

Learning 1 – The Problem With Problems

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At a recent Kettering meeting with City Managers, I was struck by how universally the focus of relationships with community was “problems.” Certainly, problems are one way of defining a part of the kinds of relationships government or any institution might have with a neighborhood and local people. However, the possibilities of productivity are also limited by the idea that what we are about is problems.

In the five communities where we have Asset Based Neighborhood Organizers, two of which are supported by local government, people are associating the name for the main activity as “connecting.” The connections are not about problems. They are about possibilities and creativity. They result in collective action growing out of the desire people have to make their neighborhood ever more livable. It is probably the case that if these newly connected people were engaged by institutions around problems that require meetings the whole activity would begin to wither away.

It is important to recognize that the language we use to define the purpose of an association or meeting often puts people in a box that limits their productivity. The “problem” box usually focuses on a negative aspect of community and a resolution provided by institutions. The asset-based approach is a box that usually focuses on creativity produced by citizens. One of the reasons we may have so little productive citizen creativity at the local level is that people buy into the belief that the purpose of getting together is to deal with a problem. There is another purpose that is probably more important and that is engagement that mobilizes citizen creativity and contributions. Perhaps we need a name for this. It is not problem solving. It is mobilization of creative vision.