

The Harwood Institute
Action Tools

The Sweet Spot of Public Life



The Sweet Spot

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by Richard C. Harwood

Finding the 'Sweet Spot'

Increasingly, as I travel the country, I find myself talking about the “sweet spot of public life” – how we can take action on specific issues and build community at the same time. This past week was no different. I spent two days with 40 leaders of local collaboratives in Newark, NJ, good people who are urgently focused on strengthening families and children.

The challenges in Newark (and Essex County) are tough, long-standing, often depressing – but doable. In these communities, people often feel that no one speaks for or listens to them. Finding sustainable pathways for improving their local conditions can be hard. People worry that they are being left behind. Truth be told, many people are falling through the cracks.

The collaboratives sit at two critical nexus points in relationship to these challenges. They work among people in neighborhoods trying to create change; and they sit in-between “official” city structures and the local neighborhoods and communities to ensure that all people are at the table of public discussion and decision-making. Indeed, they serve as essential connective tissue that can help to bring about a greater sense of community wholeness.

No doubt, there is compelling need for better policies and programs that address people’s core concerns around families and children; but it is also the case, according to the folks in Newark and Essex County, that effective policies and programs also require the community coming together in new ways– from people supporting one another to people taking more responsibility for themselves.

Indeed, a recurring theme of the conversation in Newark was how to tap people’s own potential to create change and come together to forge stronger communities. But what does this mean? How does it happen? How does it sustain itself? This is a challenge I hear everywhere I go.

We must design initiatives that not only focus on a specific issue, but that also build the relationships, leaders, networks, and norms of communities – the stuff that makes communities go – what I call “The Sweet Spot.” In Newark and Essex County, there were three

key components of The Sweet Spot that need attention if the community is to effectively address its core concerns around families and children:

- Cultivating leaders – there is a real need to identify and engage “untapped” leaders in the community who hold authority and authenticity in the eyes of residents. These leaders can help engage, inspire, and support people and their causes in ways that leaders outside the community simply cannot;
- Creating safe space for discussion – there is a real need to create safe spaces in which people can come together to identify their aspirations, wrestle with competing values, and find ways to join hands in building a stronger community and strengthening families. The conversations that are now taking place too often focus on complaints and expert-framed policy issues that fail to move individuals and the community forward;
- Building networks – there is a real need to build networks in which organizations and leaders can learn about each other, build trust, and discover new ways (or strengthen existing ways) of working together. These networks reduce the time and costs associated with mistrust, the spinning of wheels, the pointing of fingers, and the inaction which results when we are unable to overcome obstacles.

The importance of finding The Sweet Spot cannot be over-emphasized. For it is not merely an academic point, or something simply to theorize about.

Rather, the challenge is how can we move ahead?

Let’s face it, whether in Newark or in other communities, we will never have all the resources, time, and people we want to address the challenges before us. Instead, we must find ways to leverage our resources for making progress. That, I believe, requires that we find The Sweet Spot. Then we can have the very capacities we need to act on the challenges we seek to overcome.

Public Capital: A Way to Look at the Community

The Factors of Public Capital	What to Think About
The Tangible Dimensions of Public Capital	
<p>An Abundance of Social Gatherings — that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How are you creating places for people to connect with others, such as sporting events, organized potlucks, and community festivals?
<p>Organized Spaces for Interaction — where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on community challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How do these places give people room to express themselves? ▶ Will people feel they can make a difference? ▶ Do have use space in church, school, online or the recreation center to come together for interaction?
<p>Boundary Spanning Organizations — that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges and marshal a community’s resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not act as the driving force.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Is genuine learning about the community and others going on? ▶ How is the organization bringing people together across dividing lines? ▶ Are new ideas being incubated and spun off to others? ▶ Is a mirror being held up to the community?
<p>Safe Havens for Decision Makers — where a community’s leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in “unofficial,” candid discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Are you creating places where leaders can meet and feel “safe?” ▶ How are people getting to know and trust each other—and building new norms?
The Links Between the Tangible Dimensions	
<p>Strong, Diverse Leadership — that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Are you cultivating leaders at different levels of the community; from neighborhood associations members to civic groups and ministers and elect officials? ▶ Do you bring existing and emerging leaders together? ▶ How are people’s leadership capacities being developed?
<p>Informal Networks and Links — that connect various individuals, groups, organizations and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages and community norms from place to place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How are networks being built for people to share ideas and work together? ▶ Are people focused on working for the benefit of the community? ▶ How are relationships and links growing?
<p>Conscious Community Discussion — where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Are people being engaged to express aspirations for the community (or on issues or a project)? ▶ How are you infusing what you learn into your goals, program design, and relationships? ▶ Are you creating an ethic of engagement in organizations and community?
The Underlying Conditions of Public Capital	
<p>Community Norms for Public Life — that help guide how people act individually, interact and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How do your efforts help build more productive norms in community? ▶ What stories can you tell about how people are working together?
<p>A Shared Purpose for the Community — that sends an explicit message about the community’s aspirations and helps reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Where can people talk about questions of shared purpose—in a program or staff meeting, board session, community engagement meeting, leadership discussion? ▶ How can you spread a shared sense of purpose?

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The Public Capital Audit

Purpose

To measure Public Capital in your community

Directions

Please respond to the following nine factors of Public Capital in terms of your community.

To rate the factor, use this rating scale:

The Harwood Rating Scale	
Rating	What it means
We've Got It	We feel good about saying we've got this factor.
Real Progress	We're steadily improving and moving in the right direction. Still room for improvement.
Starting to Improve	We're beginning to demonstrate genuine effort. Things are starting to get better.
Lip Service	We're talking a good game, but our actions are not in line with what we're saying.
Business As Usual	We haven't changed at all – it's "business as usual."
Not Applicable	This factor is either not relevant to our work or not on our radar.

The Sweet Spot

The Public Capital Audit

Mark down your ratings for each factor below in terms of your community.

	We've Got it	Real Progress	Starting To Improve	Lip Service	Business As Usual	Not Applicable
An Abundance of Social Gatherings — that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.						
Organized Spaces for Interaction — where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on community challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns.						
Boundary Spanning Organizations — that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges and marshal a community's resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not act as the driving force.						
Safe Havens for Decision Makers — where a community's leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in "unofficial," candid discussions.						
Strong, Diverse Leadership — that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.						

Chart continued on next page.

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Mark down your ratings for each factor below in terms of your community.

	We've Got it	Real Progress	Starting To Improve	Lip Service	Business As Usual	Not Applicable
<p>Informal Networks and Links — that connect various individuals, groups, organizations and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages and community norms from place to place.</p>						
<p>Conscious Community Discussion — where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act. Discussions about:</p>						
<p>Community Norms for Public Life — that help guide how people act individually, interact and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.</p>						
<p>A Shared Purpose for the Community — that sends an explicit message about the community's aspirations and helps reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.</p>						