

Pete Carlson | August 28, 2015

Developing more and better regional business-civic leaders



Growing a regional economy in ways that expand opportunity for all requires distinctive leadership skills that are different from managing a business or running a government agency. Currently, leaders with the requisite skills are in short supply. And when they move on, burn out, or pass away, they often leave a vacuum that is hard to fill.

That is a key finding of a [study I conducted of 10 regions participating in the Brookings-Rockefeller Project on State and Metropolitan Innovation](#), an effort designed to deploy a new model of economic development that promises better results for more people and communities.

An important backdrop for that finding is that inclusive regional economic growth doesn't happen on its own. Somebody has to bring together key stakeholders across program and jurisdictional boundaries, develop a common plan, and oversee implementation through a network of partnering organizations. In the regions I studied, the individuals best equipped to perform those core leadership functions came from many different kinds of organizations, but business leaders were particularly important since it has proven to be difficult to implement economic growth strategies without their active engagement.

In the past, CEOs of large regional corporations, banks, and utilities embraced this role. But globalization has shifted CEOs' focus outside their home regions, and mergers and acquisitions have thinned their ranks and shortened their tenure in any one region. As a result, the pool of high-level corporate leadership available to participate in regional partnerships is shallower, more transient, and less influential than in the past.

Fortunately, there are some innovative efforts under way to develop the next generation of regional civic leaders from the business community. Those efforts focus on educating mid-level executives about the regional economy and plans for growth, engaging them in carrying out those plans, and building their capacity to sustain and expand this vital work as their own careers advance.

For example, [Kansas City Tomorrow](#), a civic engagement program sponsored by the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City (a regional CEO organization), is closely tied to [Kansas City Rising](#), the region's economic growth strategy, and the program's curriculum is structured around priority opportunities and challenges identified in that strategy. In addition, the more than 500 members of the KC Tomorrow Alumni Association represent a network of business leaders available for roles in carrying out that strategy.

World Business Chicago forges an even stronger link between leadership development and its regional growth strategy through its [fellowship program](#), which provides an opportunity for mid-level business executives to spend four to six months on loan from their firms to help implement the [Plan for Economic Growth and Jobs](#). Using an apprenticeship model, each fellow is assigned to a particular initiative, and is responsible for conducting background research, developing a business plan, recruiting partners, and overseeing the execution of that plan. Fellows also participate in strategy sessions and steering committee meetings for the plan as a whole.

In Northeast Ohio, the focus is on helping civic leaders develop and practice the unique skills that collaborative civic leadership requires. [The Fund for Our Economic Future](#), [Leadership Akron](#), and [Leadership Cleveland](#) have developed a curriculum that focuses on how to build partnerships that reach across organizational and sector boundaries, how to catalyze action and promote accountability without hierarchical authority, and how to navigate through complex and dynamic environments. All of

those activities require leadership skills built on trust and often require being willing to admit “I don’t know, but let’s find out.”

Taken together, these innovative efforts offer a new model that could be taken to scale by the myriad of leadership development programs that currently operate in cities across the United States, providing a solid platform for cultivating new cadres of business-civic leaders.

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