

Kentucky.com



Tom Eblen: Program aims to connect with area connectors

By Tom Eblen — Herald-Leader columnist

Posted: 10:19am on Jan 29, 2011; Modified: 10:27am on Jan 29, 2011



Tom Eblen

GEORGETOWN — There are two kinds of community leaders. The first is obvious: mayors, county judge-executives and the heads of companies, civic groups and non-profits. Then there are the "connectors."

Connectors are people who bring others together for the common good but often don't attract much public attention. They are grass-roots dreamers and organizers who know how to engage the right people, gather the right information, connect the dots — and get things done.

You will soon hear a lot more about connectors because United Way of the Bluegrass is coordinating the Bluegrass Connectors project to identify them in the area.

The project's goal is to identify the key 100 or so connectors in the region, based on analysis of nominations from the public. Those connectors will then be connected with each other, which should naturally increase communication and cooperation across city limits and county lines.

The project also could help empower a new, more diverse group of people to join the ranks of that first group of community leaders. That would be good, because leadership initiatives in Central Kentucky too often resemble the old movie *Casablanca* — we just "round up the usual suspects."

This social-networking project grew out of a meeting last week at Toyota. Nearly 100 of the region's first group

of leaders were invited by Lyle Hanna, a local human-resources executive, to listen to Karen Stephenson, a cultural anthropologist who has taught in the design and management schools of Harvard and UCLA.

Over the past three decades, Stephenson has developed a lucrative international consulting practice, working with organizations to improve performance by identifying their internal networks of communication and trust. After 9/11, she even helped the Pentagon try to figure out the al-Qaida terrorist network.

Stephenson achieved a degree of fame after Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, wrote an article in the December 2000 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine about her work with furniture manufacturer Steelcase to design more productive offices.

Since then, Stephenson has donated time to several cities, including Louisville and Philadelphia, to apply to communities the "connector" research that she has done for more than 500 companies.

"In every community, there are these people who work hard for the greater good, but they don't always have the time to connect with everyone else," she said. By asking the public to identify and recognize these citizens, she said, "It gives people an opportunity to think differently and find those people who have been overlooked."

Louisville's connectors project was organized in 2008 by Leadership Louisville. "We have never done anything like this before that has had so much impact on us and the community," said Chris Johnson, who has been president of Leadership Louisville for two decades.

The Louisville project chose 128 key connectors from among more than 5,500 nominations. Many were executive-level leaders with recognizable names — including former Mayor Jerry Abramson and new Mayor Greg Fischer. But others included small-business owners, educators, a librarian and an administrative assistant. (People can't nominate themselves, and Stephenson's computer analysis tries to weed out "ballot stuffing.")

"Word has really gotten out across the community that connectors are resources," Johnson said. "We're trying to dig deeper and ask them about issues they care about, issues that are under the radar."

The nine-county United Way of the Bluegrass, with help from the Blue Grass Community Foundation, is facilitating the Bluegrass Connectors project so it won't be viewed as Lexington-driven. Some previous efforts at regionalism have failed because leaders in counties surrounding Lexington resent Bigfoot.

Hanna, United Way president Bill Farmer and others who arranged for Stephenson's help don't know exactly what will result from the Bluegrass Connectors project, but they have high hopes.

"There are a substantial group of people who are getting things done in our communities who we don't notice because we are often focused on the executive level," Farmer said. "Because of the economic reset, we recognize that things have to be different if we are to maximize our potential."