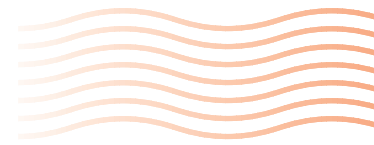


UP-FRONT



Inspired by Ben: The Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange

What describes the unique blend of visionary energy and tactical smarts so often found in people who get things done? The phrase we think fits is “strategic impatience.” Good leaders are impatient to spark action but understand that good strategy can make sure the action yields the result they want. Last September, when the Pennsylvania Economy League sponsored the Leadership Exchange visit to Chicago, we wanted to see what happens when enough people get both strategic and impatient.

Over the course of three days, our group of 72 civic leaders — drawn from government, business, and the nonprofit sector — learned about a wide range of concrete achievements now helping metropolitan Chicago position itself for the 21st century. We heard about new regional approaches to economic development, transportation, housing and environmental policy. We heard about new projects, like Millennium Park, a \$500 million downtown development that now draws millions of visitors annually. We learned about the impact of new civic organizations, like the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, that now pave the way for regional collaboration. And we learned about public agencies like the Regional Planning Board, freshly empowered to guide land use and transportation decisions for the whole area. We asked hard questions and received direct answers.

The overall impression is that the six-county region often called “Chicagoland” is anything but bogged down. How is this possible? Metropolitan Chicago faces all the same issues as Greater Philadelphia. It has the same economic and social challenges, the same problems with schools and taxes, the same vital but struggling urban core, and the same advantaged but increasingly stressed and congested suburbs.

Chicago also has a similar abundance of competing political interests. Regions are inevitably rife with divisions. Regional leaders will always be pressured to put their constituents first; they aren’t often rewarded for cooperating with the neighbors. Like Greater Philadelphia, metropolitan Chicago is a giant that often finds itself tied down by the ropes of a thousand local interests.

What allows the giant to get up and move, even haltingly, is civic leadership. Many point to Chicago’s Richard M. Daley, one of America’s most powerful mayors, as Chicago’s moving force. But his successes have often depended in a large part on collaborations with business leaders, civic groups, and fellow regional mayors. The stories we heard in our dialogs at the Leadership Exchange graphically illustrated a basic, modern truth: when no one governs an entire region, everyone must work together.

The good news is that the spirit of collaboration and coordination is on the rise in Greater Philadelphia. As we returned from the Exchange, we were delighted to find our participants were applying the lessons they’d learned. Exchange alumni quickly threw their weight behind Philadelphia’s important ethics bill, raising \$36,000 in just 3 days to promote it and make sure it won big for the good of the community. Others joined efforts to improve regional policies for parks, transit, taxes and minority business development. To create a place to meet and share ideas, PEL has formed what we’re calling the Franklin Caucus, named for the man who set the template for creative civic engagement. We are committed to sustaining the momentum the Leadership Exchange launched.

It’s encouraging that this momentum exists at all. Two years ago, PEL’s *Regional Review* featured a cover asking, “Is Regionalism Dead?” Our conclusion at the time was that regional collaborators would always face an uphill fight, but that the idea made too much sense to die. Our meetings in Chicago proved that useful regional cooperation is possible, but it takes a combination of strong political leadership, active civic engagement, and perhaps a healthy dose of fear.

Our collective impatience is perhaps inevitable; the smart strategies used to address it are not. But neither are they impossible to create. In the pages that follow, a host of encouraging examples shows how metropolitan Chicago is finding success.

What’s our simple takeaway? Think big and work together. Now.

Sincerely,

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