

Transparency and Trust: From Looking in to Being in

John McKnight

Co-Founder, Asset-Based Community Development Institute

Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation

One explanation for the failings of our democracy is that government is not trusted. One aspect of the national dialogue on restoring trust in government suggests that a critical reform is government transparency. The proposition is that the work of government must be visible rather than opaque or hidden. As citizens, we should be able to look inside the government so we can understand what it is doing. It is this ability to understand that can lead to trust.

In practice transparency takes several forms. It may mean disclosure – making visible that information required by law or administrative rules. It may mean making government practices visible through “hearings” where citizens are engaged in direct contact and dialogue with elected or administrative officials inside the system. It may mean the willingness to make visible institutional mistakes and failures rather than covering them up.

Each of these and other traditional transparency reforms place the citizen as an outsider looking into a system. Transparency becomes a word for how much you can see from the outside. Each method has limited effect on trust-building because the citizen is a supplicant trying to see inside rather than sitting at the table inside where they are part of the government process itself.

One example of transparency where citizens are acting inside rather than observing from the outside is the practices of the Police and Fire Departments of Longmont, CO. There, retired Chief Mike Butler’s efforts to creating a trusting relationship with citizens began by opening up the department so that the community could come inside.

The Police headquarters was re-designed so a citizen felt it was a welcoming place rather than a secure fortress.

Then citizens were invited to become part of the department’s internal process. This meant that all the residents of the City were invited to sit at the table in department meetings dealing with:

- The hiring of police officers.
- The promotion of police officers.
- Oversight of the disciplinary process.

- Staff meetings.
- The development of a long-range strategic plan where several thousand residents participated.
- Implementation of the long-range plan.
- Developing and implementing training.

The department treated media reporters just like other citizens, encouraging them to come inside so that they could easily report on the engagement of the department and local residents. This provided even wider citizen knowledge of the work going on inside the department and in the neighborhoods.

In each of these processes high school students were intentionally involved. The schools supported this student engagement and authorized a new course conducted by police officers.

As the department invited citizens to engage in its internal processes, the citizen participants began to see that the Department was a vulnerable organization that had limits. As a result, citizen participants began to recognize that they had responsibilities for community problems that the police could not address. As a result, local residents and their associations began to take responsibility for new functions that included:

- Citizens, including high school students, facilitated conversations between victims and offenders enabling restorative justice.
- A process called SOMOS (we are) was facilitated by local Spanish speaking residents to resolve disputes between citizens and police officers.
- A citizen group was formed by residents to take on functions previously performed exclusively by police officers.
- Citizens assisted in investigating certain types of crimes.
- Local citizens assisted in supporting those struggling with mental illness or addiction.
- Citizens assisted the department with administrative assignments contributing their expertise, especially in the field of IT.

It is significant that the transparency that brought people inside developed the trust that led residents to take on new functions that only citizens can perform. In this sense, the department's openness was a major factor in strengthening neighborhood functions and authority. It is these new community functions and the relationships they created that had more to do with neighborhood safety and security than the presence of police. Nonetheless, it *was* the Police Department that precipitated the community change that created increased security and trust.

For those concerned about trust in government, Longmont's lesson is that officials should be vulnerable enough to risk opening up their system so all the citizens can engage the government from the inside. And as inside participants, genuine trust can be created and, seeing the structural limits of the system, citizens can recognize they have responsibilities, power and authority to perform their unique neighborhood functions.