Ted Kolderie of Education/Evolving

More thinking, less premature action for better community problem solving

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

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Summary

Higher quality actions on community problems are more likely if decision makers avoid short cuts to action and give more attention to analysis, clarification, and optional solutions, according to Ted Kolderie.

Kolderie criticized leaders who, anxious to move quickly, dismiss more discussion as unnecessary. "Thinking is good," he said.

Among his other thoughts on producing better action:

- Individuals and groups whose income and job security is dependent upon the outcome shouldn't have a dominant position in developing proposals.
- The media should cover more of the substance of community problems than their politics.
- Foundations should commission studies that address causes of problems, not just symptoms.
- Private and governmental sectors should encourage innovation by giving employees freedom to try new things on their own.

Biography. Ted Kolderie is co-founder and senior fellow at Education|Evolving. He has worked on system questions and legislative policy in several areas of public life, including urban and metropolitan affairs and public finance, through the 1960s and '70s. He is most recognized nationally for his work on K-12 education policy and innovation, which he has focused on since the early 1980s. Ted was instrumental in the design and passage of the nation's first charter school law in Minnesota in 1991, and has since worked on the design and improvement of charter legislation in over seventeen states.

A graduate of Carleton College and of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton University, Ted was previously a reporter and editorial writer for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, executive director of the Twin Cities Citizens League, and a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs

Background

Today's interview is one of several the Civic Caucus is conducting to review the effectiveness of Minnesota's institutions of public policy, that is, its foundations, university schools, think tanks, media, and civic groups, including the Civic Caucus.

Ted Kolderie, today's interviewee, has concluded that Minnesota's leadership among the 50 states in successfully addressing community problems is, to a considerable degree, a product of the good work of its institutions of public policy. A recent Citizens League publication highlighted Kolderie's position, often referred to as Minnesota's effort to accommodate its geographic position as a "Cold Sunbelt".

Discussion

A policy "circle" helps to explain the role of organizations involved in public policy. Kolderie began by distributing a chart identifying key steps in the public policy process: (1) events occur and "issues" are identified, (2) problem analysis takes place, (3) issue clarification follows, (4) policy proposals are then developed, (5) public debate occurs, (6) policy action takes place, and (7) the action creates new 'events' which become apparent — starting a new cycle of policy discussion and policy-making.

(1) Events and Issues Identification

(7) Resultant New Event (2) Problem Analysis

(6) Policy Action (3) Issue Clarification

(5) Public Debate (4) Policy Development

Civic Caucus work appears concentrated in steps 2, 3, and 4, he said.

Too many short cuts harm good policy development. Too often, Kolderie said, public sector leaders are prone to believe that once the step (1) "issues" discussion begins they can move directly to step (6) policy action, skipping over steps (2) problem analysis, (3) issue clarification, (4) policy development, and (5) public debate. That means largely ignoring the "thinking part", as he called these often-skipped steps, during which the nature of a problem can be thoroughly examined, along with possible solutions.

Regrettably, he said, the tendency to shortcut the system is widespread, and at high levels of influence in the state. To illustrate, he noted that a highly respected business and civic leader, upon

the formation of a new organization, complained that there's entirely too much thinking going on and that, instead, "we've got to get it done". A well-versed individual in business turned quietly to an associate and asked, "What is 'it'?"

An advantage of stressing the importance of *studying* before *solving,* is illustrated by a major arts organization in Minnesota in which leaders originally saw no possible way out of their particular problem except to have endless subsidy, or the project coming apart.. But upon intensive reappraisal the organization came to see that one major element of the situation could be re-thought. That opened the way to an innovative solution resulting in a successful project.

"Getting it done" should not take precedence over thorough analysis first, Kolderie said.

Look critically at roles "stakeholders" should play. Kolderie went on to outline the role that groups with a financial or program interest in the outcome of a study should play in its preparation. If such interest groups dominate a study, the outcome isn't likely to include ideas contrary to what those groups want, or outside the conventional 'givens'.

He recalled a controversy in the mid-1970s over financing hospitals in the Twin Cities metro area. A Citizens League committee compared the hospital situation here with that of Seattle-Tacoma, a metro area almost identical economically and demographically but with a hospital plant half the size of ours and no visible difference in overall health status. The committee's finding that the Twin Cities was carrying excess hospital bed capacity came to the attention of board members of major Twin Cities area hospital systems. The chair of a board of one of the largest hospitals called a meeting of hospital board chairs. Hospital administrators, anxious to attend, too, were politely informed that the meeting would be for board chairs only, not staff. The result was creation of The Hospital Trustees Council, which led a move, with support of the State Legislature, to reduce excess bed supply, a move that never would have resulted from a task force of hospital executives, he said.

Another example Kolderie cited was that of creation of the Metropolitan Council, made up of citizens from districts of equal population, a recommendation from a Citizens League committee that wasn't dominated by interest groups. The outcome would have been radically different had interest groups developed the proposal. Those groups had plenty of input as the proposal was debated in the Legislature.

Education change, a field in which Kolderie is heavily involved, is as difficult as it is, partly because the discussion is so influenced by those inside the system who resist proposed changes, he said.

Well-reasoned proposals require understanding of how systems work. Another short-cut in developing proposals according to Kolderie is that too often in studies today participants incorrectly assume they have adequate advance understanding of an area under study and, in the process, skip over learning in depth about how a system works, whether in health, education, housing, transportation, government structure or any other field. Such understanding needs to be, and can be, developed by interested citizens, rather than relying only on experts who have vested interests in the outcome.

Changes in the media haven't helped. Kolderie recalled that when he started as a reporter with the Minneapolis Tribune in the 1950s, the owner and publisher said he viewed their reporters almost as

the equivalent of college professors. Reporters had a reputation for knowing intimately the subjects they covered. He recalled as examples Victor Cohn, medical science reporter, and Sam Romer, labor reporter. Kolderie himself, assigned to as North Dakota correspondent in the early 1950s, gained respect for his knowledge of the emerging oil industry in that state.

Today, he said, the media are vastly more interested in covering the politics of issues (which political party is winning or losing, how individual voters are affected) than in the substance of the policy involved. The politics of issues is about the choices being offered. That is different from the substance of the policy itself.

A hopeful sign, he said, had been the Public Insight Network of Minnesota Public Radio, to help its journalists cover news in greater depth. But he's less than convinced by a sampling of issues listed on the Public Insight Network website: " Share your story about concussions in youth hockey ", " How Do You Cope With Montgomery County's Traffic Congestion? " " What are your predictions for the South Florida economy in 2016? "

Wilder's "Compass" is a start in the right direction, but more analysis needed. The Wilder Foundation has done a good job in describing what is happening in many areas of public policy, but it stops short of helping people understand how systems work, Kolderie said.

Do some journalists ignore broader questions? To illustrate his concern over how journalists report on major issues, Kolderie recalled a meeting he had with an editor about the safety problems in rail cars transporting crude oil through the state. Kolderie said he asked the editor about the relationship between rail car shipment and pipelines. "I don't know anything about pipelines," the editor replied.

On questions of transit investment, Kolderie is puzzled why journalists don't ask transit planners, in regard to expanded service proposals, "what is the cost per new rider attracted?"

There is a tendency to ignore the debate before the vote. Kolderie said it is unfortunate that the media do not report more of the discussion on issues before a governmental body takes a vote. He related a conversation he had with a journalist who had informed an editor about a discussion on a pending motion before a city council. The editor said not to bother with a story about the debate, just "Let me know when something happens." Kolderie contends that when there is no reporting of the debate before the vote is taken, something important has happened in the democratic policy process. Readers should know what happens before the vote is taken. He noted, by contrast, how closely the late journalist Peter Vanderpoel reported the discussion, the thinking, of public officials and groups in 1967 leading up to the creation of the Metropolitan Council.

Bill Kling recognized the importance of a commitment to better journalism. Kolderie noted that Bill Kling, former head of Minnesota Public Radio, in a 2011 interview upon his retirement called for 100 more journalists in the major markets.

General Mills' pioneering effort in assisted living is another example of innovative leadership on public problems. Kolderie singled out Altcare, a joint venture between General Mills and the Wilder Foundation, that in 1983 began to conceive, design and develop living arrangements for the frail elderly, those between complete independence and institutionalization. Assisted living facilities

have since spread rapidly here and around the country. Verne Johnson, founding chair of the Civic Caucus, and Steve Rothschild, founder of Twin Cities Rise!, led the Altcare effort for General Mills.

There is a critical role of foundations in public affairs. Foundations have long been leaders on analyzing and developing proposals on significant issues facing Minnesota and the nation, Kolderie said. But he believes foundations in Minnesota need to be challenged to do better. He is concerned that perhaps innovative proposals for change aren't always coming from foundation-financed projects. They are well aware of the areas that need attention, but innovative redesign proposals aren't showing up very often. Foundations need to challenge their grantees to think through problems thoroughly. Foundations should insist that grantees make specific, actionable recommendations, not vague conclusions.

Later in the meeting Kolderie questioned whether a foundation's study to help a single entity, such as one specific school district, should take higher priority over foundation studies that would get at systemic problems and real causes of problems that go beyond the symptoms that might be evident in looking at only one school district.

Does societal mobility hinder people's identity with where they live? An interviewer noted that many people today change residences frequently, unlike in the past where they might be born, live and die in a comparatively small geographic area. Does this mean, the interviewer wondered, whether it is more difficult to get people to focus today on the problems in the areas where they live, because they might not take a long-term interest in their current community's welfare?

Kolderie replied by noting the dramatic change in scale of our community institutions. What used to be thought of as local businesses have increasingly gone national, which might have reduced the now-national firms' interest in any one locality. It is hard to identify which institutions, private or public, now have their principal interest in the community where they are located. Governments do; educational institutions do; arts and cultural facilities do; some foundations do. But of these, only the foundations give money. The others raise money. Foundations are probably the best example of "can't move" institutions, he said.

Are high schools granting "counterfeit diplomas"? An interviewer noted that high school graduates frequently display an abysmal lack of knowledge of subject matter, which makes the interviewer wonder if schools are issuing what amounts to "counterfeit diplomas." As a consequence, many adults are unable to have enough background to discuss issues intelligently or even to know what questions to ask.

Are elected representatives at all levels failing to have open discussions of policy issues before the vote? An interviewee contended that real debate issues seems to occur behind closed doors, so the media can't report what is not available to them. Kolderie replied that when our civic process was working well, civic organizations played a key role by inviting elected officials to public meetings where issues of substance, as well as politics, were discussed. Such meetings now seem to occur less frequently than in the past, he said.

Where does the Civic Caucus fit on the policy process chart? The Civic Caucus seems to fit most in the problem analysis, issue clarification and policy development areas, Kolderie said, the very areas that many people think can be skipped.

Stimulating broader public discussion beyond meetings can and should be done. Kolderie recalled that when he was executive director (1967-1980) the Citizens League shared its minutes and other working papers broadly with interested parties in the community. Consequently, many more people of influence beyond the Citizens League were learning about and discussing the same issues as were the League committees. Such action had the effect of preparing the larger community for Citizens League recommendations when its final reports were issued.

Care must be taken in bringing raw data into relevant discussion. An interviewer said public discussion about the implications of raw data often fails to uncover the real problems. The interviewer cited debate about wide differences in learning among racial groups. But rather than just blaming the school, the interviewer contended, the impact of family background and involvement must be factored in.

It's important to be focused on more than just "public policy"— An interviewer wondered if too much importance is being attached to the words "public policy". The interviewer noted that general subject areas contain within them the real, focused issues, which should be the topics of debate. Too many studies seem to highlight the more visible, but less precise, general areas and ignore the narrow issues that ultimately must be addressed.

There has been a shift from "what can be done to help the state?" to "what can be done to help a specific interest?" Kolderie recalled the business-supported Upper Midwest Economic Study in the 1960s that led to the Upper Midwest Council as an illustration of business' civic activity. Another example was the Project on Corporate Responsibility.

Many changes occur outside "public policy." At the end of the discussion, Kolderie pointed out that the graphic shows a policy cycle that ends with governmental action. Increasingly, he suggested, system-change is the result of things happening outside of government, the result of innovative products and services developed outside government, and not primarily the result of governmental action. Indeed, we now see public policy basically responding; legitimizing what people have themselves decided to do differently. He cited major changes emerging in transportation, such as computer-matched ride-sharing and the driverless cars, are likely to result in enormous improvements in mobility for all people over the next five years. Think, he said, about the profound changes in social behavior, in social norms. Think about the civil rights movement. Often, legislation follows behind changes on the street and in public attitudes.

Enable institutions to improve themselves, beyond mandated change . Kolderie drew the group's attention to his book , The Split Screen Strategy: How to Turn Education Into a Self-Improving System. The dominant notion of a great transformation, politically engineered, is not realized; there is no concept of a political consensus on radical change. Major change happens in systems as people on the working level try new ways to solve problems. The role of leadership is to create a climate of encouragement for that innovation. In K-12, that means encouraging schools and teachers to try what they believe will help the students, whom only they know as individuals.

Just last evening, Kolderie said, he heard Jim Rickabaugh, former superintendent in Burnsville, MN, now director of the Institute for Personalized Learning in Wisconsin, highlight a major move to personalize learning in all grades, now emerging in districts in Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri and southeastern Minnesota.