



Introducing the Left Hand to the Right Hand The Benefits of Annual Leadership Summits

Can you imagine a company where top executives never agree on goals or strategies – in fact, never meet at all? How about a non-profit where co-workers never talk about what they're working on or ask each other for help?

If you live in a typical city, something very similar is happening among your community's leaders – the state legislators, city council members, county commissioners, school board members, non-profit and business leaders who shape your city's future. They never meet as a group, share plans and ask each other for help.

The results are predictable: Mayors lobby directly with state agencies without involving their most important asset, their legislative delegation. Legislators support bills that local officials oppose. School boards build new schools without coordinating plans with county officials and traffic backs up every morning and afternoon. Chambers of commerce recruit industrial prospects but can't close deals because the elected officials aren't supportive.

To an extent, the problem is understandable. Each of these bodies has its own constituency. Once in office, they focus on their issues, not their neighbors'. And there's a reason civic leaders are reluctant to ask each other for help: turf protection. The school board doesn't want to give the county a say in its plans; a city council doesn't want state legislators interfering in city business.

Our experience at Civic Strategies, though, is that these fears are greatly exaggerated, and the benefits of annual meetings that bring the entire regional leadership together – called leadership summits – can be enormous.

But careful here. The benefits accrue over time, meaning that you won't see major results right away. Stands to reason: Cooperation is fueled by strong relationships, mutual interest and opportunity. It takes time – and repeated interactions – to build relationships. Only when the relationships are established will your leaders discover mutual interests and opportunities for cooperation.



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How Leadership Summits Work

We helped design a first-ever regional leadership conference for one of our clients, an urban chamber of commerce. To guide the chamber's planning, we did a study of seven cities that successfully used leadership summits to build strong cooperation among elected officials. The communities we studied ranged from small towns to major metro areas; two were top-20 metro areas.

The typical leadership summit involves from 30 to 100 key leaders – although one big-city chamber brings together 1,500 participants each summer. Some are one-day affairs, others stretch over a three-day period. Many are held out of town. For some cities, there are several meetings a year; some of which are social and others strictly business.

These aren't retreats, which are planning sessions for people who work together – a city council, for example, or chamber board. At retreats, issues and positions are usually well known beforehand and relationships are established. A retreat's main purpose, then, is make decisions, set priorities and do detailed planning.

Summits are different. They are for people who rarely work together, and they always have strong elements of mutual learning and relationship-building, even among those who've attended summits for years and years.

In fact, the key to success for leadership summits is repetition. As we noted in our report, "One thing almost everyone we spoke with acknowledged was that it was tough in the beginning. With every passing year, however, participants developed a higher level of trust, and the conferences became increasingly productive."

What Summits Can Accomplish

What are the payoffs? Once the relationships are in place, summits can become effective ways of building support for critical civic projects. Examples:

- A mid-sized city's leaders agreed to support a local-option sales tax referendum at their summit and created the leadership team to get it passed.
- Another mid-sized city agreed to support their delegation in getting important local bills through the next legislative session. The city government and chamber of commerce split the cost of a contract lobbyist whose job was to work with the delegation on local issues with research, outreach to other legislative delegations and alerts about committee action.
- In a smaller community, regional leaders agreed to pool the resources of three small school systems and begin joint planning.
- In a major metro area, participants agreed to support a new regional transit system.

Getting Started

But where do you begin? Our suggestion: Use the first leadership summit to show elected officials and business leaders what they have in common. You might use a visioning exercise to get them talking about the future, then move to "first steps" – in which participants discuss how the region might begin its journey toward a better future.

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From there, you can have participants talk about the things they're working on. Careful: You don't want debates; you're looking for greater understanding. You want people to lay out their agendas and tell why their top items are so important to them. A skillful facilitator will find ways of pointing out the areas of mutual interest – how, for example, a city council member's desire for better inner-city parks may connect with a suburban legislator's support of greenspace legislation.

Most important, find ways of introducing leaders to one another in a way that's not adversarial and takes them beyond campaign slogans and political positions and into an exploration of interests. Keep in mind that most experienced politicians are pragmatic. Once they understand one another's interests, they'll find ways of working together.

In later summits, you can move beyond relationship-building and exploration of interests and toward specific issues. Your objective: a mutually supported regional agenda that spells out what each party – the legislative delegation, city councils, county commissions, school boards and business community – will do to achieve it. Don't rush things. It takes several years of relationship-building before leaders can move to agenda-setting. You'll never do away with relationship-building entirely. New leaders will come on the scene, older officials will retire, and you'll need to bring the newcomers into the fold.

About Civic Strategies

Civic Strategies is collaborative and strategic planning firm that helps local governments and civic organizations make important decisions. Over the years, we've designed numerous community leadership summits. To learn how Civic Strategies can help your leaders come together to create relationships and make decisions, call us at (404) 873-5343 or e-mail us at info@civic-strategies.com.