

# The Philadelphia Connector Project

Liz Dow 23 September 2009

In the summer of 2000, when I strolled into a bookstore to find a good “beach read,” I came upon *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell. Drawn to its subtitle, *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (and its length — short enough for a quick read), I picked it up. Perched on the beach and poised to learn, I couldn’t put it down. Reading it changed my definition of leadership and a life well lived.

Like the other readers who have kept this book on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over seven years, I was intrigued by Gladwell’s explanation of the way ideas spread through society like epidemics. What really got my attention was his description of the Law of the Few, which explained the role of “Connectors” in spreading information and bringing the world together. Suddenly, I had a name for the kind of leadership that inspires me. When Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson spoke of pulling together the right players and then getting out of their way, he was acting as a Connector. When another of my favorite leaders, the late Olympic hockey coach Herb Brooks, assembled the 1980 U.S. gold medal-winning team, saying “I’m not looking for the *best* players, I’m looking for the *right* players,” he was acting as a Connector.

Gladwell's insights helped me to understand why so many of the key leaders who spoke to LEADERSHIP Philadelphia's classes of executives were effective but not inspiring, while certain less traditional, more entrepreneurial leaders mobilized these executives to volunteer to serve the community. These mobilizing leaders were Connectors. They achieved results by enrolling a diverse group of others in their cause. They earned reputations for serving the common good; they articulated visions that inspired others. Most refreshing of all, they often achieved results by staying below the radar, working behind the scenes with no concern for who got credit.

Gladwell's views strike a chord for so many of us because not only do we admire these unsung heroes as connectors, but often we are these unsung heroes. Gladwell's Connectors *are* the leaders next door, people like us. Like so many other *Tipping Point* readers, I found that by helping me see the possibilities in connection, the book made me want to be a better person. Likewise, I wanted to get different people in leadership roles, meaning more Connectors, who achieve results without caring who gets credit and who bring out the best in others.

Coincidentally, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had been running a series of editorials about City Hall's "pay to play" scandals and the lack of local leadership. I approached the editorial page editor, Chris Satullo, with the response

that Philadelphia has outstanding leadership if you broaden the definition to include Connectors. Chris agreed enthusiastically. This exchange confirmed that we were on the right track.

I was thrilled in 2005 when Gladwell accepted our invitation to speak at a LEADERSHIP Philadelphia alumni event on the February Philadelphia stop of his *Blink* book tour. As I prepared his introduction, it dawned on me that in our audience CEOs sat next to artists, politicians, doctors and students. The room seemed to have two of everything — a Noah's Ark of talent. LEADERSHIP Philadelphia is the organizational equivalent of a Connector. As Gladwell prepared to leave after the speech, I asked him to sign my copy of *Blink*. He inscribed it "To Liz, Philadelphia's #1 Connector!"

The message struck me like a bolt of lightning. LEADERSHIP, the model for 400 community leadership programs across the country, would be celebrating its 50th anniversary in four years. Instead of simply having another gala event, I decided, we would celebrate Connectors. We would change the conversation on leadership in Philadelphia from its focus on what's wrong with local leadership to what's right by broadening the definition of leadership to include Connectors and recognizing their contribution.

When I approached my board to propose this idea, they asked about measurable outcomes. What concrete

benefit would come out of this work? I told them about an observation that haunted me in Gladwell's *New Yorker* article, "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg" (1999, 63). "If the world is really held together by people like Lois Weisberg . . . how poor you are can be defined quite simply as how far you have to go to get to her. . . . *Poverty is not deprivation. It is isolation.*"

The board agreed that we should identify and study Connectors, find out how they operate and use what we learn to teach kids to connect. If poverty is less about deprivation and more about isolation, let's teach kids to connect their way out of poverty.

Once LEADERSHIP's Board accepted the idea, I called Gladwell to tell him that we wanted to identify and study Philadelphia's Connectors. No one had ever mapped the Connectors in a city, and I didn't know where to start. He proceeded to connect me with then Harvard professor and social network guru Karen Stephenson, whom he had interviewed when writing *The Tipping Point*. I e-mailed her and got a call back immediately from Spain. Intrigued by the adventure and creativity of this new application of social network analysis, she was on board.

## **How the Philadelphia Connector Project Began**

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Despite its ranking as the fifth largest city in the nation, Philadelphia often acts like a small town. A cadre of “usual suspects” runs things and wins awards for running things. Given LEADERSHIP’s long history and standing in the community and the desire not to discount traditional leaders while discovering new ones, the board debated the pros and cons of taking this non-traditional stand.

This project not only fell into the gray area of innovation, but also had to be handled very carefully from a public relations standpoint. If we were going to try to change the local culture and turn the spotlight away from traditional power players to different sorts of people, we needed to be very careful, creative and clear. We needed the benefit of different types of thinkers who could look at leadership in bold new ways.

In true Connector fashion, we assembled a diverse group of professionals with different backgrounds and ways of thinking. Besides Karen Stephenson and me, the core group consisted of futurist Medard Gabel and ethics professor Kate Nelson. They have donated their time, expertise and support wholeheartedly, meeting regularly for three years. They were joined by researcher Martha Gay; architect and planner John Claypool; theater creative director Penelope Reed; columnist Chris Satullo; brand strategist Ed Tetteimer; and economist David Thornburgh for meeting after meeting. This group tailored Stephenson’s social network methodology questions to meet our goal of finding community Connectors.

We invited local newspaper editors to a presentation and asked them to assist us in identifying Connectors. They agreed, and covered the story as editorials and a feature story.

After laying extensive groundwork and creating the project infrastructure, in the spring of 2006 we solicited nominations, asking the public to identify Connectors. We sent a viral e-mail to LEADERSHIP's 2,500 alumni asking them to nominate people and to forward the nomination. The nomination process consisted of providing specific names in response to seven questions focused on trust. Newspaper stories on the project referred readers to LEADERSHIP's web site and provided hard-copy print nomination forms. Over 4,800 people submitted 4,300 names in response to the questions. The 101 most frequently listed names became the subject of research to determine how Connectors connect. The research was repeated in 2008 to identify the next generation of Connectors. We were pleased to see that Connectors' competencies — skills and knowledge, which are the outward manifestation of social roles, self-image, traits and motives — held true for both experienced and emerging Connectors.

## **What Is a Connector?**

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According to Gladwell, Connectors link us up with the

world, introduce us to our social circles and have a special gift for bringing the world together (Gladwell 2000, 38). Connectors are the kind of people who know everyone. They have a gift for making friends and acquaintances. They can be found in any walk of life. Gladwell describes Connector Roger Horchow, founder of the high-end mail order Horchow Collection, as

someone with an instinctive and natural gift for making social connections... He's more an observer with the dry, knowing manner of someone who likes to remain a little bit on the outside. He simply likes people, in a genuine and powerful way, and he finds the patterns of acquaintanceship and interaction in which people arrange themselves to be endlessly fascinating. . . . Horchow collects people the same way others collect stamps. (Gladwell 2000, 43, 45).

Horchow describes Connectors in his book *The Art of Friendship* as people who cultivate acquaintances and friendship for the simple joy of doing so. He believes that a meaningful connection does not necessarily have to imply a lifelong devoted friendship, and that anyone can be a Connector if they take action, make friendships a priority and understand the importance of following up with people. In describing Chicago Culture Commissioner Lois Weisberg as the prototypical Connector, Gladwell says, "When we talk about power. . . we're [usually] talking about: money and authority. But there is a third kind of power as well — the kind Lois has — which is a little less

straightforward. It's social power."

## **It's not what you know, it's who you know**

Connectors hold a great deal of social capital, which refers to the resources available in and through personal and business networks. These resources include information, ideas, leads, business opportunities, financial capital, power and influence, emotional support, even goodwill, trust, and cooperation. If you think of human capital as what you know (the sum of your own knowledge, skills and experience), then access to social capital depends on who you know—the size, quantity, and diversity of your personal and business networks.

"Capital" emphasizes that social capital, like human capital or financial capital, is productive; it enables us to create value, get things done, achieve our goals, fulfill our missions in life and make our contributions to the world (Baker 2000).

## **It's not about the money**

Affluence is not influence, according to the authors of *The Influentials*. For decades these researchers "have been on a quest for marketing's holy grail: that elusive but supremely powerful channel known as word of mouth. What they have learned is that even more important than the word – what is said – is the mouth – who says it" (Berry and Keller 2003, back cover). Connectors help to

drive word of mouth.

## **It's not about technology**

Gladwell sees that, "paradoxically, all of the sophistication and wizardry and unlimited access to information of the New Economy is going to lead us to rely more on very primitive kinds of social contacts," like the Connectors (Gladwell 2000, 264). He goes on to say, "When people are overwhelmed with information and develop immunity to traditional forms of communication, they turn instead for advice and information to the people in their lives whom they respect, admire, and trust" (Gladwell 2000, 275). The impact of Facebook, LinkedIn and sites like Second Life is not yet clear. Gladwell sees Connectors as one cure for the growing sense of isolation and immunity.

Gladwell ends the Afterword of *The Tipping Point* with this message: "In a world dominated by isolation and immunity, understanding [these] principles of word of mouth is more important than ever." He states that he is "quite sure that there are readers who will use *The Tipping Point* as the inspiration to come up with a way." The Philadelphia Connector project team members were among those readers inspired to learn more about how to connect.

## **A Charismatic Connector: Ben Franklin (1706–1790)**

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Philadelphia's favorite son, Ben Franklin, founded the Junto, the model for LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, in 1727. As Walter Isaacson noted in his biography (2003, 55), Franklin was the consummate networker who "liked to mix his civic life with his social one, and he merrily leveraged both." This statesman, inventor and entrepreneur demonstrated all of the Connector competencies identified by the LEADERSHIP team.

"He that drinks his cider alone, let him catch his horse alone."

*Poor Richard's Almanac*

**Community Catalyst:** Franklin created the Junto for civic and self-improvement. The organization launched a number of civic institutions. "His vision of how to build a new type of nation was both revolutionary and profound," says Isaacson (2003, 493).

**Other-Oriented:** "Franklin's organizational fervor and galvanizing personality made him the most influential force in instilling [this contribution] as an enduring part of American life" (Isaacson 2003, 102).

**Network Hub:** The consummate networker, Franklin organized clubs for mutual benefit. He "epitomized this Rotarian urge and has remained, after two centuries, a

symbol of it" (Isaacson 2003, 55).

**Navigates Mazes:** Franklin was equally at home among tradesmen, artisans, scientists and government officials.

**Empowering Passion:** Franklin practiced the empowering of others: "Would you win the hearts of others, you must not seem to vie with them, but to admire them. Give them every opportunity of displaying their own qualifications" (quoted in Isaacson 2003, 56).

**Curious:** Franklin created the American Philosophical Society to promote the sharing of useful knowledge on a wide range of subjects.

**Trustworthy:** Franklin "trusted the hearts and minds of his fellow leather-aprons more than he did that of any inbred elite...His trustworthy ways helped to form the nation" (Isaacson 2003, 493).

**Optimistic:** His guiding principle was a "dislike of everything that tended to debase the spirit of the common people" (Isaacson 2003, 493).

**Results-Achiever:** Junto launched organizations ranging from a lending library to the fire brigades to a hospital to the University of Pennsylvania.

**Self-Starter:** Franklin created many institutions and worked his way from printer's apprentice to the world's most famous American of his time.

# Why Connectors Matter

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Gladwell writes of Connectors as one antidote to isolation. Social capital experts write of the value that Connectors possess as the tools to make contributions to the world.

What Gladwell observed when studying Lois Weisberg was a person who acts as the glue that holds society together. At work, Connectors are the people who foster innovation by bringing together a range of thoughts and thinkers. They work across functional lines to create a culture of collaboration. They hold the institutional memories in a merger. They know how to get things done on a tight deadline.

On the home front, Connectors are the glue that binds the family together. In tough times they can be counted on to listen without judgment and then call on their vast network of acquaintances to solve the problem. When things are going well, they are assembling volunteers, getting the word out about who needs what, and modeling good citizenship for their kids. Using the same respect, listening, and resourcefulness at home as they do outside the home, they raise confident capable future Connectors.

Connectors matter because they get things done in the community. When we studied the 2006 Philadelphia Connectors we were surprised at the number of major

projects they helped to accomplish:

- Created several special schools
- Led foster care reform
- Led the city wage tax reform movement
- Financed high-tech camping, creating over 1,000 jobs
- Built the Convention Center, Kimmel Center and National Constitution Center
- Built the sports stadiums
- Created the Avenue of the Arts
- Built the world's largest outdoor mural program
- Led ethics reform in city government
- Brought the 2000 Republican Convention to the city
- Hosted a LIVE 8 concert
- Brought the city back from the brink of financial disaster.

Connectors play a significant role in vitalizing cities.

LEADERSHIP Philadelphia has shared the competency model with the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) so that what was learned could be used to teach children to connect. Together they created a curriculum that PYN delivered to teams of local high school students and former dropouts. Connectors were assigned to these youths as mentors.

In 2008 an additional 101 Emerging Connectors were identified and convened. That group is working on ways to

leverage their skills and connect on behalf of the city. In 2009 LEADERSHIP Louisville is copying this project. To learn more about this project and to see a list of local connectors, see [www.leadershipphiladelphia.org](http://www.leadershipphiladelphia.org).

**As the long-term CEO of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, Liz Dow is an agent of change. A former senior bank executive, Liz also served in the White House and at Swarthmore College, and has worked across economic sectors. Once called "Philadelphia's #1 Connector" by Malcolm Gladwell, she works behind the scenes to help individuals and organizations to extend their reach, to improve their performance and to connect with the community. In a visit last year, Gladwell mentioned that the Philadelphia Connector project is the most sustained community effort born of the ideas in *The Tipping Point*. This article draws on material from the forthcoming book *The Connector Handbook*, to be published in 2009 by LEADERSHIP Philadelphia in honor of its 50th anniversary.**

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