Delray Beach Revisited

In the 1990s, the South Florida city of Delray Beach created a new form of leadership based on shared responsibility. In the years since, Delray's "responsibility revolution" has deepened and widened.

By Otis White

A LITTLE MORE THAN 10 YEARS AGO, DELRAY BEACH, FLA., INVENTED A NEW FORM OF CIVIC LEADERSHIP, one that almost commanded its neighborhoods to organize themselves, take charge of their futures and work with the city government as partners, not a constituents (please see "How Delray Beach Saved Itself and Found Great Leadership Along the Way," elsewhere on the Civic Strategies web site.) Astonishingly, this radical attempt at shared responsibility worked. When I visited Delray Beach in 1995, it hummed with citizen involvement, from the poshest districts to the poorest neighborhoods, and even the natives seemed surprised by how much they had accomplished by working together.

But could it last? Delray's belief in citizen involvement was so intense and its demands for neighborhood responsibility so far from the civic norm, there was good reason to doubt its endurance.

Relax. Delray Beach is still an engine of grassroots leadership, still "as close to ideal as it gets," as the *Palm Beach Post* once said. If anything, says its current mayor, Jeff Perlman, the ethic of shared responsibility has deepened, as new generations of city leaders have bought into this leadership model. "Our mantra," says Mayor Perlman, "is Delray does it differently."

First, though, a refresher course. Delray Beach's great innovation was pushing responsibility for many decisions down to the neighborhood level. If a resident came to city hall with a request – for more sidewalks, greater police coverage or new streetlights – and it wasn't an emergency, city officials replied with two questions: Is your neighborhood organized? And, if not, would you help organize it so you and your neighbors can study the problem and come up with a good *shared* solution?

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The shared part was important. Tom Lynch, the mayor who pioneered the shared-responsibility approach didn't believe government ought to assume responsibility for people's problems. Lynch's view was that government worked best as a facilitator – gathering people closest to the situation, helping them explore their problems and prodding them to come up with solutions. "If someone comes to us with a problem, our role isn't to solve the problem," he said back then, "but to connect them with other people who can help them solve their problem." Even when the neighborhood settled on a solution, Lynch didn't want the city to assume total responsibility. He wanted the neighborhood to contribute something to the solution, even if it were nothing more than the proceeds of a bake sale and their own labor. Even a modest contribution – when combined with the time spent meeting, exploring and deciding – would give the people who used the sidewalks and depended on the police ownership of the solution, Lynch believed.

Leaders realized that neighborhoods are systems, and to fix systems you need everyone involved as deciders and resources.

To grasp how radical this was, compare it with cities where mayors and city council members are eager to take on their constituents' problems. As they see it, that's how they earn re-election: by operating like complaint departments. When a constituent walks in with a broken-sidewalk complaint, a mayor or council member can usually bully city workers into doing a quick fix, pleasing the constituent and making the mayor look competent. Everybody wins, right?

Not really. What Lynch and other leaders in Delray realized in the early 1990s was that, while that complaint-department approach might patch a sidewalk or two, it wouldn't fix an entire neighborhood's sidewalks (or lessen crime, improve quality of life or make children safer). Neighborhoods are, in important ways, systems, and to tackle systemic problems, you need to involve the entire system – as deciders and resources. This was the philosophical basis of Delray's "responsibility revolution."

It still is. In the past 10 years, says Mayor Perlman, city government has worked hard to strengthen neighborhood leadership. Among the innovations:

- The Citizen's Tool Kit, a package of information delivered to anyone opening a utilities account with the city. The tool kit tells newcomers how city government works, how neighborhood associations work and, most important, how they can get involved.
- If they want to be involved, newcomers can attend the Residents' Academy, a free, twice yearly program (three and a half hours a week for six weeks), which takes residents into the details of government and volunteer opportunities. Again, the idea is to move people from being passive constituents to being active citizens.
- Annual neighborhood summits, which are actually more like weekend seminars. The summits feature meetings with city officials but also coursework on leadership skills and organization. There's a nominal cost (with scholarships for those who can't pay), and anyone can sign up.
- The Neighborhood Advisory Council, an official city board that considers the impact that development projects and infrastructure improvements might have on neighborhoods and offers advice on mitigating it. The council is made up of representatives from the neighborhood associations and, in bringing a neighborhood perspective to government, also serves as an information conduit from government back to the neighborhoods.
- Community dinners, which are efforts to introduce dissimilar neighborhoods to one another – say, a wealthy beachside area and a Haitian immigrant neighborhood. The dinners are usually held in neutral locations. The city coordinates the events, services clubs like the Rotary or Kiwanis serve the food, and participants usually bring a dish or two of their own. The idea is to widen the networks of neighborhood leaders and, not coincidentally, help them think beyond parochial interests.
- Finally, there are the neighborhood grants, an annual competition among the neighborhood associations for planning and improvement money. The winning association gets two things: a year's worth of citizen-driven planning work (to identify the neighborhood's greatest needs and work with city officials on solutions), followed by money for the highest priority improvements, usually $250,000. As always, the neighborhoods are expected to contribute as well, financially or with "sweat equity."

Why lavish such attention on the neighborhoods? First, Delray officials have long viewed the neighborhoods as the building blocks of the city – and neighborhood associations as the best ways of organizing and building partnerships at the neighborhood level. So anything that can be done to make the associations more effective, the city was eager to do. Second, the city has also realized over the years, Perlman says, that it can never stop trying to build trust, responsibility and leadership at the grassroots level.

The payoff for all this attention? Not the absence of controversy or disagreement. (The city recently had a loud dispute over where the city high school should be located.) Nor does the responsibility revolution speed things up. Decision making, Mayor Perlman admits, "would be easier in a top-down place."

The real payoff is the quality of people involved in leading the city. Perlman was a newspaper reporter covering Delray Beach 20 years ago, when local politics was at its worst and the city commission was a war zone of backbiting and personal attacks. "As a journalist, it was great," the mayor remembers. But, he adds, "It was such a toxic atmosphere, I wouldn't have run (for office) in the 1980s."

Today's elected leaders are very different, he goes on. They are collegial and committed to the views that Tom Lynch articulated in the 1990s – that decisions should come from the neighborhoods up, government's role was facilitator not problem-solver, and the city would work as partner, not patron, to neighborhood associations. "That (philosophy) has been a major key to our success," Perlman says, creating enough trust among citizens to encourage genuinely civic-minded people to run for office and allowing bond referenda to pass easily.

Delray Beach is such a model these days that leaders from other cities visit to learn its secrets. For that reason, Mayor Perlman and others are considering a non-profit institute that could train people from other places about the responsibility revolution. "We really feel," Perlman says, "that we are civic entrepreneurs."

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