

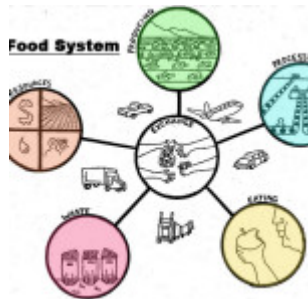


Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Councils, Common Purpose, and Collaboration

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Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/councils-common-purpose-and-collaboration/>

This entry was posted on April 08, 2014 and is filed under Community Development, Human & Cultural Assets, Regional & Collaborative Approaches, Social & Civic Assets, Sustainable Development



I read a terrific blog post at Harvard Business Review (HBR) the other day about

collaboration. The author explained that “purpose is collaboration’s most unacknowledged determinant.” Community collaboration has never been more important as today’s challenges are too complex and interconnected for any one organization—government or otherwise—to handle alone. The issues we care about, more often than not, are enmeshed in complex systems that connect many disparate stakeholders. The ideal is to bring the different stakeholders—the different parts of the system, if you will—together, to work together, to collaborate, for the betterment of all. I’ve written several posts lately about local food economies as an example of this kind of complex system that requires collaboration in order to become more equitable, resilient, and sustainable. I’ve argued that local governments in particular should have local food system development on their radar screens. But collaboration amongst the relevant stakeholders doesn’t just happen. Collaboration is difficult. Councils for cross-cutting issues like food are a tool to help overcome barriers to collaboration. They can help create the common purpose needed to drive collaboration.

The term council denotes a formally constituted body of people that meet regularly to deliberate and provide guidance on some issue of shared concern. Mark Gerzon, in his book *Leading Through Conflict*, notes that council was “turned into and art form” by the Iroquois nation who formed a council to bring together different tribes “to find common ground.” Gerzon also explains that a council creates “a container in which trust can grow, and new relationships can be formed” (p. 151). That is key.

Today we use the term council to describe many municipal governing bodies. We also have “councils of governments” that provide opportunities for regional thinking and regional solutions across local governments. There are councils on aging, youth councils, and domestic violence councils. What these bodies have in common is that they bring together various stakeholders that are part of a complex system to regularly meet and discuss pertinent issues. When they work well, these councils develop a common or shared purpose which becomes the driving force for collaboration amongst the various stakeholders.

As Vineet Nayar notes in the aforementioned HBR blog post, common purpose is the key to understanding collaboration. His observation isn’t new though. One of my favorite writers, Mary Follett, a progressive-era scholar and practitioner of management and leadership, wrote passionately about a social process she called integration that created this common purpose. She argued that when people come together in dialogue and create a common purpose that the purpose becomes an “invisible leader.” In other words, when different stakeholders share a common purpose or vision, that idea becomes the motivating factor for collaboration, and leadership becomes less about “leaders” motivating “followers” and more about keeping the common purpose out in front of people.

It is for this very reason—the need to create common purpose across stakeholders—that community food councils are springing up across North Carolina and across the United States. Communities are realizing that the different parts of the



local food system (including local governments) need to come together and develop a common purpose so they can act together to improve their local food system. When the different stakeholders are able to 'get on the same page' they are much more able to work together, to collaborate, for the betterment of all. Highly functioning food councils generate the kind of collaboration that spins off local initiatives that make a real difference.

On April 17, from 12:30-2:00pm, we are going to be broadcasting a webinar on community food councils. It will feature an impressive group of experts on local food systems and the practice of community food councils in particular. We'll be sharing information about how to make the most of a food council or network if you already have one in your community, as well as things to think about if you are considering forming one. We have many host sites across the state (NC) where you can attend for free. And if you cannot attend one of the hosted locations you can still sign up (for a fee) and ideally host a group viewing yourself. Food councils are an exciting, emergent kind of community partnership that can be a catalyst for collaboration with far-reaching impacts. I hope you can make the webinar to learn more about promising practices of food councils and as part of that effort connect with others engaged in this work.