

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

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Recap of 9-29-20 Discussion with David Bray and Rachel Happe

Leadership in Turbulent Environments:
Building Communities for Inclusivity and Trust

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

The conversation on September 29th was fascinating and fast-moving. Its themes and questions are bolded below. As David said when he proposed the session, we need strategies and governance models that bring us together rather than divide us, distribute leadership and empower individuals, reward diversity in all its forms, and connect us to each other in ways that reduce anxiety and fear. To me, this session felt like homework about work that people need to do right now.

The question, **how do you set shared norms at scale**, led to consideration of ways in which culture is created and sustained, including the insight that shared culture has to be intentional. A long-time federal leader developer said that it's about inclusion, opportunities to excel, and how to be high-performing. Leaders have to become coaches.

Rachel made the point that social contagion affects behavior. She used her young daughter's school as an example, where the staff has already created a culture where we help each other. Because of that, mask-wearing is working.

David asked a startling question about an eventuality that's within the realm of possibility: **How will you build shared culture with new hires if you never meet them?**

David offers this perspective on leadership: There's a difference between management and leadership. Management is when you do what's expected of you ... leadership is when you step outside of expectations.

"Why is this important? What are three reasons why we should do this?" And so that helps inform my priority structure. And even more importantly, however – and most people don't do this – **give me three reasons why we should not do this."**

Eric McNulty, author and executive leader developer at the [National Preparedness Leadership Initiative](#), who also talked with us a year ago about his new book, asked, **Who gets called a leader? And how do you create a space to cultivate virtuous behavior?** –Because some behavior NPLI is seeing is alarming.

For more on his leadership philosophy, see a talk David gave in 2016, [Manage This, Episode 9: Leadership Tips From Dr. David Bray](#). That talk includes the concept of **pushing decision-making to the edge**, which came up in this session because, as David says, it's really impossible for one person to know everything.

The concept of change agents fits here, because if you only do things from a top-down fashion and you don't empower the edge, you're going to be less resilient and less nimble in a rapidly changing environment. The deputy CIO in attendance made the point that, in the context of planning without adequate information in the midst of anxiety and change, the only unit that can really do it is a functional team.

On the idea that the only alternative to tight control is chaos, Rachel pointed out that **there's a big middle ground between structure and chaos** – largely unexplored as yet. In connection with the college alumnae board she's serving on, she also made the point that it's possible to have too much governance.

A federal supervisor in attendance made the excellent point that failure is not necessarily failure if we can learn something from it. That prompted the FAIL acronym from David: **F**irst **A**tttempt at **I**terative **L**earning. The exchange reminded me of my favorite Thomas Edison saying, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

By the way, that supervisor also said that the management mindset around telework is changing, and that the people on her team are meeting or beating their deadlines.

On **information technology**, we heard a couple of things. From David, we heard that misinformation and disinformation have been around since the days of Jefferson, and the difference now is that network effects are amplifying them, and that IT is increasingly becoming weaponized.

Rachel, who was an IT analyst before she moved into community management to help organizations adapt to tech, made the point that IT keeps evolving at a faster rate than people's brains are equipped to handle. An article she wrote in 2011, [Communities – The New Strategic Imperative](#), is an evergreen resource on that topic. After our session, she also emailed the following:

"The issue David is concerned with - that the process of democratic governance is slow and potentially too slow for an accelerating world - is the reason I became so interested in the online community space initially - because I saw how effective it was at turning the slowest governance process (that was typically only used in not-for-profit/government because of their mission-driven mandate) to a *more* efficient governance system than the hierarchical/top-down model used by most commercial organizations. It's interesting to me that, because of that, we see more adoption of these approaches in the commercial space. That is changing but slowly."

On **performance measurement**, Rachel said we're still measuring people on getting an answer, whereas we need more "show me your work." **Can we start measuring behaviors and switch from lagging to leading indicators?** For example, what percent of members in internal communities have asked questions? If the percentage is growing over time, it means that more people have enough of a sense of psychological safety to ask questions. Rachel was asked whether open-ended questions are more helpful than Yes/No questions, and her response was that the questions elicit different kinds of information. The Community Roundtable has a model that separates the two.

What a stimulating conversation! For more about Rachel's work there, go to <https://communityroundtable.com/what-we-do/>. For more about David's work, go to <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/geotech-center/about-the-geotech-center/>.

Participant affiliations

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
Atlantic Council GeoTech Center
BM Martin Solutions
National Preparedness Leadership Initiative – Harvard University
Pearl City Chapter, Project Management Institute
The Community Roundtable
U.S. Department of Education, Retired
U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Retired
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Navy
U.S. Securities & Exchange Commission

Participants joined from the DC Metro Area, Boston, MA, Wickford, RI, Colorado Springs, CO, and Hyderabad, India. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley

