

# Interview: The Dynamic Duo Behind Connecting and Shaping Future Leaders

Liz Dow and Chris Satullo 29 January 2013

## An Interview with Liz Dow and Chris Satullo

Liz Dow (LD) and Chris Satullo (CS)

**Describe your first meeting and your first impression of the person who you have ended up partnering with.**

LD: I met Chris through his writing. I was intrigued by the thought-provoking editorials he wrote as the *Inquirer's* Editorial page editor. His words were a call-to-action. Since my work is to mobilize people to serve, I was glad to see this activist perspective at the newspaper.

When I asked the editor to meet about a Pay It Forward program we were considering for the city, she included Chris in the meeting. He felt like "Lou grant" (seasoned and skeptical) to my Mary Tyler Moore (naïve and idealistic). Later that year, he wrote a piece asking, "Where's the outrage about poor leadership in this town?" In response, I asked to talk to him about an idea I had about identifying the many good leaders in town who

operated under the radar. Given my initial impression of his skepticism, I was honored when he liked the idea, and we've been working on it together ever since.

CS: Liz is right. I thought the Pay It Forward idea was naïve and idealistic, and I wanted no part of it as an editorial page project. I would like to point out, however, that I was (at least then) much thinner than Lou Grant.

My recollection is that Liz then came up to me after a lunch event at the National Constitution Center (a chat with Jack Bogle, as I recall, a hero of mine who is both idealistic and skeptical), wanting to talk about the leadership idea. And that one hit my sweet spot; I really liked how she talked and thought about leadership, because she put into words things that were at the heart of my perpetual dissatisfactions both with Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Inquirer.

She's also the one who that day put me on to "The Tipping Point." It was, as they say at the end of "Casablanca," the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

## **Why did you end up partnering with this person the first time?**

LD: Big Picture: Because we both believe in the power of connecting people to solve problems. Specifically: because both of us admire the kind of unsung hero leader who is more interested in getting things done than getting

the credit for it. LEADERSHIP started the Connector Project, and Chris made it better by covering it at the *Inquirer*, helping to shape it, and doing an extraordinary job of showcasing, hosting, and encouraging the Creative Connectors through NewsWorks at WHYY. Adding his voice gave it credibility and broadened its reach.

CS: I think the most powerful thing in the world is skeptical idealism. In other words, a passionate belief that the world can be made better, in ways big and small, and that you have the power to help make those changes, both big and small. But linked to a thorough-going, practical understanding of how the world really works, how change really happens, and how hard it will be to make it happen. I think that Liz and I, as a team, embody skeptical idealism.

## **What subsequent partnerships have you undertaken?**

LD: We have worked on three iterations of the Connector Project over the past seven years. We both worked on different aspects of LEADERSHIP's partnership with WHYY to produce the This I Believe radio series. We provided the idea and early interviews while Chris ran neighborhood focus groups to create a community mural called This We Believe. We co-chair the program committee for the Sunday Breakfast Club, which means that we showcase fresh ideas and talent to a large group

of established civic leaders.

CS: Yep, all that. Plus Liz wrote a book about lessons learned from the Connectors projects – and I think I was able to give her some useful guidance on how to approach that and put it together.

## **Why this person as opposed to your other professional colleagues?**

LD: Chris and I would have been best friends in high school – earnest achievers who quietly get things done while everyone else complains that something should be done. I trust him. I can always count on him to do what he says he will do. His goodness, work ethic, and reliability make him easy to work with. Our egos don't get in the way. We're both committed to engaging people in making this a better city. He's so smart that I know that if he thinks something is a good idea, it is. My corporate perspective is different from his view as a journalist, so we learn from one another. The bottom line is that together we get things done.

CS: Liz is wrong about one thing. In high school, I was hanging out with the freaks making fun of everyone who was earnest, while I'm sure she was doing all kinds of do-gooding projects. I didn't get earnest until I grew up.

Here's the thing about Liz and me: We're both Midwesterners who feel a deep but baffled and impatient

love for our adopted city. Philly has so much more grit, drama, history and greatness than the places where we grew up – but it also has way more neuroses. Change is hard, but it doesn't have to be as hard as Philadelphians make it. We share a willingness to double down on our love of the city, but a desire at the same time to teach it some new ways of thinking.

We also both love "It's a Wonderful Life," as a parable about what it means to be American. Remember that IAWL is really a very dark tale through much of the movie; salvation for George Bailey only comes in the nick of time.

Also, Liz is always about the work, about the goal, not about petty stuff or her own ego. That's who I love to work with – people who are about the work.

## **What makes this partnership work?**

LD: Mutual respect, a track record of making things happen, and shared Midwestern values. We have complementary skills and have no problem sharing the spotlight or staying in the background. While both of us chose different careers, I think that we are teachers at heart: we love helping younger professionals and bringing out the best in others.

CS: Liz' idealism and Midwestern levelness buck me up when I get discouraged, which is not infrequently. My somewhat profane and irreverent candor helps her loosen

up. Her absolutely scary sense of organization and timetables repairs my tendency to be scattershot, but my ability to fling out ideas rapid fire helps her get off the dime.

## **What needs does this partnership fulfill for you?**

LD: The need to reality test an idea before taking it public. The need to know that there are other people in key positions committed to serving the common good. The need to discuss civic affairs with someone else who is an insider but thinks like an outsider. The need to tell our stories better. He's my editor. And his goodness is comforting.

CS: Wow, Liz is being too nice about me. Beyond what we do together publicly, she is an indispensable personal friend, who has helped me through more than one rough patch with her patient listening and calm feedback. And that kind of shared experience builds trust, which in turn enables a partnership to get things done in the civic sphere. Liz has taught me that multiple forms of leadership exist, and that the types of leadership that come naturally to me can be useful, even if the context that I'm in at that moment doesn't really recognize that. Learning the ins and outs of Connectorship with and through her has been the single most useful form of professional development I've ever had.

# **What impact has your partnership had on Philadelphia?**

LD: We have recognized, connected, and empowered many civic leaders who otherwise may have remained anonymous or left town because they were unappreciated or unconnected. We've helped many emerging leaders to meet more established leaders and thus improved Philadelphia's civic bench strength. We've opened the eyes of some of the more established leaders to different perspectives on Philadelphia.

CS: Here's where my skepticism comes in. I don't know. But I will say what I hope: That the projects we've done may some day prove to have the same effect on the rising generation of young leaders in Philly that the Connectors projects had on me personally. I hope it helps them learn, ratify and build on the idea that it's OK to exercise leadership in ways different from the tribal, transactional and self-aggrandizing norms of political Philadelphia. I hope it makes them feel understood, recognized and validated – and that it coaxes them into sticking with this crazy, wonderful, maddening town, instead of abandoning it in frustration.

# **What advice would you give leaders about spotting and sustaining productive partnerships like this?**

LD: Go for it. Don't be shy about reaching out to

colleagues or fellow leaders to get things done. When you find people with your world view, complementary skills, and small egos, take time to get to know them and try to be helpful. Don't be intimidated by their titles. This is something that you have to work for. Don't worry about equal division of labor or who gets credit. It is helpful to know someone you trust who you can think and dream with. But don't stop at that stage. Push each other to do more. This kind of partnership is empowering to the partners and it amplifies their messages.

CS: Find people who share the notion I harped on a few answers back: Be about the work. Be about the joy of doing it and the satisfaction of seeing it get done, not about the credit or the rewards. Be honest with each other, radically but not brutally; there are ways to share hard truths that don't wound, but inspire. Find someone whom you love to break bread or drink a beer with, but who still pushes you out of your comfort zone. If you tend to the idealistic, find a skeptic. If you tend to the cynical, find a dreamer. If you're detail oriented, find a brainstormer. Or vice versa. And realize that a good complementary partner for you is sometimes going to annoy you, and the reverse, precisely because you are not the same and don't work in precisely the same ways. That's why you make a powerful team, because you are different.