

NEXUS: The Pittsburgh Dialogues for Volunteers, Philanthropists and Activists

**Event Highlights from January 31, 2006
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Part One: The Challenge

If you compared two communities with similar levels of income and educational achievement, the community with the higher level of social capital – that is, with more connections and greater trust among its residents – would be a community where individuals:

- Lived longer and were measurably healthier, with less reports of a series of diseases;
- Enjoyed a safer community, by all measures;
- Experienced more successful, higher functioning schools;
- Governed themselves more effectively, with better delivery of public services and decreased incidents of corruption;
- Flourished economically because the business community worked better;
- Reported being happier about their lives.

Recent research on individuals successfully leaving welfare rolls after the first five years of reforms shows that in state after state, the best predictor of success was not the quality of the job training nor the quality of child care and other supports. These factors are important, and I'm not arguing against public investment. But the *best* predictor of who got off welfare? It was those people who knew somebody who helped them get the job.

There are only 3,200 auditors in the entire Internal Revenue Service. The chances of being audited are minuscule. We all pay our taxes because we know that our neighbors will pay their taxes. So we don't need to employ a huge army to police the paying of taxes. It's done voluntarily. There's a form of trust working there.

Race is critical. If you had to name an institution in this country that was designed to destroy trust – to destroy social capital – it was slavery. Three hundred years before the war and then another hundred years of Reconstruction, and it remains a pervasive and persistent factor. The South continues to struggle, in part, because of the legacy of slavery.

If we look at the membership of large national organizations over a full century, the trend is clear. When we look at the last 35 years of the century, we see a steep decline. Now, if you were living in Gavelston in the 1960s and you were in Kiwanis and the attendance started dropping, you'd figure, "*must be because we're meeting the wrong night of the week or charging too much or have lousy speakers!*" But the same thing

happening to the Kiwanis in Gavelston is happening to the American Bar Association in Atlanta and Hadassah in New York City and Rotary in Portland. No one said, "Must be social capital!" Locally, no one saw the pattern, but it is a pattern.

Woody Allen has said that eighty percent of life is just showing up. Americans are not showing up!

- In 1972, 22% of Americans responded positively when asked if they attended public meetings where local affairs are discussed. By the end of the century, this number is down to 13%, almost a fifty percent drop.
- In 1972, 17% of Americans reported taking a leadership role in community organizations. By the end of the century, that percentage had dropped to 8%, more than a fifty percent drop.
- At its height, in the early 1950s, 48% of Americans reported attending church weekly. By the end of the century, it had dropped to 36%.

Collective activity is dropping in all domains of our lives, not just the public arena.

- Early in the 1970s, people entertained at home or were entertained at home 14 or 15 times a year. By the end of the century, it is only about 8 times a year. If you're being invited out less, it's not you.
- By the 1950s, Americans were giving 2.3% of their income to charity. By the end of the century, it is 1.6%. We are sharing less and less with other people. Americans may be the most generous people, but when you adjust for income, you see that the percentage being given is going steadily down.
- In 1960, 55% of Americans said, "Yes, most people can be trusted." By the end of the century? 35%.

Visualize your community as a big bathtub. You have a pool of social capital - a pool of active, engaged, trusting people. On the top of that water is a very thin layer of older people. That top layer is cooling, they are dying and they are retiring. We are losing them. Coming into the bottom of the tub is this big mass of younger people, who are far less engaged and far less trusting. The water is getting colder.

The 10/10 rule tells us that for every 10 minutes you spend driving in a car, it reduces by 10% virtually every form of social capital activity - 10 % less likely to vote, 10% less likely to give to charity, 10% less likely to trust neighbors.

Part Two: The Lessons

People don't come together to build social capital. You don't call a neighbor and say, "let's go build social capital." That's just not how it happens. People come together to be with friends, or improve the neighborhood. Along the way, though, social capital becomes the means they use to connect and then, it helps to produce the ends.

Social capital is often a side effect. That is, social capital gets invested in an activity. It produces an outcome - which might mean higher wages or better schools or a better neighborhood. But it *also* produces more social capital. So it produces both things and you need to pay attention to more than one factor. You're building social capital while you achieve an end, and then the social capital cycles back in to help you do the next activity.

Scale matters. This is about building trust. This is an intimate activity, it is not something you do to a stadium of 15,000 people. You do it *one by one by one* to build trust. At the same time, there is this notion of bonding and bridging. It is easiest to build social capital with people who are like ourselves - that's bonding, sort of like super glue. The critical thing, though, is can we build social capital, can we build trust, can we build connections with people that are different from us - different religion, different race, different ethnicity, different economic class? ***That's the test for America.*** If we don't find out how to do the bridging, the bonding won't be enough. So we've got to find out how to do that.

Building social capital requires redundancy and multi-strandedness. It takes more than a single meeting with a person. We need to watch how others work and trust each other. We need opportunities to see how someone else regards a colleague, too.

This is incredibly time and labor intensive. But it is worth the time and labor activities, it is worth the intensity that it takes, because in the end, it has far more potential to add, and to be able to apply to the next and the next situations. The challenge for us is to *do* it.

If we are not working on building social capital, if we are just treating it as though it may happen or it may not, if we are treating it as some kind of a kumbaya la-di-dah thing, if we are not working on building it intentionally, then we are substantially reducing the likelihood that we will achieve the maximum benefit of virtually anything that we are involved with, whether it's health, education, job training, housing. It's a powerful, powerful force.