

## Making the right connections

Corporate anthropologist Dr. Karen Stephenson discusses the merits of identifying life's human connectors and working toward shared governance solutions

Interviewed by Tom Martin

BUSINESS LEXINGTON

As New Orleans songwriter Allen Toussaint noted, "we're all connected." And since Toussaint made music of that observation in the '90s, profound advances in technologies and social media have made us all the more connected — globally, although quite often in an ironically disconnected manner lacking in that essential ingredient of trust. The new versions of connectedness may or may not pass muster with instinct when humans actually interact in the physical presence of one another.

Corporate anthropologist Dr. Karen Stephenson studies social networking and consults businesses on how human connectedness functions in today's world.

In a February 2010 column published in the Louisville Courier-Journal, Stephenson noted, "You can have the most cutting-edge technology at the fingertips of a team, but if the members of the team don't trust one another, nothing — or worse — will result."

Stephenson had just served as adviser to the 2009 Leadership Louisville Connectors Project that used sophisticated analysis of roughly 5,500 nominations submitted by people throughout Louisville and Southern Indiana to sort out and identify a "dream team of existing and emerging leaders." The result was a diverse group of 128 individuals, ranging in age from 28 to 71, who were recognized for their success at getting things done through distinctive styles of "trusted leadership."

During a recent visit to Lexington as the guest of Hanna Resource Group to explore the prospect of a project similar to the Leadership Louisville effort, Stephenson talked with Business Lexington's Tom Martin about the nature of human connectedness in the 21st century business environment. Here is an edited version of their conversation. It can be heard in its entirety as a podcast online at [www.bizlex.com](http://www.bizlex.com).

**TM (Tom Martin):** You study and advise about social networks in the workplace. What do you look for?

**KS (Karen Stephenson):** Over the 35-year period in which I have been doing this kind of work, I have been selectively honing and validating a series of questions, which look at different levels of trust. People don't realize that they're answering questions about trust, because I am asking, "Who do they work with? Who do they go to for a new idea?" But what research has shown is that they correlate actually to certain levels of trust. If you ever asked a person who they trust, you'd never get an honest answer. Nobody would tell you that. I certainly wouldn't. ... So the point is that it's an inference model. You're asking questions that get at trust indirectly.

It takes a lot of research to validate



that, and that's what I've been doing over the last 30 to 35 years. And the way that I know it's been successful is that we're able to absolutely diagnose issues around organizational culture, where we can spot where the deep veins of trust actually run. We can remediate issues having to do with conflict — and quite successfully and in record time. So instead of spending the one-to-two years of traditional classically trained anthropologist research, we're now able to focus this battery of just a few questions and the analytics that go behind that in 30 days. And (reducing the process to) 30 days from one-to-two years is a huge improvement, because nobody has one-to-two years to wait.

**TM:** You have offered solutions to a variety of complex problems. Can you give us some examples?

**KS:** If you took a look at mergers and acquisitions, almost everybody agrees that they see "80/20." Maybe 20 percent of mergers are successful; 80 percent are unsuccessful, and largely that's because cultures don't blend very well. The things that hold the cultures together are the trusted social networks. So if you can diagnose those trusted social networks and figure out the ways in which they can blend more harmoniously, you can go from a four-year period on a merger down to six months and make that merger and acquisition happen successfully. So this approach is being used as a form of due diligence for mergers and acquisitions. ...

A second aspect is when new hires, new people, come into any type of organization or community or government or private sector firm, they are typically handed by a manager the various manuals. They are told what to do and "the way we do things around here." But they could be assimilated into the culture much more rapidly if they knew who the key connectors were — those key, trusted, connector people within the culture — who, by the way, are not the usual suspects. They're the unusual suspects. And so what, for instance, a firm like Shell Oil did, is that they had a four-year onboarding experience for many years. It took about four years to really totally integrate or assimilate new hires into their culture. They shortened that down to six weeks because of this method, because of this approach.

There are many other aspects, but let me just close with a third, which I think is very interesting and exciting and is part of my pro-bono work. When you look at city, regional and national governments and look within urban centers at the complex problems that people are trying to solve — like reduced crime, "Why can't we all work together?", "Let's build this bridge," and "Why are there these issues that are causing such conflict in our community?" — a large part of that could be solved if we could find the hidden connectors, the people who are,