

The Transformation of King Henry

Henry Moore

I recently learned that I have cancer of the lymph nodes. Nevertheless, I am very upbeat. I have a very good chance for a full recovery. My family and my support network are lifting me up, and I am doing everything I ever wanted to do. I am enjoying my family, watching my daughter Morgan (who is now 16 years old) grow up. I really enjoy watching my wife, Donna guide Morgan's development helping her prepare for college and adulthood. My work, which takes me to about 50 cities a year to teach and consult and help people think about how to move institutions to be more productive by engaging citizen leadership, continues to vibrantly fulfill my vision of helping others to build thriving communities.

When I first got my cancer diagnosis, I called a colleague from Baton Rouge to tell her that I didn't think I would be able to finish our work together because I would have to focus on the challenge ahead. She said, "Well, Henry Moore, I hope you don't think you're going to get off that easy. I've had cancer twice and I beat it both times. I took my chemotherapy on Friday and I was back at work on Monday. So I expect you to be here for the job." And I said, "Yes, ma'am."

My ability to do that job –and to benefit from the many relationships and resources and satisfactions my work brings me– is the result of my amazing life journey. I want to tell part of the story of that journey here.

Growing up on a farm in rural North Carolina, where life was difficult, I had this image of helping people and being a help to my community. This vision led me through college and, in 1981, it led me to begin 17 years of service in Savannah, Georgia, as assistant city manager. Under the gold dome of City Hall, I worked hard on the mission of providing services to improve the community. We used management by objectives, problem solving, resource allocation, and timeliness to improve public facilities and services. We won awards that recognized our effectiveness.

Yet we hit a ceiling, especially with the advent of crack cocaine. Citizens acted like consumers of government services, saying "Give me something. I want you to come and fix me, fix where I live, fix this problem." Many citizens did not see themselves as producers of neighborhood well-being. Recognizing this limit brought an important turn in my journey as I learned a difficult and critical lesson: that **we managers must lead by stepping back**. Our success is measured by the extent to which residents take ownership of the mission of neighborhood revitalization. Community leaders must drive community improvement and our task as managers is to develop the skills, the resources, and the relationships to assist them. Managers must also transform organizations to nurture, lift up and support citizens.



My journey's turn toward a new form of leadership began at a workshop with a 90 year old guy named Ed Deming who had been a management improvement pioneer in Japan. He said that transforming any organization means that people in organizations themselves must get stronger, and then they will think of ways to be more productive, making the organization more effective and also benefiting themselves.

The second big step came at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina. Their intensive leadership development session included collecting "360° feedback" from my subordinates. They said, in effect, that I was an SOB, and I learned that people in Savannah called me "King Henry." (My wife Donna said that she could have told me that before the session, saving the City \$3,000).

I realized that when I went on vacation my employees went on vacation, and that if I wasn't around nothing was getting done. I had to "transform Henry" in order to be more effective. Top-down management doesn't really work. In effective organiza-

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tions, the lights are still on when you go home. I recognized that we needed new skills to complement the traditional skills taught in management school. New skills such as listening, nurturing, supporting, asking, and acting on what people say to us.

I began to figure out how to make the whole organization work better by stepping back. Instead of cultivating employee yes-men, I began to cultivate **gappers**: people from our organization

who really cared about working “in the gap” between city government and neighborhood residents to develop new connections and relationships and lift up communities. Instead of simply trying to fix communities, we asked citizens about their priorities. We found that each neighborhood had its own priority: improving housing, or combating drugs and crime, or eradicating blight. We listened to what community residents were saying and we tried to find ways of closing gaps, helping them to lift up their own communities to accelerate revitalization.

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We discovered how to surface new leaders in a community, how to get them involved and how to sustain their involvement over time. One significant step was the creation of “Grants for Blocks”, which provided grants of up to \$500 for residents to do what ever they wanted to improve their neighborhood, provided that it didn’t benefit them personally. They planted flowers, cleaned up vacant lots, established tool banks, and otherwise used the money to make visible improvements in their neighborhoods. People who wanted to contribute their skills, gifts, and capacities came forward in ways that we had not known were possible before we stepped back and offered support. Citizens mobilized and our organization realigned itself to help residents plan and implement neighborhood revitalization.

Most important, we nurtured bottom-up neighborhood leadership. Savannah began to physically improve neighborhoods and to build the trusting relationships with the community that are necessary for sustained improvement. This transformation was difficult and it took time, but it was successful. Active residents came to City Council meetings, zoning hearings, and neighborhood meetings. Residents not only expressed their vision for safe and attractive neighborhoods, they worked together to achieve those visions.

After leaving City Hall, I began to help other communities to apply these lessons. My work focuses on building community partnerships that mobilize citizens. I help people think about how they can build strong organizations that are sensitive to their mission and engaged with their community. I look for ways that residents can gain their own strength, take ownership, and lift up their communities.



Some communities, such as these three, have made remarkable progress.

- **Fremont, California.** This very diverse city of over 200,000 people speaking many languages, adopted an ordinance for community engagement. The entire city organization made a commitment to increased community involvement. They hired a community organizer and held a community summit with over 500 persons to determine how to improve the community. (See Fremont's tools for neighborhood engagement at www.ci.fremont.ca.us/Community/CommunityInvolvement/default.htm)
- **Staunton, Virginia** (the birthplace of council/manager government), The City Manager hired me to help build a community partnership with an African-American neighborhood that still holds annual reunions for a high school that closed 40 years ago. The association and the Booker T. Washington Community Center became the base for a partnership with the broader community that developed a plan for the neighborhood and for the city as a whole. The neighborhood and the city are making remarkable progress.
- **Seattle, Washington.** Despite budget cuts, the city keeps building community partnerships. A Neighborhood Service Unit, located in the Police Department, represents a bottom-up approach to engage citizens in making the community safer.

Across the nation the statistics are clear: the safest neighborhoods are those in which people know their neighbors, talk to each other, watch each other's houses when they're away, and otherwise ensure that their neighborhoods are safe. This citizen action would be fundamental to safety even if it were possible for the city to provide more and more police officers.

In my journey I have come to fully understand John McKnight's message: institutions must do what cannot be done by citizens, but we must give citizens the space to reclaim their own communities. Leaders must not be at the top of a pyramid with citizens at the bottom. Leaders must be inside a circle with other partners and stakeholders. Our organizations and institutions must step back. In doing this, there are two rules. Rule number one is, citizens have the answers. Rule number two: when in doubt, refer to rule number one.



For a case study of the work in Fremont, turn to page 178.