



THE COMPETENCIES FOR CIVIC LEADERSHIP

An Introduction To The Core Curricular Underpinning of the KLC

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The KLC Competencies offer a framework, born out of listening to Kansans, for effective civic leadership. Think about any failed effort at making change happen in civic life, and chances are one or more of The KLC Competencies was absent. Conversely, successful civic leadership efforts tend to embody these simple, yet profound competencies. The KLC Competencies represent the type of leadership needed to truly create healthier communities.





Most everyone intimately involved with the Kansas Leadership Center (board, staff, faculty and advisors) has significant experience in civic life. I mention this, not to pat ourselves on the back (there is a difference between being involved and being effective after all – more on that later), but instead as a way of conveying our empathy with those active in trying to build stronger, healthier organizations and communities. Our experience tells us exercising civic leadership is hard. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it!

We also believe developing civic leadership capacity in others – which is our charge – is a deep and daunting task that requires more know-how than we collectively possessed when we began the KLC effort. This led us to design and implement a process of engagement with Kansans about the nature of our state’s civic challenges and the type of leadership necessary to make progress on those challenges.

Our experience, as well as the feedback from listening to Kansans, tells us there is something different about leadership in civic life versus business or organizational life. Of course, there are many similarities, with the main one being that leadership is never easy – anywhere. But we believe leadership is even more difficult in civic life, primarily because no one is in charge. Think about it. In civic life, even the governor has considerably less formal authority than the CEO of any company. To do anything significant, the governor must collaborate with at least the majority of the legislature. It’s no easy task to get a majority of people to do anything significant, but at least a CEO can hire, fire, promote, demote, give a bonus or raise, etc.

Leadership is especially hard in the civic sphere, and if we are going to make progress on creating healthier communities, KLC must help prepare people to exercise a different type of leadership especially in touch with civic life.

Rather than just sit around and wax philosophic about what type of leadership is necessary for civic life, we instead engaged over 100 Kansans to help us answer the question. All were asked the same questions, and their answers were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. As we explored their answers, four broad leadership competencies emerged. This article provides an introduction to those competencies, which have become known simply as The KLC Competencies. Our assertion is significantly greater progress would be made if more Kansans working toward creating stronger communities were competent in The KLC Competencies – diagnose situation, manage self, intervene skillfully and energize others.

DIAGNOSE SITUATION

What does it mean to diagnose situations for the purpose of exercising effective leadership on difficult civic challenges? And why is it the first of The KLC Competencies?

If you are trying to intervene to help make progress on a tough issue, it is critical you understand what you are intervening into. And our experience and observation is that the biggest single mistake people make in trying to exercise leadership on civic challenges is in misdiagnosing the situation. Chuck Krider, a longtime godfather of Kansas economic policy, put it this way:

“Problem identification is key. If you don’t identify the right problems, then you are working on the wrong thing! What are you going to work on? What are you going to do? To set good objectives and goals, you have to understand the problem.”

Why do people misdiagnose the situation? Two reasons stand out.

Don’t Just Stand There, Do Something. When a community or organization is facing a difficult issue, there is almost always tremendous pressure, especially on those in authority, to act, to do something, making it difficult to spend the time necessary to do a deep



diagnosis. In the complex economic meltdown in the fall of 2008, President George W. Bush and the Congress took unprecedented steps in a matter of days. Inaction would not have been easily tolerated by the public.

Find a Pain-Free Fix, Please. Second, the actions that are preferred by the community are ones that address the manifestations of the crisis with as little cost or pain as possible. The hurry-up legislation enacted to deal with the economic crisis was designed to stem the hemorrhaging rather than address the underlying causes.

That approach to the economic crisis illustrates the single biggest diagnostic error people make in framing civic issues: treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.

What is an adaptive challenge? And how is it different from a technical problem? Here's a simple example. If the brakes on your car are failing, there is an easy fix. Take the car to a repair shop and hire an expert, a mechanic, who has skills and knowledge that are probably beyond your competence, certainly beyond ours. For you, the problem is beyond your capacity. For the mechanic, it is right in the wheelhouse and can be tackled with a high degree of certainty that the intervention will be successful. But let's say that your 85-year-old father has recently moved in with you. He has been driving your car and, given his failing eyesight, prefers to keep his foot on the brake all the time just in case he needs to stop quickly. Getting new brakes will only provide a temporary fix.

Like most complex problems, your brake problem has elements that are technical – the brakes do not function properly – and aspects that are adaptive – your father has been driving a car for over 60 years and for him driving symbolizes his continuing to lead an independent life, an important part of his self-identity. For him to stop driving would rip part of his heart out.

Technical problems live in people's heads and logic systems. They are susceptible to facts and authoritative expertise. Adaptive challenges live in people's hearts and stomachs. They are about values, loyalties and beliefs. Progress on them requires the people with the problem to do the work, and the work involves refashioning those deeply held beliefs.

You can see why there is always pressure in a community or organization in which you are working to interpret challenges as technical problems.

Here is a Kansas example. A few years ago, the legislature, feeling increased pressure from businesses and individuals, felt it had to act on health care reform. The only problem was we avoided the deep, daunting adaptive challenges related to health care reform – cost, cuts to other state programs, responsibility for government vs. individuals, etc. – and instead went for the technical fix and established what is now known as the Kansas Health Policy Authority (KHPA).

And you know what happened? For a while, the pressure in the system waned. Legislators could point out that they established the KHPA and had asked the KHPA to develop recommendations for reform. Low and behold, a few years later the KHPA, as requested, delivered a set of health care reform measures to the legislature. The problem was those recommendations represented many of the same conflictual value choices legislators tried so hard to avoid a few years earlier. What do they value more – health reform or a pledge not to raise taxes? Clean indoor air or the rights of local business owners? More Kansans covered by Medicaid or reducing the size of government?

KHPA is a fine agency, staffed by talented and competent Kansans, and its mission goes beyond simply providing recommendations to the legislature. However, when it comes to health reform, KHPA must wrestle with the reality that it may have been the legislature's attempt at solving an adaptive challenge with a technical solution.



Interpretation of the current reality is an essential first step in exercising leadership on civic challenges so that you can tailor your intervention to the situation. In our brake example, your intervention would be very different if you understood that the problem was about undermining your father's sense of independence rather than getting new brakes. Similarly, the U.S. government's intervention into the economic crisis might have been very different if the problem were diagnosed as having to reverse the country-wide norm of forgoing savings in favor of consumption – spending beyond our means – rather than preventing bank failures.

How do you interpret reality well? How do you diagnose situations effectively? How do you distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges when they are often enmeshed and when most everyone around you wants you to accept the technical interpretations?

Here are four techniques you might find useful.

First, as your community struggles to deal with a difficult issue, it is a leadership act to help **keep open interpretations that are adaptive, systemic and conflictual rather than technical, individual and benign**. Here's an example. Kansas, like many states, has faced severe budget shortfalls. It would be tempting to diagnose those situations as simply having less money than anticipated to meet projected expenses. And that interpretation might well lead, as it often does in government budget crises, to across-the-board cuts. But a more uncomfortable and systemic interpretation might be that the problem is less about a revenue shortfall than about our unwillingness in more flush financial times to make hard decisions about priorities and to save enough money to get us through difficult times. That interpretation would lead to a different set of approaches than across-the-board budget cuts.

It is important to push against our default interpretations, which are often ingrained deeply in us. When discussing how business men and women often diagnose civic life, one of our interviewees said, "... a lot of business folks have this fifth-grade civics book understanding of how

the public sector works. They apply their model of how the universe works to the civic model they learned in fifth grade. It's more complicated than that." Another said, "We need skepticism. One of the things that has been a hindrance here is that if you hear it from the right source, if the superintendent says it for example, it must be true." You must be able to push against your default thinking and test multiple interpretations.

Second, interpretations are only a guess, ideally your best guess at the time. That means your best guess might not be right. So when you are engaged with others in trying to name and frame the issue, it is important to **hold on to multiple interpretations** rather than gravitating toward the first one that gains broad acceptance or meets the need to just do something. Test several interpretations simultaneously. Dr. Bob Moser, a family practice doctor in Tribune, Kansas, put the challenge of interpretation in civic life this way:

"What we need is what I call the family practice model, because we have to go through so many different specialty rotations in medical school. So, you may see five different ways (or interpretations) to repair a particular wound. As you learn more about it, with time, study and evaluation, you take a little of this one and a little of that one."

Third, adaptive challenges are often **more about process than content**. The merits of an issue are relevant but not controlling. Think more about *how* you are going to go about making progress than marshalling the facts and making the best argument for your preferred solution.

Ron Hammerschmidt, a former long time Kansas Department of Health and Environment employee, suggested to us people tend to get an "A" in commitment towards their cause, but a "D" or "F" in understanding what really needs to be done. What really needs to be done, at least for adaptive challenges, tends to be more about process than content.



Finally, if you are trying to find the underlying, deeper, adaptive challenge, **look for where there is conflict or pain**, where the heat is in the system, where the disequilibrium is high. All of those indicia are signs of an adaptive issue at hand.

Diagnosis is an art, not a science. But it is an essential skill in the effective exercise of leadership on difficult civil challenges where progress has been inconsequential or non-existent.

MANAGE SELF

Exercising civic leadership effectively requires artfully deploying yourself. And artfully deploying yourself requires knowing yourself well enough to make conscious choices about whether you are well situated to intervene and, if so, how to intervene to maximize the chances of success.

What is it that you need to know about yourself?

First, with a cool, clear, realistic eye, you need to be able to **identify your own strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers**. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Everyone has hot buttons that others can press to take us out of our game. Everyone’s packaging is both a resource and a constraint. If you are a well-spoken male, there might be situations where a more plain-spoken female would be more effective. If you have a big unfilled need to be liked, then you may not be well-suited to delivering unwelcome news with clarity.

Brian Black, Corporate Public Affairs Manager for Spirit Aerosystems in Wichita, said, “You get someone who is high super intelligent, who is just extremely bright, but their bedside manner is terrible, so they are ineffective. I know people with Ph.D.s who never had more than an adjunct faculty position, because they just don’t get it.” Regarding triggers, or the “hot buttons” that can set us off, Kay Johnson, Director of Environmental Services for the City of Wichita said, “We need to have a commitment to not give up, get mad, take our toys and go home!” Understanding what might trigger us to “take our toys and go home” is critical towards managing yourself for the difficult task of civic leadership.

KLC FOUR COMPETENCIES

1. **DIAGNOSE SITUATION**
 - Explore tough interpretations
 - Distinguish technical and adaptive work
 - Understand the process challenges
 - Test multiple interpretations and points-of-view
 - Take the temperature
 - Identify who needs to do the work

2. **MANAGE SELF**
 - Know your strengths, vulnerabilities and triggers
 - Know the story others tell about you
 - Choose among competing values
 - Get used to uncertainty and conflict
 - Experiment beyond your comfort zon
 - Take care of yourself

3. **INTERVENE SKILLFULLY**
 - Make conscious choices
 - Raise the heat
 - Give the work back
 - Hold to purpose
 - Speak from the heart
 - Act experimentally

4. **ENERGIZE OTHERS**
 - Engage unusual voices
 - Work across factions
 - Start where they are
 - Speak to loss
 - Inspire a collective purpose
 - Create a trustworthy process



Second, and closely related to the first, **you need to know the story others tell about you.** How are you understood? What is your formal authority? What is your informal authority? Are you considered an expert on certain issues? What is your reputation? What is the folklore about your past performance and involvement? If you are new to the community, you have certain advantages and certain disadvantages. If you supported the winning candidate for mayor, you are in a different place than if you supported her unsuccessful challenger. If you are a business person, then your stepping out on an issue that is seen to be pro-business will be less effective than if you are a prominent environmentalist.

Third, you need to **distinguish yourself from your role.** When you are contemplating intervening to help make progress on a civic challenge that has been persistent in spite of previous attempts, people will come at you personally, with both praise and pushback. But you are neither saint nor sinner. It is not about you. Your initiative is a role you are playing at a moment in time, helping your community or organization address a tough problem, and that activity will generate all sorts of emotions, which may well be directed at you. Taking them personally, thinking they are about you and not about the role you are playing, will be a diversion. On this note, prominent Kansas historian Craig Minor said:

"I have been very impressed by some politicians' patience. Sometimes I'm not impressed by much else about them. Sometimes they are listening to things that are quite abusive and not losing their cool or demeanor or feeling that people do have a right to express their opinions."

Since you are likely to be part of any system you are trying to change, a member of the community which you are trying to move from the current reality to an aspired future, you are part of the problem and will need to change as well. This suggests two other elements of managing yourself.

Fourth, **identify and choose among your own competing values.** What has held you back from intervening in the past and what risks have you not been willing to take? If you can figure out what your own competing values are, such as being liked versus being respected, then you can also begin to assess whether you are willing to take the loss potentially associated with choosing among them. Embedded within this fourth concept is the ability to have the courage to accept risk and tolerate dissent while elevating a value for the common good over your own advancement.

[Exercising civic leadership often requires us to put at risk our personal stakes for the common good. Leadership is risky business and requires tremendous courage.](#)

Mary Birch, one of my longtime mentors and the former president of the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce, said, "Leadership requires head, heart, guts and courage. And courage is the one I find missing the most."

A core value for everyone, according to Joe Harkins the longtime civil servant and leadership scholar at the University of Kansas, is doing what feels right. He said:

"Every human being, according to Sigmund Freud, is hard-wired to seek pleasurable experiences and avoid unpleasant ones... But that very instinctive drive in human beings is the Achilles heel for leadership. So you have to find people who have the ability to recognize the instinctive response when they experience it and override it. Leadership requires acting in unnatural ways. You have to willingly, consciously take on unpleasant tasks because they probably got to be a problem because everyone else was avoiding them. And that requires an extraordinary degree of self-awareness."

Fifth, beware of the tendency to make a moral principle out of being reluctant to do something that is really uncomfortable for you to do. It is important to **do what is needed, not what is comfortable.**



For example, most people do not like to ask difficult questions of their friends, colleagues, peers or authority figures. But sometimes, forcing people to deal with difficult questions is exactly what is necessary to make progress. If you refuse to ask difficult questions, it may be tempting to say, "It's not right to put people on the defensive that way," rather than, "I know that is the right thing to do here, but it just makes me feel bad." Exercising leadership on tough civic challenges will undoubtedly require you to get outside of your own preferred behavior, your own comfort zone. You will have to do what is needed, not what is comfortable.

Again, Harkins' words are illustrative:

"All of us have incredible ability to rationalize our behavior. We can sidestep and avoid unpleasant situations with grace and dignity and convince ourselves that it's the right thing to do. We're deceiving ourselves and avoiding leadership. We talk ourselves into avoiding it and go on with our business. So the ability to recognize and override the pleasure principle is a fundamental leadership characteristic."

To manage yourself well requires a lot of self-awareness, not only of who you are as a human being, but also of who you are in the particular situation into which you are planning to intervene. In a sense, you are being asked to understand yourself deeply both in human terms and in political terms. This is no easy task. Often your view of yourself on either dimension is different than how you are perceived. For that reason, it is useful to reality check your own assessment with trusted others who can help keep you from making a misstep based on some assumptions that are part of your own self-identity but do not match how you are experienced by others.

Finally, you can't manage self, let alone exercise leadership, without taking care of yourself. While the results are worth it, exercising leadership will wear you down. Making progress on adaptive challenges can't be done overnight and therefore requires you and others to stay engaged for the long haul. Burnout is not a leadership behavior. Take care of yourself - physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, etc. - and you'll be able to exercise leadership more effectively.

INTERVENE SKILLFULLY

If you keep doing what you have always been doing, nothing is going to change. If Kansas civic culture keeps doing what it has always been doing – engaging in zero-sum, win/lose scenarios – nothing is going to change. Leadership is about change. And the catalyst for change is often an intentional, well designed intervention. Intervening skillfully is the third of The KLC Competencies for civic leadership.

Individuals and organizations "intervene" into the civic culture to attempt progress on things they care about. A church notices an increasing number of homeless families and intervenes by opening a shelter and providing job training. At a neighborhood homes association meeting, an individual realizes the meetings constantly revolve around technical issues such as dues and trash pickup and intervenes to focus part of the conversation on how the neighborhood can begin building neighborly bonds among residents.

It is important to think of interventions, or civic leadership in general, as able to come from anywhere in civic life, not just the positional authority figures. In fact, Kansas communities will be better off as soon as we quit thinking about civic leadership as positional and start thinking of it as an activity.

Doing this allows us to analyze what behaviors and attributes make up the visible activity of leadership. We often refer to the "visible activity of leadership" as interventions.

Mayors, city council members, county commissioners, state legislators, non-profit executives and business CEOs are often referred to as "leaders." Why? Because they have an authority title, and in most places in life, authority and leadership are synonymous. The authority figures in the state legislature – speaker of the House, Senate president, etc. – are called "legislative leadership." When citizens complain about the leadership of their city, more often than not, they are referring to the city council members.



These individuals are authority figures; whether they ever exercise leadership is a completely different question.

Are they experimenting in hopes of making real progress on the community's most daunting challenges? Are their interventions leading to real change? Simply holding the authority role is not enough.

Eric Sexton, longtime government relations director for Wichita State University and current WSU athletic director, put it this way:

"Being able to stand up and make a speech is not leadership. It {leadership} is about how you engage people. I am talking about leadership that moves communities, states and neighborhoods... Just because someone is not viewed as an {authority figure} doesn't mean they are not driving a system, a process or a decision."

The ability of more Kansans to intervene skillfully in the civic arena is critical. But understanding the concept of intervening – or of leadership as an activity – is only part of the equation. We need to learn how to intervene skillfully

What makes interventions effective? Citizens who exercise civic leadership are intentional about when, why and how they intervene into a civic system or organization. They resist intervening in whatever way feels most natural to them (i.e. their "default" – see Manage Self) but instead **make conscious choices about what type of intervention is needed to fit the situation.** Dale Dennis is the deputy commissioner of education in Kansas. He has been with the Department of Education since the '60s and has worked closely with the legislature all those years. He referred to the idea of conscious choices in describing members of the House of Representatives:

"Some of them went to the microphone and talked all the time. Those that didn't accepted the reality that leadership often includes making choices about when to speak!"

People who excel at intervening skillfully in leadership calculate how best to **capture the attention of their desired audience** (e.g. protest, steady engagement, etc.). These individuals **understand and appreciate the role and necessity of conflict** in making progress on daunting issues. Conflict is not seen as something always to be avoided, but rather something that may be a necessary part of the process. They have diagnosed the situation well enough to know whether their intervention should be designed to increase or decrease conflict.

Intervening skillfully also means resisting the temptation to put all the work on their shoulders. Giving the work of identifying the challenges and possible solutions back to the usual and unusual factions involved with the challenge engages stakeholders in powerful ways. This is different than delegating, which usually involves telling someone else exactly what you want them to do.

This is the riskiest of the four KLC competencies. Once you begin an intervention you lose control of the outcome. Diagnosing the situation and managing self, the first two KLC competencies, are critical, but not inherently risk laden.

At the heart of this competency are two beliefs. First, leadership is about activity (interventions) not position (authority) and, second, effective interventions are intentionally designed and delivered.

At its core, leadership on daunting civic challenges is about emotions more than cold hard facts.

A few years ago the Kansas Legislature was debating a bill to require young children to sit on a booster seat in automobiles. In the eyes of advocates, the cold hard facts suggested the law should be passed. In fact several studies suggested implementation of the law would immediately begin to save lives in Kansas.



To the disbelief of these advocates, the bill had lingered for years. Finally, in 2006 a state legislator, who had a young family, including a child with special physical needs, went to the well of the House to speak passionately on behalf of the bill. His speech contained no facts. Instead, he spoke with first-hand knowledge of raising a child with special needs. As he **spoke from his heart** the bill's passage became more likely. Towards the end of his speech he implored, "It will be worth it if this bill helps just one child not face what my daughter has faced." No facts. No figures. The bill passed later that day.

Over the years dozens of legislators had spoken at the well in support of the bill. Many were fine orators, but none spoke from the depth of such great personal experience as this legislator. By speaking from his heart, he created the space for others to do the same through their words and votes.

At the heart of intervening skillfully is the belief you can't change people's values; they have to change them. Intervening skillfully is about creating the conditions for people to begin changing their values in a lasting way.

ENERGIZE OTHERS

The fourth of the KLC competencies is energizing others. Leadership is not a solitary activity. The best idea or intervention goes nowhere without others taking up the cause. For example, someone passionate about helping low-income Kansans build assets doesn't get very far if he can't embolden dozens of additional champions for the cause.

No one individual or entity can tackle a daunting civic challenge on their own. Leadership on these challenges must involve energizing more people to take up the difficult work of civic leadership. But, how is this done?

Central to energizing others is figuring out where they are coming from. What do they care about and what do they need? People tend to get energized when they perceive you care about their situation

and their issues. The old adage "it is better to be interested than interesting" applies here. To be effective at energizing others you need to **start where they are, not where you are.**

The temptation of course is to have a firm understanding of where other like-minded people are coming from, but to make little effort at understanding where our opponents are coming from. Quite frankly, it is easier to vilify them than to seek to understand them. But making progress on adaptive challenges more often than not requires you to engage with numerous factions. One faction alone simply can't make enough progress.

Discovering "where they are" can best be done by intense engagement. But the purpose of the engagement is not to sell them on your idea, but rather to **empower them to help design the intervention.** You have to be open to (and wanting) new possibilities that go beyond or in a different direction than your initial preferred solution. Don't defend your idea, but instead let the group work on it, make it better or throw it out.

People effective at exercising leadership also intervene in a manner that engages **people across factions in a collaborative and inclusive way.**

Their activity in groups or civic life tends to bring disparate individuals together to address daunting issues facing the broader community. One interviewee described a barrier to civic leadership not being a lack of willingness to engage across factions, but a lack of knowing how to do it. He said, "It's the ability to go from their own universe to the next."

Especially important to civic leadership, these individuals purposefully seek ways to **engage an expansive and unusual group of citizens,** rather than relying on the same iconic or exclusive, depending on your perspective, small group of individuals to develop and implement solutions. For example, rather than relying on the "city fathers" to devise a plan for the revitalization of downtown, an individual skilled in civic leadership would instead



engage the “city fathers” and numerous other individuals or factions that have a stake in downtown revitalization. They realize diverse minds, reflective of the many factions in the broader community, devise stronger and more sustainable solutions than any one or two factions could on their own. Another interviewee said, “For progress, there need to be other ideas that come into the mix.”

In addition, people are energized when they see or can envision progress on what they care about, on their purpose. More importantly, discovering a collective purpose and consistently **orienting to that purpose** is critical to energizing others. It creates hope within organizations and communities. High-performing communities are high-hope communities. Orienting to purpose reminds coalitions, factions and individuals why they are engaged in the difficult work of civic leadership.

On one hand, energizing others is about empowerment, engagement and collective purpose – all of which tend to have a positive orientation. On the other hand, overcoming difficult civic challenges will require significant change, and change usually means loss or at least perceived loss for some. Rather than sugarcoat the bad news or pretend it does not exist, it is actually energizing for others to hear someone **speak to their loss**. The losses need to be acknowledged, not suppressed.

Because real or perceived loss is involved with any significant civic change effort, you must **pace the work** of the group or community. Communities need to be ripe for change. Nothing zaps the energy out of people faster than forcing too much change on them too quickly. Conversely, not asking enough out of people who are ready and willing is also a recipe for failure to energize others.



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