for society as a whole, but good for us as individuals because it breaks us out of our isolation, according to the President. "We all have a tendency when times are tough to turn inward," he said. "But in some ways that can be more isolating. Being out there with people, making common cause, helping others, is a way of strengthening your own resolve and improving your own life."

Informal groups are one of the ways we connect and make common cause with others. These networks occupy a middle ground between formal civic organizations (e.g., the League of Women Voters) and casual community groups (e.g., bridge clubs). They are informal in the sense that they lack an official legal status or a formal organizational structure, but they are more than simply casual gatherings of friends and neighbors. For the purposes of our study, we defined them as loosely structured citizen groups that meet on a regular basis and are committed to the greater good of the community. This rules out a wide range of informal groups that may be civic in the strict sense of the term but not directly concerned with the needs and interests of their communities.

Almost all of the people we interviewed for the study were engaged in public work on a professional level — as government officials, foundation executives, social service providers, and the like — and many of them sat on the boards of organizations of various kinds. For this reason, they saw their

participation in an informal group not as a *replacement* for more structured community activities but rather as a *complement* to it. What gave value to these networks, they told us, is that groups of this kind meet different needs and adhere to a different logic than formal associations.

Most of the mechanisms for getting things done in public life — from organizations and departments to task forces and governing boards — are structured vertically: decisions are made at the top and people derive their influence and authority based on their positions within the hierarchy. This is especially true in professional organizations where leadership tends to be centralized, the work mission-driven, processes guided by procedures and statutes, and internal communication mostly confined to departments, workgroups, and committees.

By contrast, informal networks are structured horizontally. Leadership, to the extent that it exists at all, is broadly distributed. Job titles and professional affiliations fade into the background and people derive their influence from having their ears to the ground, by being well-connected in the community, and by being engaged in a multiplicity of projects. Membership usually spans silos and divisions in the community, processes are guided by norms of trust and reciprocity, and communication is more personal, more conversational, more exploratory than in formal settings.

In the interviews, the participants described their informal activities as vital not only to their own personal and professional lives but to the broader civic milieu of their communities. Informal networks helped them to make connections, bridge divisions, build trust, and create a sense of common identity and collective purpose. Many of them spoke of being resources for each other. As a United Way director in Flint put it, "there is a real sense of covering each other's back and serving as eyes and ears for each other, based on what we know about the other's objectives and goals."

"We establish and nourish relationships that strengthen the community," said one of the founders of the Louisville group. "The forum helps advance the community readiness for ideas to take hold, and connects people to possible resources and allies." One of the essential missions of the group, he added, was to "create networks that inspire, energize, and connect people of similar vision but of disparate work."

In addition to connecting people and strengthening relationships, informal networks provide entry points for people to get involved in the community. As one member of the Louisville group put it, they create "a space for people to grow ideas, to form relationships, and to find a foundation, or a springboard, to take

action." An essential mission of the Louisville Sustainability Forum, he said, was to create "pathways for people to engage." "If you believe that change happens in the hearts and minds and actions of individuals before institutions and governments," he said, "then we're the crucible for that first part of the change."

Several other people we interviewed expressed similar ideas. A foundation director in Durango described his leadership circle as "a positive launching pad" for more formal programs and initiatives in the community. Oftentimes, important community changes begin with a casual conversations on the street or in a brewery, he said. "These informal interactions strengthen the more formal interactions."

Another vital function they serve is to provide spaces where people can sort each other out across the barriers of social distance. In the words of a community leader from Las Vegas, "there is a fostering and an understanding of where people are coming from." This is essential, she said, because programs and initiatives too often go off the rails when people fail to understand where others are coming from, or when they haven't coalesced around a common understanding of the challenges they face.

Informal networks allow people "to communicate across community lines," as one member of the Durango group put it. Without that "informal point of connection," groups and organizations easily wind up at cross-purposes:

> It's tough, you get focused on your particular group's issues and mission and drive, and it's hard to step away from that and recognize the value in really having a good, open exchange with other groups.… The ability to see where goals and missions cross over and are mutually supportive, or in direct competition with each other, gives you a different perspective.

Flint, Michigan**:**

THE BREAKFAST GROUP

The members of Flint's "breakfast group" met a decade ago at The Place for Public Ideas, a community development workshop organized by The Harwood Institute. After the event, they decided to get together over breakfast to compare notes. One meeting led to another and before they knew it they had formed not just an enduring network but a close bond.

"We hit it off and enjoyed the conversation, so we just kept meeting, as much out of friendship as a desire to share information and keep each other informed," one of them says.

In a city decimated by the collapse of the auto industry and hard-hit by the economic crisis, community-building efforts are tough and fraught with challenges. In Flint, stepping forward can be daunting and draining. The members of the group turn to each other to deepen their awareness and understanding of the critical issues facing the city. They also look to the group for vital information, ideas, and support.

The network is made up of a United Way director, an economic development officer with the local chamber of commerce, a community organizer who works chiefly with young people, and the head of an urban housing partnership.

Because each member works in a different sphere of the community, meeting on a regular basis is "a great way to keep connected to what's going on in other people's worlds," one of them says.

"In Flint, it's all about the grapevine — who's talking to whom, who's not talking to whom, what are the rumors, is there any truth to them, and so on. When we get together we can bring all of our perspectives to those questions."

The conversation at the meetings tends to range widely, from "how are the kids?" to "who do you support in the city council race?" There is also a lot of laughter and camaraderie, which they feel is a welcome antidote to the seriousness of so much community work. "It's a safe space just to laugh," one member says. "I think that's a space that's often lacking in public life."

The meetings have spawned tangible outcomes. The housing director recalls asking one of the members of the group to help him organize neighborhood conversations as part of drafting a new master plan for the city, for example.

The members have also helped rally support for one another on a variety of projects, including a campaign on the part of one of them for elective office.

But the real value of getting together, they insist, is that the discussions don't revolve around problems to be solved or issues to be addressed. "It's a camaraderie that isn't situational," as one member puts it. "It's not in place because you have particular projects or tasks that you need to undertake together. There is a real sense of covering each other's back and serving as eyes and ears for one another. That makes it unique."

CIRCLES OF LEARNING

One of the recurring themes in the interviews was the important role informal networks play as vehicles for learning. One person called his group a "learning lab." Another referred to his as "a kind of skunk works." It stands to reason that just as many leaders in the business world have sought turn their companies into learning organizations in order better adapt and evolve, so many community leaders have created circles of learning — spaces where people can get to know each other better, assimilate new information and ideas, expand their capacities, and develop a sense of common purpose.

At the most basic level, informal networks expose their members to vital news and information about the community. The participants of our study described it as a two-way flow of information: they give and receive information from others in the group, and in so doing acquire and spread knowledge throughout the community.

Being part of an informal network "gives me a broader perspective," a nonprofit director from Durango told us. "It lets me interact with two or three folks who are unrelated to what I do. I use them as a sounding board and they extend what I do by interacting with others in the community." Because each member of the group represents a different sector of Durango, he said, "it's like a force multiplier."

An interviewee from Flint echoed the point. "One member of our group does economic development, one does housing, and one does community work," he said. "So whenever we get together, we get information on each of those worlds. We often tip one another if we come across information that we think is of value to other members of the group."

Taking in new information and acquiring knowledge about the community is essential, but it's equally important to have spaces where people can explore together — where they can voice their opinions, try out new ideas, suggest possible

alternatives, and discover what they agree on. Informal networks provide that. They create organized spaces for common reflection and dialogue.

"We create a space for discussion that inspires, motivates, and deepens our ability to catalyze social change," one member of the Louisville group told us. "To really do what needs to be done, you need to spend time listening, being, and understanding things — and only then seeing what needs to be done."

A member of the Flint network agreed, stressing that in many formal group processes, spontaneous and open dialogue only occurs after an action has been agreed upon by members of the community. Her informal network does things the other way around:

> Generally, when you have formal meetings, you can discuss, come to agreement, and all of that. But it's really what happens *after* the meeting that's the most interesting. It's those conversations *after*. In our group, we do the reverse: we have the conversations, and then we disperse and go back to whatever we're doing. Then the conversations become formalized in different ways.

Another essential component of learning is being able to let your guard down and admit where you feel uncertain or vulnerable, or accept constructive criticism without having to defend yourself. "I know I'm among good friends and I don't have to worry about what I say or don't say," a member of the Flint group said. "It's all honest conversation. I don't have to pad or skirt the issues."

Another member of the group referred to it as "a safe place" several times in the course of our interviews. She said there are not many settings where community leaders like herself are close and familiar enough to reveal their doubts and uncertainties and offer honest feedback and constructive criticism. "We can share confidences, and we know that they're held," she told us. "We do the 'what if's.' We ask why. We poke fun at each other, and we poke fun at ourselves."

A nonprofit director from Durango put it this way: "Behind closed doors, as we drink a beer together, we can say to each other, 'where are you, really?' or 'what can we do to make a difference on this issue?' There's a trust level. You can be pretty honest and open, and get right to the heart of the issue rather than being genteel, polite or politically correct."

For many community leaders — especially those whose professional identities might be compromised if they were to take sides on a charged public issue (and among those we spoke with, that included a city manager, a chamber of commerce director, and two community foundation executives) — the ability to

have candid, off-the-record conversations with trusted peers was seen as a crucial component of good decision-making and sound leadership.

In many of our interviews, participants also spoke of their groups as spaces for acquiring new skills and honing their leadership talents. The Las Vegas network is a case in point. Much of their time together is spent exploring opportunities and discussing strategies. Because all of the members are seasoned community leaders — some of them with real political experience — they devote much of their time to scenario-building and coaching.

For example, when one member of the group had an appointment with Nevada state senator Allison Copening, the others in the group guided her to "go in with an ask." "What's an *ask*?" she wondered. An ask, they said, is a request for help. "When you talk with busy officials, you always have to be ready with an ask — a set of specific actions they can take on your behalf. If you don't have an ask, you're basically wasting their time." So the group worked together to create a list of concrete steps the Senator might take to help advance their cause.

The members of the Las Vegas group support and help each other in a variety of practical ways. But they also help each other grow and become better leaders, better organizers, better stewards of change. "For us to resonate," one of them said, "we have to get it right. We can't just sit around and talk about how we wish it were different. We need spaces where people can discover their talents and get the help they need to really make a difference."

When people join together and discover common purpose, they create the kind of synergy that builds *collective* capacity. "Not only are we capable of more as a result of cross-pollination, collaboration and support," as a member of the Louisville group put it, "but we're also capable of more because our need for community is met and as such we're happier and more fulfilled people."

Louisville, Kentucky**:**

THE SUSTAINABILITY FORUM

Louisville's Sustainability Forum first met in the summer of 2006, but its genesis traces back to a decision made a decade ago by the directors of the local United Way. At the time, they had concluded that raising money and funding social service programs wasn't doing enough to address the really tough issues facing Louisville. It was improving the lives of some residents, to be sure, but it wasn't addressing the root causes of the city's problems. What was needed was a new approach, one that revolved around robust civic participation.

They formed a committee charged with exploring new metaphors and models for creating community change. The committee surveyed the literature, attended seminars, and brought in consultants. At one point, they invited David Bornstein, author of *How to Change the World*, to come to Louisville to speak. The turnout nearly overwhelmed them. Over 600 people showed up, many of them inspired less by Bornstein himself than by their genuine interest in the idea of "changing the world."

Two members of the committee decided to harness that energy to create "a series of monthly seminars on how people step into civic involvement and to social entrepreneur-ship," as one of them described it. The first gathering drew over 40 people, and by the second meeting the group was already calling itself the Louisville Sustainability Forum — reflecting its focus on local environmental issues. Before either of the two founders knew it, the forum had a life of its own.

Four years on, the meetings — which are held in a large barn behind St. Agnes Church — continue to draw an average of 35 to 40 people. What is unusual about the network is that, unlike so many community groups, the participants don't see themselves as an action committee or task force. They have avoided focusing conversations on actions to be taken or causes to be advanced, seeking instead to create a space within the community where new ideas and possibilities can emerge on their own.

"There were some struggles early on between being and doing," one of the members recalls. "Very often people would come to the group expecting it to be an action-oriented group. They felt there was no value in it unless everybody was getting together to do a particular thing. But we felt it was more important to feed people's souls through community than deciding to clean up the park or get people to start riding their bikes to work."

The issue of environmental sustainability is a complex one, says another member of the group. It simply doesn't lend itself very well to specific action strategies. For this reason, the group tries instead to create what he calls "an empowering space that connects people to possible resources and allies and helps advance a *readiness* for ideas and actions to take hold."

NETWORKS OF BELONGING

As important as informal networks are as a public good, they also have an important private dimension. One of the resounding themes in the interviews was the crucial role groups play in giving people the encouragement, support, and validation they need to stick with and ultimately be effective in public life. People stressed that their lives were not only deeply enriched by being part of a group — they had found friends, received warm emotional support, and broadened their understanding of the world around them — but, more importantly, it grounded their community work in a sense of belonging to, and being responsible for, something greater than themselves. It gave them an experience of community on a small scale, one they said helped them to engage more meaningfully in public life and devote themselves more passionately to the causes they care about. It helped to energize and recharge them.

People typically find their way into a group out of some basic human need, such as a desire to be liked, a need to feel heard, or a yearning to be of service, as one member of the Louisville group pointed out. This had certainly been true for his own group. "In its style and nature, the Sustainability Forum begins to meet many of those needs," he said. "Being a part of the group feeds people. It's a place where they can come and simply participate. They don't have to be 'activists.' They can come and relax and be affirmed in their work."

At their best, these groups build and strengthen relationships so that people can come to understand each other better, discover what they have in common, and develop a capacity to do things together. Ultimately, that's what makes participation in a group satisfying and sustainable.

While informal groups allow people to make new connections, the temptation to engage in networking can work against what they are trying to create together. One member of the Louisville group recalled some of the early meetings where participants took turns introducing themselves and listing their organizational affiliations. "People have a natural inclination to network," she said. But the trouble with doing that is that "it immediately sets you up to start roaming

the room for who to connect with based on a person's *role* rather than who he or she might be as a person." The Louisville network has since discouraged that practice by asking everybody to be on a first-name basis and avoid referring to titles and affiliations. That decision has strengthened their bond as a group.

Being part of a group of people who share similar values and concerns is deeply meaningful to people, said another member of the Louisville network. "Instead of depleting you, the energy of the group lifts you up." It seems fitting that the focus of the group is sustainability, she mused, because there is a very real sense in which the group itself is sustaining for its members. "We've found that the time we spend together has become very *sustainable* because it doesn't deplete us. It recharges us so we can go out and continue to do our work, whatever it happens to be."

Many interviewees also described their groups as circles of affirmation — spaces where they could be seen and honored by others, where their public identities could be recognized and validated, and where their hopes and aspirations for their community could be nourished and given full expression. While it felt good to be encouraged and supported, they said it also helped to keep them whole, balanced, and ready to act.

Several participants spoke of the value of seeing their concerns "mirrored" by their fellow group members. A member of the Flint network noted that he always left meetings feeling affirmed and supported by others in the group. "If they tell me something is okay, I know it to be true," he told us when we visited Flint. Gesturing to the others members of his group, he said: "This is the test, right here. If I can walk away from this table and my thoughts are intact, then it's good."

The Louisville group described a similar sense of affirmation and support. As one member explained, "it's very important to us that we have a process by which everybody has a voice, where they can share from the heart, and where they can look each other in the eye and see that they're not alone in the bigger picture." This is especially important in dealing with ideas that aren't yet widely embraced in the community — such as the idea of environmental sustainability — where members of a group can feel they're "swimming against the prevailing tide," as he put it. "It takes so much extra effort that we really need that affirmation. We benefit from having our message affirmed and from hearing other people's success stories. It really helps to know that change is possible, that it's happening, and that we're not alone."

Another aspect of affirmation and support is a feeling of safety, of having your back covered. For many of those we interviewed, this was a critical dimension of being part of a group. They made it clear that being a changemaker means

challenging people, ruffling feathers, upsetting the status quo, and putting yourself on the line again and again for what you care about. That kind of work is tough and fraught with adversity, they told us. But being a part of a group that not only believes in what we're doing but defends and supports our efforts can make the difference between giving up and forging ahead, between burning out and going the distance.

When we visited the Las Vegas network, the members related a lot of war stories. "I've always felt as if politics in this town is like kindergarten, only meaner," quipped the director of the local community foundation. "It's like a full-contact sport, it's rough," said another member who works as a strategic consultant. "This man has seen me cry," she said, gesturing back to the director. "He's had to pull me out of my own private Vietnam at least ten times."

She went on to describe an incident in which a public official, who happened to be a client of hers, had lost his temper and taken out his frustration. "He was swearing and spitting in my face. I left crying." When she told the other members of the group what happened, they came to her aid. "They saw me getting beaten up," she said, "so they stepped in to set it right. That was something I couldn't have done myself without doing damage to the project I was working on." The story illustrates the importance of having others who can steady you in the face of adversity, and offer support when you stumble and fall.

Durango, Colorado**:**

THE LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

Like many small cities in the American West, Durango is no stranger to public controversy. But when a plan was presented in 2008 for a residential development involving almost 600 new homes and a questionable land-annexation deal that would expand the city by 584 acres, it ignited a public firestorm.

For the members of Durango's leadership circle — an informal network made up of the city manager, a community foundation director, a documentary filmmaker, and an engineer and longtime school board member — there was only one thing to be done. What the community needed was a chance to come together, voice their concerns about the plan, and engage in an honest discussion about what it would mean for the future of the city.

The four of them had no formal status as a group. They were simply a circle of friends and colleagues who happened to care about the issue. Yet they were able to make a few calls, identify a meeting space, generate some media attention, and persuade several influential community leaders to attend.

The forum got the community talking. It helped people begin to make sense of the plan and talk about what was at stake. It also got residents who were on opposite sides of the issue to begin engaging in a civil conversation with one another. Most importantly, it provided critical feedback to the city council which was about to vote on the plan.

The experience made the four of them realize the power they had as an informal network to kick-start a process and generate momentum on a vital issue.

The success of the forum notwithstanding, the group sees value in getting together even when there is nothing specific on the agenda. The four meet frequently, if not always on a regular basis. Because of the small size of Durango — a city of just 15,500 people — they often run into each other at community functions or at local diners and coffee shops.

The strength of the group isn't its ability organize events, advance causes, or mobilize initiatives, they insist. Other groups and organizations do that better. What sets them apart, they believe, is their ability to share information, generate ideas, and create vital linkages between people, groups and activities in the community.

The city manager sees the group as a way to keep his ear to the ground and stay up-to-date on a range of issues. "We have access to all kinds of information in local government," he says, "but we don't have access to the kind of input I get from this group. I simply can't do my job well without interactions of this kind."

A community has to be able to talk to itself, says another member of the group. An informal network of well-connected people is a powerful way it can do that.

SEEDBEDS OF INNOVATION

When we asked people what prompted them to start or join an informal network, they often said it arose from dissatisfaction with the traditional ways of getting things done in the community and a gnawing sense that "there must be a better way." Time and again they made the point that the formal mechanisms for bringing about change are often exasperating, time-consuming, and ineffective.

Take the Las Vegas network. The original impetus for getting together was a sense of frustration about a formal committee they had been a part of for some time. They recalled running into each other in a parking lot after attending a group meeting that had ended badly. "What just happened in there?" one of them grumbled as she stepped out of the meeting room. Someone quipped that the people at the meeting fit the definition of insanity — they were trying same things over and over, hoping for a different result. After blowing off steam and debriefing for over a half-hour, the four of them decided to meet again on their own to continue the conversation. One gathering led to another and soon they had developed a close-knit group.

The dysfunctional committee they had been a part of was not unusual. Formal organizations and community processes can run aground for a variety of reasons. In even the most well-meaning community groups, organizational needs often eclipse the needs of the community. Short-term programs and initiatives take the place of long-term renewal strategies. Turf battles and competition for scarce resources get in the way of dialogue and collaboration. And organizational rules and procedures stifle creativity and innovation.

How are informal groups different? Loosely structured networks operate in the gaps between formal organizations, taking advantage of opportunities, adapting quickly to changing circumstances, and responding to needs in the moment, as they arise. This makes them not only creative and dynamic, but deeply appealing to people who thrive on change. "I love working in the gray areas, in the spaces in-between," as one member of the Las Vegas group put it.

"It's refreshing for me to work with our informal group," a city official from the Durango group told us. It's "a totally different environment." Formal mechanisms adhere to the logic of agreements, statutes, and codes of conduct. Those are important, but they tend to sap the vitality out of community initiatives and create inertia over time. He said his group is a valuable antidote because it operates without the constraints of formal structures or prescribed ways of thinking.

One of his fellow group members, an employee at the local college and a longtime member of the school board, echoed the point. Formal groups usually have a clearly-identified mission and viewpoint on issues, he said. "When you become part of such a group, you subscribe to its perspective. The value of an informal group is that there's a level of frankness and an openness that is liberating. You're not constrained by the group's particular cause, motivation, or perspective." That, he said, is what makes informal groups so adaptive and entrepreneurial.

Members of all four networks we studied cited examples of how ideas generated within their groups had spread and taken root in their communities. In some cases, informal discussions spawned splinter groups organized around specific problems or issues. Several environmental initiatives have grown out of the Louisville Sustainability Forum, for instance. In other cases, informal networks hatched ideas that local officials or other leaders outside the group later adopted as their own. Several interviewees related stories of how vision statements and strategic plans developed within their groups were subsequently taken up and embraced by formal organizations.

Only in rare cases do informal networks take action as a collective. While they can create a readiness for action and help lay the groundwork for change, their purpose is not to launch initiatives so much as help people connect with one another, learn together, and discover common purpose. When action was required, the informal networks we studied sought alternative means for generating momentum and moving things forward.

Durango's leadership circle is a case in point. In 2008, it decided to organize a community conversation to address a contentious land-use issue. In order for the forum to be recognized as an official public meeting — and thereby have some hope of influencing the city council — the group needed a formal sponsor. One member of the network, the director of the local community foundation, offered to play that role. But when he turned to his board for approval, they said no. The foundation needed to maintain a position of neutrality on the issue, the board insisted. Other organizations also declined. With few options left, the group resurrected an entity that had been dormant for over a year — the Grassroots

Vision Project — to serve as a sponsoring entity. As one member of the group recalled, "it was a funny way of saying, 'yeah, we're somebody' — because we were."

This is a clear illustration of how informal networks sometimes assume a temporary identity for the purposes of taking action. Several of the community leaders we talked with said that, at their best, informal groups are shape-shifters. They are amorphous and ever-changing entities that formalize as the need arises and dissolve or reconfigure as circumstances change.

The Las Vegas group insisted that the lack of a formal identity can be a strategic advantage in a environment where people are always currying favor with those in power. It allows the members to move in different circles and form creative alliances as needed. "In some ways, it allows us to informally collaborate with other informal groups," one member said. "There is no territorialism, so it's non-threatening."

Since informal networks are not action-taking entities, they don't make choices and weigh decisions the way formal groups do. The notion that informal networks engage in dialogue and deliberation in the manner of small executive teams or leadership committees is misleading. It would be more accurate to say they provide spaces where new ideas can be imagined, articulated, and cross-fertilized. This process goes a long way toward forging the collective will needed to take action and effect change.

A member of the Louisville group noted that formal groups too often begin with a discussion of solutions before there is clear agreement on what the problem is. "In our informal group," he observed, "we may spend more time asking 'What's the question?' before we jump to an answer." He said that unlike many formal groups, where decisions are arrived at through a linear, instrumental process, his informal network is better described as a dynamic, self-organizing system:

> It's completely outside the rules of organizational development. It's not a mechanical, Newtonian kind of thing. It's more like quantum physics. It works in surprising and paradoxical ways. The trick is to get really clear on your intention, create a compelling vision, and then work to attract and connect people to that intention and vision — and then not hold on too tightly to what's supposed to happen next.

New ideas and actions tend to emerge organically within informal settings rather than being imposed from without. One interviewee described the process as "self-creating coherence." While it can be disorderly and "messy," it's also inherently innovative.

The trouble with many formal groups is that they short-circuit this process by rushing too quickly to action. The eagerness to get results and generate impact doesn't allow the group to adequately explore people's ideas, perceptions, and aspirations for the community — the very qualities in which actions, if they are to be effective, must be rooted.

From the start, the Louisville network has made a point of not moving too quickly to action. "We were clear that we wanted to create community, not just another social organization that takes something on," one of the members explained. "There is a time for doing and there is a time for being. To really do what needs to be done, you need to spend some time listening, learning, and seeing what has to be done."

She went on to say — and here she spoke for many of those we interviewed — that her group was not looking for new activities to take on. "All of us are already *doing* somewhere else. We all have our work and we all have stuff that we're doing. We're not looking for another project." The purpose of the group, she said, is to create a space for discussion that inspires, motivates, and deepens their capacity to bring about change and long-term impact.

"Holding the intention for the community is more valuable than hosting a single initiative, or a small set of specific actions," said another member of the Louisville network. When he facilitates group discussion, he makes a point of "protecting" the group from "formal process stuff." He likened the network to a ceramic or metal container in which metals can be melted down and formed into new shapes. The group is like a "crucible for action," he said, one where new ideas and initiatives can be "potentiated."

By serving as spaces where connections can be made, ideas can be cross-fertilized, and collective knowledge can be developed, informal networks create rich opportunities for innovation. As we've seen, they don't typically act on these opportunities. Instead, their members carry the momentum generated between them back into more formal settings. Or they decide to "go public" as a group and assume a formal identity of some kind. Either way, there is a causal connection between the ideas generated in one setting and the actions taken in another.

Informal networks are like seedbeds where innovative ideas can germinate. But once they have taken root, they usually need some formal structure to help them flourish and bear fruit.

Las Vegas, Nevada**:**

THE STRATEGISTS TEAM

"What brought the four of us together," says one member of the Las Vegas group, "is that we were all tired of the same old approaches to social problems. Everybody knows that people in nonprofits like to meet — we meet in order to meet. But we never get anything done."

When they started getting together on a regular basis two years ago, they decided to do things differently. They dispensed with formality and zeroed in on solutions.

Of all the networks in our study, the Las Vegas group is perhaps the most structured and professional. They like to gather around a conference table, follow an agenda, take notes, and focus on connections to be made and actions to be taken.

Even so, the group is both informal and organic in the sense that the members meet on their own time, check their professional identities at the door, and see their work as rooted in a strong sense of stewardship for the community.

The group consists of four core members and a handful of others, all nonprofit professionals who share a common interest in child and family welfare. It includes the directors of a community foundation and a charitable trust, the county coordinator for the homeless, and a strategic planning consultant in private practice.

Most of them met through the Child Welfare Network, a coalition of nonprofit directors, service providers, and other community leaders in Las Vegas. But they had little patience for what they saw as the slow pace of change and the inefficient way the coalition made its decisions. One day, they decided to start meeting outside the group to explore some strategies of their own. They've been meeting regularly ever since.

When they get together, they like to talk fast, pitch a lot of ideas, play out potential scenarios, and provoke and challenge each other the way only people who are confident in their own capacities and genuinely comfortable with each other can do. And they laugh a lot.

They say the group is a welcome change from so much of their day-to-day work. It's a safe space to talk openly, explore quandaries, and seek advice and support. They all share a strong belief that that no one needs to be in charge and that it doesn't matter who gets credit for what they do. They insist that for busy people saddled with heavy responsibilities in the community, there is a creative freedom and a real sense of possibility that comes from informal interactions of this kind.

The group plays an important intermediary function in the community, they believe, shuttling back and forth between those working at the grassroots and those working in the halls of power. "We see ourselves as the broker between what's happening on the ground and what's possible," one of them says. "We're trying to seed the thinking around a common vision and then message that to people who can make a difference."

CONCLUSION

Our study of informal community groups suggests that public innovation can happen in the most unassuming contexts — in small groups of committed citizens who get together after work, on weekends, over lunch. Their purposes are often modest — to compare notes, share information, and explore ideas. But when they come together with passion and a sense of common purpose, they can do great things.

Unlike formal organizations, informal networks are not instruments of action, at least not in the traditional sense. They serve a more basic function. They provide spaces for learning, sources of affirmation and support, and contexts for the emergence of new ideas and possibilities for action.

When groups that have been meeting informally are ready to mobilize and take action, they either adopt a formal structure or they take their ideas and plans back into existing organizations to make something happen.

In their efforts to create change, many groups rush too quickly to formalize their activities. While launching a new program or organization can give them an air of legitimacy, access to resources, and other tangible benefits, it can also choke off the innovation and creativity needed to really make a difference.

What people need to be effective are informal settings where they can find each other, share ideas, and discover common ground. They need spaces where they can receive support and be acknowledged as public actors. And they need contexts for imagining and acting from a new sense of possibility.

The trouble is there aren't a lot of venues in public life where people can do that in an open and authentic way. All too often, community processes are organized around issues to be *confronted* and problems to be *solved*, not possibilities to be lived into.

Our research suggests that it's time to engage in a different conversation, one about what we aspire to, what we imagine, and what we can create together. Strategizing about how to make change happen is valuable and important, but the

conversations must be rooted in something more basic — the animating purpose of our work. Informal networks provide settings where we can openly explore that and connect with others who are treading the same path and working toward similar ends.

"Truthfulness, honor, is not something that springs ablaze of itself," the poet Adrienne Rich once observed. "It has to be created between people." The same might be said about work carried out on behalf of the common good. The impulse to innovate, to build, and to renew our communities does not exist in a vacuum. It must be kindled through meaningful interactions and mutual discovery.