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Douglas Easterling

Ph.D., Wake Forest University School of Medicine

Holly C. Sampson

Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation

Beth Probst

Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation

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RESULTS

Speak Your Peace: A Communications Strategy for Changing Community Culture

Douglas Easterling, Ph.D., Wake Forest University School of Medicine; Holly C. Sampson, M.S.S., M.L.S.P., and Beth Probst, Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation

Key Points

- Strategic communications can play a crucial role in advancing tangible community-wide impacts.
- “Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project” (SYP) was developed by The Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation and the Millennium Group to improve the civility of public discourse, under the premise that this would strengthen community decision making, expand civic engagement, and increase residents’ interest in elected office.
- The SYP campaign promotes nine principles (or “tools”) adapted from Forni’s book *Choosing Civility* (e.g., pay attention, take responsibility, apologize, give constructive criticism).
- City councils, county commissions, and school boards in the region adopted the nine tools as ground rules for meetings, leading to more civil interaction.
- There is suggestive evidence that civility has spread to citizens who are actively involved in local public affairs.
- The initiative’s success can be traced to the multi-mode approach to communicating the nine tools, as well as the recruitment of “champions” who highlighted the tools and translated the tools into concrete policies and practices.

now committed to using their financial, human, and social capital to achieve discernible impacts in line with their mission.¹ As foundations have become more intent on creating positive change in people, neighborhoods, and communities, they have recognized the need to invest in strategies beyond grantmaking (Bernholz, Fulton, & Kasper, 2006). These new strategies include raising key issues on the local or national agenda, convening problem-solving processes, creating and strengthening networks, generating new knowledge, advocating for new policies and practices, and building the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities (Easterling, 2008; Hamilton, Parzen, & Brown, 2004; Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004; Irvine Foundation, 2003; Ranghelli, 2006).

In adopting strategies such as agenda setting, mobilizing, and advocacy, foundations typically rely to at least some degree on *strategic communications*. Communicating information, opinions, and ideas to specific target populations is a well-established mechanism for fostering positive social change (Abroms & Maibach, 2008; Hornik, 2002). As such, foundations large and small have invested resources in communications campaigns designed to advance their mission. One notable

Introduction

Arguably the most important trend among foundations over the last 10 years has been the shift toward strategic philanthropy. Rather than contenting themselves with the goal of “making good grants,” more and more foundations are

¹ The shift was jumpstarted by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer’s 1999 article “Philanthropy’s New Agenda: Creating Value,” in which they argued that responsive grantmaking has a much lower return on investment (and thus is less deserving of a foundation’s privileged tax status) than does strategic philanthropy (Porter and Kramer, 1999).

example is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which has relied heavily on communications strategies to support goals such as reducing tobacco use, changing eating habits, increasing physical activity, expanding access to health care, and reducing disparities in health status.

There are a number of distinct ways in which communications can be used to promote social change. To date, foundations have generally focused on either (a) encouraging individuals to change their behavior in positive ways, (b) raising an issue on the public agenda, or (c) building support for a particular policy solution. This article focuses on a fourth approach to strategic communications, namely, *communicating information and ideas with the intent of changing the culture of a community.*

The specific intervention described in this article is “Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project,” a multimedia campaign designed to shift the nature of public discourse within the Duluth-Superior region of northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin. Speak Your Peace (SYP) promotes the adoption of nine “tools” of civility—relatively simple principles (e.g., pay attention, take responsibility, apologize) that support respectful communication. The Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation (DSACF) and the Millennium Group, a leadership council convened by the foundation to identify and address key community issues, developed the campaign between 2001 and 2003. The ultimate goal of SYP is to improve public discourse. Although differences of opinion are expected, the nine tools of civility promote disagreeing in a healthy and civil matter.

The problem that SYP was intended to remedy was an entrenched, pervasive pattern of divisiveness and disrespect among elected officials and residents when dealing with almost any public issue. According to one elected official, “local politics was a blood sport.” Meetings of city councils and county commissions in the region had gained a reputation for shouting matches and personal attacks. This toxic atmosphere made it difficult to reach reasoned decisions on many matters related to, for example, economic development, budgets,

planning and zoning, and environmental protection. Moreover, qualified residents with an inclination for public service chose to avoid elected office because of the maliciousness of public discourse. This divisiveness extended beyond public officials to ensnare the larger community. Letters to the editor of local newspapers provided an especially fertile forum for leveling personal attacks on those with opposing views.

DSACF and the Millennium Group recognized that this culture of disrespect was undermining the region’s ability to make progress on a number of fronts and might even be contributing to the outmigration of young people. SYP was explicitly designed to change the civic culture of the region, especially the culture within which elected officials carried out their duties. By promoting a set of pro-social principles, the designers of SYP hoped to appeal to residents’ higher values and elicit a way of interacting that would be ultimately more satisfying and productive.

Speak Your Peace (SYP) promotes the adoption of nine “tools” of civility—relatively simple principles (e.g., pay attention, take responsibility, apologize) that support respectful communication.

This article describes the development, design, implementation, and results of the SYP campaign. The assessment is based on information provided by DSACF staff, along with in-depth telephone interviews with six key informants outside the foundation who have specific knowledge of how the campaign was carried out. The first author carried out the interviews in the spring of 2009, approximately six years after the SYP campaign was rolled out. Interviewees were asked to describe their involvement with the campaign, their perception of what the campaign was intended to achieve, their observations about any effects

that the campaign had generated on civility, and recommendations as to what other strategies might be useful in producing a more civil culture in the region. The interviewees included elected officials, a prominent representative of the local media, and other community leaders. Of the six interviewees, four were residents of Duluth and the other two were from Superior.

Before moving to a description of how SYP was developed, we first consider the larger question of whether strategic communications has the potential to alter a community's culture in the manner that was required in the Duluth-Superior region.

Using Communications to Change Community Culture

The basic question addressed by this article is whether a highly focused communication strategy can promote a positive change in a community's culture. The concept of "community culture" refers to the norms, attitudes, value systems, and beliefs (mostly unwritten) that determine how the residents of a community behave and interact with one another. In attempting to change a community's culture, a foundation is operating out of the belief that one or more of these prevailing norms, attitudes, values, or beliefs is unhealthy or counterproductive. In the case of SYP, DSACF sought to replace a prevailing norm that tolerated, and even celebrated, personal attack in the course of public meetings and discourse.

Most prior attempts to use communications to change culture have focused on the culture of an *organization* or an *institution*, rather than the culture of an entire *community*. For example, "character education" curricula such as Character Counts seek to create a more cooperative, supportive culture within elementary and secondary schools (Josephson Institute, 2008). Likewise, media campaigns have been used on college campuses to create a culture that is less tolerant of alcohol consumption. Campaigns that provide accurate information on the actual rate of drinking have been particularly effective in resetting norms and modifying behavior (DeJong et al., 2006).

There is less evidence of communications strategies being effective in changing the culture of entire towns or cities. One interesting case is the Kansas Health Foundation's media campaign to change the way that adults in communities across Kansas interacted with children (Thorson & Beaudoin, 2004). Building on Search Institute's "developmental assets" model (Benson, Mangen, & Williams, 1986), the foundation sponsored extensive newspaper and television advertising to encourage adults to reach out to children (especially children other than their own) in ways that would support those children's health and development. The campaign was essentially an effort to shift the culture of the state to be more supportive and nurturing of young people. The evaluation of the campaign found small increases in the degree to which adults across the state regarded themselves as being "attached" to their community, as well as small improvements in attitudes toward youth. However, no significant change was seen in adults' reports of how they acted toward youth (Thorson & Beaudoin, 2004).

Developing an Initiative to Create a More Civil Culture

As mentioned above, SYP was designed with the intent of promoting more civil interaction among elected officials and the general populace in the Duluth-Superior region. The decision to focus on civility emerged out of a planning process that DSACF convened on the larger topic of social capital.² The foundation's interest in social capital was stimulated by a data report issued by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The report, covering the various communities served by the Knight Foundation, showed that the Duluth-Superior region had relatively high levels of *bonding* social capital, defined as connectedness and

² Social capital is a concept originated by sociologists and political scientists to explain how community residents overcome shared problems with collective action. The construct has been defined in a variety of ways in the academic literature, but all definitions include some notion of *social connectedness*, accompanied by the premise that communities with "stronger" connections (e.g., more trusting relationships, wider networks, denser networks, more bridging across lines of difference) are in a better position to promote the well-being of their members (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). At least 50 community foundations across the country have developed programming in the area of social capital over the last decade (Easterling, 2008).

trust among people who are similar in terms of race, ethnicity, age, profession, religion, and other factors. However, Duluth-Superior was lower than other communities when it came to *bridging* social capital, defined as connectedness and trust among people who come from different groups.

In any community, bridging social capital will be lower than bonding social capital, but the disparity was especially pronounced in Duluth-Superior. In practical terms, this result signified that people in Duluth-Superior socialize strongly with people from similar backgrounds, but maintain excessive distance from people who look different or have a different perspective. This pattern of tight but distinct social clusters fostered mistrust across lines of race, class, and ideology, which in turn set the stage for the disrespectful interactions that had come to characterize public discourse in the region.

Following up on the Knight Foundation report, DSACF invited Robert Putnam to be the keynote speaker at its annual luncheon in May 2001. About the same time, the foundation convened the Millennium Group, a planning body consisting of approximately 100 residents of Duluth and Superior who were identified by DSACF as the next generation of leaders in the region. At a dinner meeting during Putnam's visit, the Millennium Group discussed with Putnam what might be done to build social capital in the Duluth-Superior (or "Twin Ports") region.

Building on the interest expressed during Putnam's visit, the Millennium Group focused its deliberation and problem solving on the topic of civic engagement. Of the four project areas identified by the Millennium Group, the one attracting the greatest interest was "Improving the Quality of the Public Dialogue/Civic Discourse."³ The group

was keenly concerned with the divisiveness that characterized public discourse. While agreeing that debate is healthy for a democracy, the group was disturbed by the lack of civility between citizens when they disagree. Indeed, some members indicated that they personally had refrained from pursuing public office or engaging in community issues because of the likelihood of being "shot down" for their thoughts and opinions.

Duluth-Superior was lower than other communities when it came to bridging social capital, defined as connectedness and trust among people who come from different groups.

To develop a specific remedy to address divisiveness, the Millennium Group created the "Improve the Quality of Public Dialogue/Civic Discourse" subcommittee. This group consisted of 16 Millennium Group members, including a member of DSACF's Board of Trustees. Staff from the foundation worked directly with the subcommittee and contributed to the development and implementation of its strategy.

During the time that the subcommittee was brainstorming ideas and researching other models, Dr. P. M. Forni visited Duluth and presented his views on civility at the St. Louis County Health and Human Service Conference. Members of the subcommittee who were in attendance at the conference began to envision a public education campaign. They especially liked the ideas outlined in his book *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (Forni, 2002), including the definition of civility as "being constantly aware of others and weaving restraint, respect and consideration into the very fabric of awareness ... a form of gracious goodness" (p. 9). In other words, civility involves not only the *awareness* of others' needs and interests, but also

³ The other three projects were the following: (1) "Community Service Learning with Youth," which intended to work with high school students and the educational systems to increase levels of service learning projects; (2) "Volunteer Resource Center," which planned to connect graduates of "Leadership Duluth" and "Leadership Superior/Douglas County" with opportunities to serve through mentoring relationships; and (3) "Civic Mentoring," designed to mentor those individuals who typically would not have an opportunity to serve in a civic capacity.

thoughtful *action* by one human being toward another.

Forni places civility within the context of the larger community. Both civility and civilization are derived from the same Latin word, *civitas*, which means “the city.” According to Forni, “the aged-old assumption behind civility is that life in the city has a civilizing effect. The city is where we enlighten our intellect and refine our social skills. And as we are shaped by the city, we learn to give of ourselves for the sake of the city” (Forni, 2002, p.12). In other words, civil people are not just courteous, polite, and well-mannered; they are also good neighbors and good citizens.

To assist fellow citizens in understanding what constitutes “civil behavior,” the subcommittee reviewed Forni’s rules of civility. Subcommittee members selected and revised those rules into the following tools to reflect regional needs:

- *Pay attention:* Be aware and “attend to” the world and the people around you.
- *Listen:* Focus on others in order to better understand their meaning.
- *Be inclusive:* Be welcoming of all groups of citizens working for the greater good of the community.
- *Don’t gossip:* Don’t accept when others choose to do so.
- *Show respect:* For other people and for their opinions, especially in the midst of disagreement.
- *Be agreeable:* Look for opportunities to agree; choose your battles.
- *Apologize:* Be sincere and repair damaged relationships.
- *Give constructive criticism:* When disagreeing, stick to the issues and don’t make a personal attack.
- *Take responsibility:* Don’t shift responsibility and blame onto others.

As these ideas for promoting civility began to take shape, it became clear that communications would play a central role in changing behavior. It also became clear that this would need to be a large campaign requiring investment on the

part of DSACF. At the time the foundation was exploring the concept of “community leadership” and examining options for community initiatives. As the subcommittee discussed its plans for promoting civility, DSACF staff determined that this would be an important initiative for the community and a natural fit for community leadership. The Board of Trustees affirmed this view, overwhelmingly and enthusiastically approving the initiative. The board also agreed that this would be an important component of DSACF’s community-leadership strategy.

With the backing of the board, DSACF staff worked with the Millennium Group to translate the nine tools of civility into a high-profile public education campaign. In March 2003, the foundation issued a request for proposals to regional marketing agencies to develop a marketing campaign based on the nine tools derived from Forni’s model. The region’s largest advertising agency (HT Klatzky and Associates) responded with a proposal in which the campaign was designated as their pro bono effort for the year. This proposal was selected. In total, over \$150,000 was contributed by the agency and other vendors to create and implement the ideas of the “Improve the Quality of Public Dialogue/Civic Discourse” subcommittee.

The SYP Program Model

Building on the creative work of the subcommittee, HT Klatzky and Associates developed the actual campaign to disseminate the nine rules of civility. The first step was the creation of the name: *Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project*. The firm also developed the tagline “It’s not what you say. It’s how you say it.” With the name in place, the subcommittee created a vision statement for the initiative:

The purpose of the Speak Your Peace Civility Project is to urge the citizens of the Duluth/Superior area to communicate in a more respectful and effective way. This is not a campaign to end disagreements. It is a campaign to improve public discourse by simply reminding ourselves of the very basic principles of respect. By elevating our level of communication and avoiding personal attacks and general stubbornness, we can avoid unhealthy debate. This will lead to a

Figure 1 Poster showing the nine tools of Speak Your Peace

Figure 2 Logic model for Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project

more effective democracy, and help maintain our sense of community by increasing civic participation. We hope to reach not only elected officials and political groups but also regular people, like neighborhood organizations, church groups and even the parents on the sidelines of youth athletic contests. We are not just targeting those who are uncivil, but those who allow uncivilized behavior to happen.

A variety of communication materials were created in order to reach different audiences with the nine tools. These include the following:

- Public service announcements for print and broadcast media,
- Billboards,
- A Web site (<http://www.dsaspeakyourpeace.org>) with a description of the nine tools, the history of the campaign, contacts, and events,
- A poster that uses buzz words and graphics to display the nine tools (shown in Figure 1),
- Window clings with the nine tools,
- A wallet card that allows for easy referral to the tools.
- Buttons displaying each of the nine SYP tools.

The campaign involved not only promotional materials, but also specific tactics for reaching dif-

ferent target audiences with the SYP message. Initially SYP was conceived as a three-level campaign:

1. *Elected officials* would be reached through tailored presentations made by Millennium Group members and DSACF staff. These representatives would specifically point out how the proceedings of each elected body had undermined constructive public decision making, and would offer up the nine tools as a framework for constructive dialogue. Posters and wallet cards would be distributed as a means of supporting the change process.
2. *Active citizens* would be reached through presentations by SYP representatives to various civic groups, associations, nonprofit organizations, and other groups. The presenters would make the case that increased civility would benefit the community as a whole, and potentially the organization being addressed. Posters and wallet cards would be distributed as a means of creating emissaries for the SYP message.
3. *The general public* would be reached through public service announcements, billboards, and news stories. These spots would provide general information on the campaign and point interested residents to the Web site or

Figure 3 Theory of how increased civility will improve quality of life

the foundation, where they could learn more and receive free materials such as posters and wallet cards.

A fourth component aimed at *middle school students* was added roughly two years into the campaign. Based on the high level of interest shown by school administrators and teachers, DSACF awarded a \$20,000 grant to the Duluth Public Schools (DPS) to support the creation of a program that would promote the use of the nine tools by students in grades 6–8. The resulting curriculum, called “Speak Your Peace in the Classroom,” was developed jointly by DPS and DSACF. The curriculum, which has been taught district-wide, includes four lesson plans for each of the nine tools of civility. Each lesson (approximately 20 minutes in length) provides an opportunity for students to apply a particular tool to real-life situations. The 36 lessons are distributed over the three years of middle school.

SYP’s multilayered approach to promoting a culture of civility is reflected in the initiative’s logic model (see Figure 2). The nine tools of civility provide the initial input, from which the promotional materials and school curriculum were

developed. These inputs support various communications activities directed at elected officials, active citizens, middle-school students, and the general public. The most focused and intentional communications are aimed at elected officials, which is where the subcommittee believed the problem to be most pronounced. The intent of these activities is to change the target populations’ view of what is “acceptable” behavior, which in turn is expected to produce actual changes in behavior (e.g., more respectful conversation, fewer personal attacks, more listening to different points of view). As these changes set in, residents who value civil discourse will be more inclined to enter public service, creating a “virtuous cycle” that reinforces the new culture. Young people play a “policing” role in this change process: through their exposure to the “SYP in the Classroom” curriculum, they become versed in the nine tools and can point out violations among parents and other adults.

In addition to spelling out how the SYP initiative would lead to changes in behavior and culture, the staff of DSACF clarified their “theory” as to why these changes were important to the region. This theory is mapped in Figure 3. The

key assumption underlying SYP is that when a community has public discourse that is truly civil, residents will be more willing to participate in the political process. This will result in new ideas entering public debate. In a community where people are more willing to participate in the political process with new ideas and solutions, community members will make more informed, responsive decisions. The end goal is a more open, engaged community, in other words, a community with more social capital. This is important because communities with high levels of social capital ultimately are higher functioning communities than those with low levels of social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Carrying Out the Initiative

The SYP campaign was launched in August 2003 with a high-profile kickoff event. The president of the Duluth City Council and the president of the Superior City Council presented a joint resolution and encouraged its adoption across the communities. At the event, Mary Johnson, the initial chair of the “Improve the Quality of Public Dialogue/ Civic Discourse” subcommittee, said

We want people to communicate in a healthier, more effective way. If we succeed it will increase civic participation and improve our community. This project is not just targeted to elected officials and political groups, but also to regular citizens. We want to reach neighborhood organizations, schools, church groups, and everyday people.

At the same time that the organizers were planning the kickoff event, a parallel effort unfolded with local elected officials. The subcommittee recognized that the media would cover presentations made to elected officials and/or action taken by election officials regarding SYP. Accordingly, volunteers from the subcommittee worked with city councils, county commissions, and school boards to create buy-in for the nine tools. The City of Duluth, whose council president was part of the Millennium Group, was the first elected body to hear a presentation and to adopt the tools of civility within their meetings. Shortly thereafter, the nine tools were adopted by the City of Superior, the St. Louis County (MN)

Board of Commissioners, the Douglas County (WI) Board of Supervisors, and the Duluth and Superior Boards of Education. In committing to the SYP tools, these bodies passed resolutions with language such as the following: “an atmosphere of incivility and disrespect can have a damaging effect on the proceedings, on the quality of the debate, and on the practice of democracy itself.” As part of the adoption process, SYP posters were placed in the meeting chambers, elected officials wore SYP buttons, and wallet cards were available for all those attending the meetings.

The launch of the campaign included not only a targeted appeal to local elected officials, but also a broad-scale effort to reach the general public. The Web site was launched, a video was created, television and radio public service announcements aired, and billboards went up. The DSACF office provided free promotional materials (posters, wallet cards, buttons, window clings) to any resident in the region who was interested. Also, the Web site allowed for free downloading of posters and wallet cards. The intent was to make the promotional materials widely available and easy to use for residents across the region. To date, these materials have been distributed to more than 10,000 residents.

In order to reach residents with a more in-depth explanation of SYP and the importance of civility, volunteers and DSACF staff made more than 40 presentations to local community organizations.

The nine tools have gained widespread exposure, particularly within the local school systems. As noted above, DSACF and the Duluth Public School system created a curriculum for middle school students in 2005. In addition, a SYP poster was displayed in each classroom throughout the system. To date, more than 2,500 students have completed the three-year curriculum. Initial surveys completed by teachers showed students were receptive to the curriculum and found it engaging and useful. In 2006 *Nick News* featured SYP as one solution in addressing civility among politicians during tense election seasons.

In addition to implementing SYP in communities throughout the Duluth-Superior region, the foundation has shared the campaign with groups around the world that have shown an interest. While SYP was designed to address the particular issues that had emerged in Duluth and Superior, DSACF wanted the materials to be general enough that they would be useful for other communities. DSACF president Holly C. Sampson has presented the SYP concept and process at numerous conferences where other community foundations were present. The SYP Web site is drawing interest from community foundations, civic interest groups, and citizens invested in their community. Finally, the curriculum developed by DPS has been made available for school districts across the country to utilize as needed.

Among the communities that have replicated SYP are Wisconsin Rapids, WI, and Willmar, MN. Willmar has an increasing number of Spanish-speaking residents, so the materials have been translated into Spanish. SYP materials have been requested in places as far away as Russia and Australia.

Reach and Receptivity

The interviews with the six key informants generated rough estimates of the degree to which the SYP campaign reached various audiences within the region, as well as the effect that the campaign had on public discourse. This methodology obviously allows for only an *indirect* measure of public awareness and response, but the individuals selected for interviews have a reputation for being well-connected to their respective community (either Duluth or Superior).⁴

The first set of responses to be reported relates to the reach of the campaign. The key informants were each asked to estimate the percentage of residents in their community who had been exposed to the SYP message. For Duluth (where the population is approximately 86,000), the responses ranged from “somewhat less than half” to “about three-fourths” of residents. For Superior

(where the population is approximately 27,000), the estimates were somewhat lower—between “not many” and “about half.”

Independent data do not exist to either verify or narrow down these estimates. However, there is good reason to believe that at least half the population of the two cities had at least some exposure to the SYP message. Many different mechanisms were used to communicate the message to various audiences, such as PSAs, billboards, presentations at meetings of local organizations, and the school curriculum. Moreover, the campaign received considerable attention by newspapers and television stations that have strong readership and viewership throughout the region.

There is good reason to believe that at least half the population of the two cities had at least some exposure to the SYP message.

Although the key informants diverged in their opinions as to *how many* residents had been exposed to the SYP message, they shared the same basic view as to *which segments* of the population had been most and least reached. The prevailing perception was as follows:

- Virtually every public official in Duluth and Superior who was in office between 2003 and 2004 was very aware of SYP and the civility message.
- Among residents who paid close attention to community decision making in 2003–2004 (by attending public meetings or by following public affairs in the local newspaper), the vast majority had heard of SYP and/or the nine tools.
- The less that a resident was aware about community issues, the less likely that he or she would know about SYP.
- Students enrolled in Duluth middle schools between 2005 and 2008 were all exposed to SYP in an intensive manner.

⁴ Because of budget constraints, formal tracking measures were not instituted to gauge the public’s awareness of the SYP campaign.

The key informants also had a shared view as to residents' *receptivity* to the SYP message. Under this view, receptivity was favorable among one portion of the population, but unfavorable among another. Those residents who had been "turned off" by the divisive character of public discourse (arguably a majority of the residents who actively followed local affairs) agreed with the SYP premise that public discourse needed to be more civil and regarded the nine tools as offering a useful framework—and, indeed, a refreshing change to the status quo. In contrast, the SYP message was not received well by those who had instigated personal attacks or who had benefited from the "winner-take-all" approach to decision making that had come to dominate the local elected bodies. Indeed, one informant reported that this latter group of engaged citizens took offense at being chastised for their behavior.

In effect, the contrasting responses to the SYP campaign reflected different philosophies as to what makes for a "good" democracy. To those who championed SYP, creating a more civil culture was a critical step in drawing more residents into public discourse and community decision making, especially residents who had a distinct interest in "solving problems constructively." Many of these residents had avoided getting involved in local politics because they found the prevailing approach to be so distasteful. On the other hand, the interviewees acknowledged that there are some residents who regard confrontation (and even highly personal criticism) to be a hallmark of a healthy democracy. For this group, emphasizing civility was viewed as a backhanded means of "squelching debate."

One of the interviewees viewed this contrast in generational terms. He believed that people in their 30s ("Gen Xers") were particularly receptive to the SYP framework, especially the principles involving respect for one another, inclusivity, and taking responsibility. At least according to this interviewee, this age group is more skilled and comfortable in interacting with people who have different perspectives, as well as more interested in "making decisions and moving forward." The interviewee had a contrasting perspective on the Baby Boom generation, believing that they tend

to distrust the concept of civility and to be not so concerned with actually solving problems. He also saw resistance among residents in their late 60s and 70s ("the Greatest Generation"). This was attributed to a general comfort with the status quo culture, that is, a community where residents cluster in their own social groups and where policy decisions are often made "in the back room."

As a general rule, residents seemed to view SYP in global terms (i.e., as either a positive contrast to prevailing norms or an intrusion into the normal way of doing things). There did not appear to be a great deal of nuanced criticism aimed at specific tools within the SYP framework. However, one informant was particularly critical of two of the nine tools, namely, "Be agreeable" and "Don't gossip." The first of these was seen as a limitation on critical thinking. The second was seen as running counter to basic human nature.

Although some resistance was encountered to the SYP framework, it did not rise to the level of overt opposition. According to the informants, those who took exception to the idea of civil discourse "grumbled among themselves" but knew that they would face ridicule if they mounted any sort of counter-campaign.

Shift in Public Discourse

Given that the SYP campaign was generally quite successful in gaining public support for the concept of civility and for the nine tools, the next question is whether this support translated into an actual change in public discourse.

There is strong evidence that discourse has become much more civil among elected officials. As noted above, two city councils (Duluth and Superior), two county commissions (St. Louis County, MN, and Douglas County, WI), and two school boards (Duluth and Superior) passed resolutions in support of SYP. In essence, each body adopted the nine tools of civility as a set of ground rules to govern conduct at meetings. These bodies each had a chairperson or other leader who acted as a champion for the nine tools, reminding fellow members of the principles, pointing out violations, and serving as a role model.

The interviews with the key informants indicated that these elected bodies experienced a tangible shift in discourse following the adoption of the SYP framework:

- The reputation of the Duluth City Council has gone from being a body that is “dysfunctional” to one that “works together” and “gets things done.” Council meetings lasted approximately three hours in 2001, but are now only about half that length—largely because there is much less argument and “political theater.”
- Prior to SYP, meetings of the Douglas County (WI) Board of Supervisors were characterized by personal attacks by one supervisor toward another. Since adopting the SYP tools, the supervisors are viewed as much more respectful and willing to listen to one another, as well as more inclusive with regard to the views of citizens.
- The Superior City Council had a reputation as a “Wild West city council” where members were unable to control themselves. It is now much more “disciplined” and focused on common goals.

Evidence also exists that discourse among politicians became more respectful outside of formal meetings. In 2004 a number of candidates running for local office committed to abide by the nine tools and called on their opponents to do the same. The debates that occurred that season were decidedly more civil than what had occurred in preceding years.

As SYP became more widely known, a number of other organizations adopted the nine tools. For example, when a heated debate was expected on a nonprofit organization’s board of directors, the chair of the board secured SYP wallet cards from the DSACF office and presented them to each board member before the debate began. On another occasion, when the members of a private club were debating selling a small piece of property, a SYP wallet card was placed on each chair in the meeting chambers.

There is limited evidence that members of the general public are also acting more respectfully

when discussing and debating public issues. With at least one of the elected bodies that adopted the nine rules, the chairman requires that citizens who speak during the public comment period refrain from personal attacks and show respect to persons on the other side of their issue.

The interviews with the key informants indicated that these elected bodies experienced a tangible shift in discourse following the adoption of the SYP framework.

Some degree of indirect influence on the general public also appears evident. As public officials adopt a more respectful approach to discourse, they serve as positive role models for the wider population. This diffusion process is assisted by the local media. Meetings of the local city councils, county commissions, and school boards are covered by local newspapers and television stations, and many of these meetings are broadcast live on local access cable television. Combined with the fact that residents of Minnesota and Wisconsin are known for their high participation in politics, it is fair to say that the local populace pays close attention to the behavior of their local elected officials. The adoption of the SYP framework by the six elected bodies raised the standards for public discourse for everyone in the region.

To gain a rough sense of how much change in behavior has occurred among the general population, the six key informants were asked to rate the degree to which the SYP campaign led to a variety of effects *within their community*. The following five types of change were assessed:

- Improvements in the way that people interact with one another,
- Increased respect of people with different perspectives,

TABLE 1. Key Informants' Perceptions of Speak Your Peace Campaign's Impact

Type of change	Degree of change			
	Major	Moderate	A little	No apparent change
Improvements in the way that people interact with one another	0	4	1	0
Increased respect of people with different perspectives	0	4	1	0
More inclusive political process	1	3	1	0
More "civil" community culture	1	2	2	0
Formation of new relationships, especially across "lines of difference"	0	1	4	0

- More inclusive political process,
- More "civil" community culture, and
- Formation of new relationships, especially across "lines of difference."

Ratings were made with a four-category scale: "major change," "moderate change," "a little change," and "no apparent change." Five of the six interviewees felt comfortable with this rating task. The sixth indicated that he or she did not have enough knowledge to make an informed judgment.

The results from this rating task are shown in Table 1. For the first four categories of change, the modal response was that SYP produced a *moderate* degree of change. For the final category of change (i.e., formation of new relationships), it was generally agreed that only a little change had occurred.

One of the five informants reported that SYP had produced only a little change in each area. This person acknowledged that discourse had become more civil in recent years, but attributed most of the change to factors other than SYP, primarily the influence of a new cohort of community leaders. (Interestingly, some of these new community leaders who were interviewed by the evaluator reported that the SYP campaign had been very helpful in providing a concrete framework that promoted and reinforced the sort of change they were interested in creating.)

In general terms, the interviews support the conclusion that SYP has led to new norms of discourse among elected officials and among citizens with an active interest in public affairs. Moreover, it appears that those norms are now influencing behavior in a positive direction. This conclusion is reinforced by the report of a resident of Superior who recently mounted a successful campaign for City Council. This person (not interviewed here) indicated that the reason she was willing to run for elected office was that SYP had created a more civil political process in the community.

Analysis of the Diffusion Process

The data presented above provide evidence that the SYP campaign has produced more civil and respectful interaction in ways that are consistent with the logic model presented in Figure 2. The primary driver of the change process appears to be the shift in norms that occurred within local elected bodies (city councils, county commissions, school boards).

Everett Rogers's "diffusion of innovation" model (Rogers, 1995) provides a useful framework for understanding the process through which the SYP message has taken hold in the Duluth-Superior region. In Rogers's model, an innovation (i.e., a new idea or technology) spreads through society according to successive waves of adoption, each wave defined by a specific subset of the population (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards). With SYP, the *innova-*

tors were the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation and the Millennium Group, the coalition of young leaders convened by the foundation to find new ways to build social capital. The *early adopter* group was made up in large part by elected officials and candidates for office who recognized the deleterious effects of the status quo approach to public discourse. (It is important to point out that some elected officials were also innovators, in that they belonged to the Millennium Group and were involved in the design of SYP). The *early majority* consists primarily of residents who are attentive to local political affairs, as well as the middle school students in Duluth who have been exposed to SYP through the classroom curriculum. The principle of civility and the nine tools seem to just now be reaching the *late majority* – residents who are not so engaged in civic life, as well as the *laggards*. There is also a sixth category in Rogers’s model that is particularly relevant in the case of SYP: *nonadopters*. It was clear from the interviews that some portion of elected officials and local residents are content with the confrontational approach to public discourse and will never adopt and abide by the principles of the SYP campaign.

The diffusion of innovation framework highlights another important aspect in how the SYP message has been diffused throughout the region. Namely, innovations are more likely to be widely adopted when they are promoted by *champions* who devote their personal influence to the campaign (Goodman and Steckler, 1989; Rogers, 2002). SYP has had a number of influential champions who have encouraged adoption within segments of the community. These champions (elected officials, agency heads, teachers, ministers, and grassroots leaders) have promoted the adoption of SYP in two important ways:

1. Members of the Millennium Group and other supporters of SYP have served as *emissaries*, advocating for the importance of civility and the usefulness of the nine tools in presentations and through informal conversation.
2. Champions with influence within organizations and institutions have found ways to translate the SYP framework into formal

policies or programs. This translation process has been most evident within the various elected bodies that passed resolutions endorsing the nine tools. Leaders on those bodies introduced the resolution, argued in its favor, and have ensured adherence to the principles during meetings. Likewise, the Duluth Public Schools took the lead in developing and implementing a new curriculum founded on the nine tools.

It was clear from the interviews that some portion of elected officials and local residents are content with the confrontational approach to public discourse and will never adopt and abide by the principles of the SYP campaign.

The second approach to promoting adoption has been particularly important in the case of SYP. The campaign and the promotional materials provided a compelling message and a useful framework to improve public discourse. However, for that framework to produce tangible changes in behavior, it needed to be instituted in settings where discourse actually takes place. Well-placed champions brought the framework to life and actively encouraged their peers and subordinates to act in accord with the principles.

Lessons for Changing Community Norms Through Strategic Communications

“Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project” represented a direct challenge to the status quo approach to public discourse in the Duluth-Superior region. Staff from the foundation and members of the Millennium Group publicly reproached elected officials for disrespectful and divisive behavior and offered up an alternative framework designed to promote civil discourse and constructive problem solving. This framework has been adopted by all of the major elected bodies governing Duluth

and Superior and appears by most accounts to have effected an authentic change in how elected officials behave toward one another. There is also evidence of a shift in the way that local citizens engage in the political process: toward greater respect and civility.

Strategic communications represent a cost-effective strategy for community foundations intent on bringing public attention to a critical problem or promoting a particular remedy.

In addition to assessing the effects and the promise of the SYP model, this study has identified a number of more general lessons that are useful to consider when developing a strategic communications campaign to change the norms that influence how the members of a community behave, interact, and make decisions:

1. *Strategic communications are a useful tool for community foundations.* In recent years, community foundations have stepped more firmly and confidently into leadership roles where they actively promote positive community change (Bernholz et al., 2006). Although this is often a new and somewhat unfamiliar role for community foundations, there is strong merit in moving this direction. Community foundations typically focus their resources on a well-defined region where they have widespread credibility and a reputation for serving the common good. Strategic communications represent a cost-effective strategy for community foundations intent on bringing public attention to a critical problem or promoting a particular remedy. SYP is an excellent example of a community foundation taking good advantage of its influence and promoting a new ethic that leads to more responsive decision making and higher quality of life.
2. *Be strategic in choosing where to begin.* It is not possible to shift an entire community's norms or culture in a single step, regardless of how clever the message or how comprehensively the message is delivered. The diffusion of innovation model (Rogers, 1995) demonstrates that new ideas are adopted in waves, not all at once. In designing a communications campaign, it is crucial to map out how the change will occur, and in particular to identify the most promising segment with which to begin. The designers of the SYP campaign made a wise choice in focusing their initial change efforts on elected officials. This was the sector where (a) change was sorely needed, (b) there were allies who were interested in creating change, and (c) there was the potential for strong ripple effects out into the rest of the community. These three considerations are applicable when choosing where to focus any communications campaign aimed at community-level change.
3. *Recognize that not everyone will resonate with the message.* Strategic communications are designed to instill new ideas. In the case of SYP, the basic message was that civil, respectful discourse is healthier and more productive than a divisive, winner-take-all approach to policy making. New ideas (especially ideas that involve changing longstanding norms) will inevitably pose a threat to some members of the community (including some community leaders). It is important to reach out to skeptics and to listen to their concerns. In the case of SYP, listening and showing respect to those with a different point of view was a visible way to put the new idea into practice. These conversations might produce beneficial refinements to the message. On the other hand, it is important to remain true to the campaign's purpose and to avoid watering down the message simply to appease those who are comfortable with the status quo. There will always be nonadopters when an innovation is disseminated. Community norms can change even without buy-in from each and every resident.
4. *Take good advantage of those who are willing to be champions.* In any campaign there will

be some people who are negatively inclined toward the message, some who are positively inclined, and some who are truly energized by the idea. This last group was essential in promoting the adoption of the SYP message—both by advocating in favor of civility and by translating the SYP framework into policies and practices that promoted concrete changes in behavior. DSACF and the Millennium Group worked effectively with these champions in order to bring the framework to life in different institutional settings. Any campaign to change community norms requires the active involvement of strategically placed change agents.

5. *Communications campaigns have a life cycle.* The SYP message and the nine tools attracted widespread media exposure and public attention during the first couple years of the campaign, but that attention has waned a bit as the campaign has entered its sixth year. The posters are still in place in council chambers, board rooms, classrooms, and offices throughout the region. Residents still carry around their wallet cards and periodically refer to the nine tools, and the mayors of Duluth and Superior still hold city council members and citizens accountable to the nine tools during public meetings. But there is also evidence that some of the elected bodies are not as committed to the nine tools as they once were. The primary culprit is the natural turnover that occurs in elected officials. Newly elected officials do not have the shared history of voting for SYP resolution in 2003. Some are committed to the nine tools, but others are not. Slippage in civility seems to have occurred specifically with regard to one of the local school boards. This dynamic is typical with any innovation. In time, new ideas become old ideas. For an idea like civility to retain its vigor and influence, the work needs to shift. Rather than rolling out a communications campaign that positions civility as a welcome contrast to the status quo, new messages need to be developed that focus more on the gains that the community has experienced by shifting toward a more civil, respectful approach to public discourse.

The last lesson points to the importance of remaining focused on the ultimate purpose of a strategic communications campaign such as SYP. It is inevitable that tomorrow's new idea will steal attention away from today's new idea. But there are ways other than "new idea" campaigns to promote and sustain positive community change. The SYP campaign has planted the idea of civility within influential cohorts of residents throughout the region (including middle school students). By encouraging these leaders to bring the idea of civility to life in whatever work they might do, the norm will shift in a more permanent way.

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- Doug Easterling, Ph.D.**, is the chair of the Department of Social Sciences and Health Policy at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. In addition to carrying out research on community-based health promotion and social capital, he provides consulting services to foundations in the areas of evaluation, strategic planning, and organizational learning. Doug was Director of Research and Evaluation at The Colorado Trust from 1993–1999. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to him at Department of Social Sciences and Health Policy, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Medical Center Blvd., Winston-Salem, NC 27157 (email: dveaster@wfubmc.edu).
- Holly C. Sampson, MSS, MLSP**, is president of the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation. Under her leadership, the Foundation has grown from \$5 million to \$50 million in assets. She is active in the philanthropic community, currently serving as Secretary of the Board of the Merrill Lynch Community Charitable Fund. She is immediate past chair of the Minnesota Council on Foundations Board and served for six years on the Council on Foundation's Community Foundation Leadership Team.
- Beth Probst** is Communications Officer of the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation.