

innovations

TECHNOLOGY | GOVERNANCE | GLOBALIZATION

Resilience in a Turbulent World

Lead Essays

Peter Blom The Upside of the Downturn

Reginald Van Lee et al. Megacommunities

Cases Authored by Innovators

Amazon Conservation Team: Changing the Landscape of Power

Mark J. Plotkin

commentary by Norka Ruiz Bravo

Kiva at Four

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Analytic and Policy Articles

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Organization of the Journal

Each issue of *Innovations* consists of four sections:

1. **Lead essay.** An authoritative figure addresses an issue relating to innovation, emphasizing interactions between technology and governance in a global context.
2. **Cases authored by innovators.** Case narratives of innovations are authored either by, or in collaboration with, the innovators themselves. Each includes discussion of motivations, challenges, strategies, outcomes, and unintended consequences. Following each case narrative, we present commentary by an academic discussant. The discussant highlights the aspects of the innovation that are analytically most interesting, have the most significant implications for policy, and/or best illustrate reciprocal relationships between technology and governance.
3. **Analysis.** Accessible, policy-relevant research articles emphasize links between practice and policy—alternately, micro and macro scales of analysis. The development of meaningful indicators of the impact of innovations is an area of editorial emphasis.
4. **Perspectives on policy.** Analyses of innovations by large scale public actors—national governments and transnational organizations—address both success and failure of policy, informed by both empirical evidence and the experience of policy innovators. The development of improved modes of governance to facilitate and support innovations is an area of editorial focus.

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*Reginald Van Lee, Mark J. Gerencser, Chris Kelly, and
Robin Portman*

Collective Leadership and Overlapping Vital Interests

The Unrealized Power of Megacommunities

Today's most urgent and complex problems cannot be solved by government, business, or civil society alone. And yet, due to mistrust and inadequate incentives, leaders of these three sectors are often reluctant to come together. Nevertheless, significant opportunities do exist for government, business, and civil society to both pursue their respective vital interests and unite around a common purpose. By building trusting relationships and aligning incentives, the three cornerstone sectors of society can—and must—unite to form what we term “megacommunities.” Successfully creating such megacommunities is a prerequisite to addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

HOW MEGACOMMUNITIES ARISE

In January 2009, the Veterans Coalition, Survivor Corps, Business Executives for National Security, and Booz Allen Hamilton convened a summit in Washington, D.C., of 150 leaders from government agencies, employers, and nonprofit groups that assist returning soldiers and veterans. The program called for these leaders to take part in a kind of pressure-cooker scenario. In the exercise, participants had to

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Gerencser, Van Lee, Fernando Napolitano and Kelly are co-authors of Megacommunities: How Leaders of Government, Business and Non-Profits Can Tackle Today's Global Challenges Together, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

deal with a drop in funding, an increase in the number of returning soldiers and veterans, and a sharp rise in suicides and other manifestations of post-traumatic stress and brain injury.

What emerged was a vivid demonstration of what has been happening in the real world. Government leaders saw how their agencies overwhelmed soldiers and veterans with paperwork and red tape. Employers who wanted to hire the returning men and women found it difficult to reach out to them. And the nonprofits, which compete with each other for attention and funding, saw how they present such a confusing array of choices that many soldiers and veterans become overwhelmed and simply give up.

Ultimately, it became clear that these leaders of government, business, and nonprofits were so focused on their own slice of the problem that they failed to see that soldiers and veterans need more than just health care, or help returning to work, school, or their family. They need a holistic approach that will ease their reintegration into all aspects of the community at the same time.

The summit brought out other realizations—that there were too many moving parts, that each sector's unique priorities somehow acted as blinders. Most important, though, was these leaders' recognition that they all shared one vital interest: seeing the returning soldiers and veterans safely home—all the way home. And they realized that they had to work together to make that happen.

Organizations naturally tend to focus on how a problem directly affects them, looking at it through their own particular lens. As a result, they often deal with the symptoms of the problem rather than the root cause. But you can't solve a problem you don't understand. A megacommunity's collective view opens the aperture, so to speak, and the core problem can suddenly become apparent. As those involved better understand the entire problem, it becomes clearer how to proceed and how members of the megacommunity might best combine their resources.

At the same time, creating a successful megacommunity requires that participants focus jointly on certain key building blocks, which are described below. These building blocks are of particular importance for the sort of large-scale, complex problems that characterize public challenges in the twenty-first century.

Interests must be vital as well as overlapping. If an issue is low on an organization's list of priorities rather than at or near the top, leaders of the organization will be far less likely to put their energy and resources into it. In hectic, fast-changing situations, megacommunity participants might devise a quick answer to a problem that seems it might work. But if an organization eventually comes to believe that the issue, although shared, isn't that vital, it is likely to drop out of the process. Each lost organization can make a critical difference in whether the problem gets solved. If too many withdraw, the megacommunity may simply fall apart.

Critical stakeholders must be included. There is the danger, particularly in times of uncertainty, that megacommunity participants will reach out primarily to the stakeholders who are the most vocal, or who seem at first blush to have the most credible claims of importance. Participants must continually reevaluate

whether they have all the right stakeholders or they may inadvertently miss one that has the power or influence or resources to make a real difference. They also may ignore, at their peril, organizations with “negative power”—those with the ability to sabotage the entire process if they are not brought into the fold.

Sustaining the megacommunity is critical. The more complex and frustrating a problem is, the harder a megacommunity is to manage. People tend to talk past each other more often, and some participants may be more likely to try to help themselves at the expense of the whole. Organizations may get impatient and drop out if they don’t see the value of the process right away. Therefore, process management in a megacommunity is more important than ever. Near-term wins need to be identified so that participants remain engaged. Conflict resolution and negotiating skills are essential.

Megacommunity leadership must be calm and centered. An atmosphere of uncertainty puts extra pressure on those who have taken on leadership roles within the megacommunity. If they are to bring the rest of the participants together, they need to remain open and optimistic and not fall into negative, self-protective behavior. They cannot be caught up in the high emotions that might be swirling through the megacommunity. Megacommunity leaders must be capable of introspection and have the ability to step out of their worlds to dispassionately assess the entire situation.

LEADING IN A MEGACOMMUNITY

Creating a megacommunity is the first step. Establishing leadership is the next. A megacommunity will not come together or survive for long if its leaders do not in some sense embody the collaborative approach. The following ten fundamental elements characterize successful leaders of a megacommunity. The more complex and intractable a problem, the more essential these elements become.

A Spirit of Inclusiveness. A megacommunity relies on an “us-and-them” strategy, not “us-versus-them.” Organizations join a megacommunity to reach peak performance in finding sustainable solutions to complex problems. They recognize that these solutions require bringing multiple frames of reference and multiple capabilities to bear. Therefore, the ability to promote inclusiveness is essential in a megacommunity leader.

Tri-Sector Exposure. A great megacommunity leader needs to embrace, not just accept, the challenge of working in a large, complex sphere of influence. For this reason, the most successful leaders are often those with career paths through the business, government, and civil society sectors, who have either migrated from one to another during their careers or served on boards in different sectors. This has enabled them to develop business acumen, a balanced view of bureaucracy, and a keen sense of social issues. They understand that tri-sector success is not only a matter of fairness, it is a matter of necessity.

A Non-Imperious Approach. Megacommunity leadership is not a solo show driven by a single, imperious personality. A hard-driving, take-no-prisoners

approach can be effective within some organizations, but it doesn't work in a megacommunity where those in leadership roles have no direct control over any of the other participants. Leaders need to excel at "coaching and persuading" rather than "command and control." While they may employ a different style within their own organization, once they enter the megacommunity they need to be able to switch gears and perhaps to lead in entirely new ways.

A Light Touch. Megacommunity leadership is not prescriptive—leaders don't dictate the actions that others have to perform. The successful megacommunity leader is one who stimulates the need to collaborate, invents strategies that work for everybody, and keeps people motivated. In a command-and-control situation, a leader has a strong and heavy "touch," but in a megacommunity the touch must be lighter—more a guiding touch that lets the other participants self-discover.

Communication Skills. The ability to speak, negotiate, and listen effectively, all in the varied context of cross-sector collaboration and decision-making, may be the most important set of personal assets possessed by a megacommunity leader. Within their own organizations, these leaders have a huge job in communicating the megacommunity's case, explaining the broader priorities, and galvanizing support among their constituencies. They must also be able to communicate effectively within the megacommunity itself. Successful leaders in a megacommunity fully understand how people will perceive, interpret, and act on their messages.

Technological Savvy. Megacommunities can be greatly enhanced through social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter, and through networking media such as blogs and wikis. Therefore, their leaders should have a fair amount of technological competence, or at least the ability to draw on the technological expertise of others. They should also have a strong grasp of how systems in general operate to help them recognize how one aspect of a problem might link to another in hard-to-see ways.

Adaptability. Being an open-minded, adaptable leader involves more than the willingness to absorb and aggregate information. They also must know how to synthesize their insights and act on them. A good megacommunity leader is a "continuous adapter"—someone who tries out new ideas, monitors the changes they produce, and then applies them more broadly.

The Ability to Foster Talent. A megacommunity leader won't necessarily be able to hire a staff that has done the type of work in question before, because such work hasn't been done as prolifically as it will be—or should be—in the future. So, he or she has to be a good team and talent builder, drawing out qualities and capabilities that people didn't know they had. Great megacommunity leaders are continually fostering and developing human capital.

Presence and Passion. A megacommunity leader must have a strong, centered presence, as well as an authenticity that the other participants can appreciate and respond to. He or she must also have passion. After all, a megacommunity does not become truly viable until its leaders make it part of their personal agendas. By expressing passion and conviction, a leader becomes inspirational, for these emotions are contagious.

Long-Term Thinking. Great megacommunity leaders are often ahead of the curve. Long-term thinking can make it easier to predict the right moves in advance, to educate others, and prevent problems before they occur. Megacommunity leaders know that pre-set answers are not going to cut it. They are accustomed to thoughtful trial and error, and they often embrace new solutions that few others can see.

CONCLUSION

Not every problem needs a megacommunity to find a solution. Many may be solved perfectly well through other means. But the more far-reaching and complex the problem, the more essential it is that government, business, and civil society recognize they cannot solve it alone. That recognition is not always easy to come by and not always easy to act on. While megacommunities arise naturally, they do not appear out of thin air. Forming megacommunities requires being willing to seek out others—even those who might be considered opponents—and engaging in a truly collaborative process.

The reality is that most megacommunities are formed not out of enlightenment or great optimism but out of urgency or frustration. A megacommunity usually comes together only after people have tried other methods, sometimes at great length, and failed. Only then can they see the downside of their unsuccessful behaviors and become receptive to a new approach.