

# The Conditions of Public Work Today and What's Needed to Make Change

Dr. Craig W. Shinn, Emeritus Professor of Public Administration

and Instructor, Foundations of Collaborative Governance (PA 575)

In preparing and writing a recent text on public service leadership, we, the author team, identified conditions requiring collaborative competencies for all public service professionals and all those seeking to lead change in the public square. Three major influences on our lives have coalesced over the last couple of decades shaping the way we approach such public work.\* First, multiple forces are fragmenting and balkanizing governance processes and polarizing our communities into physical and metaphorical “walled cities,” towns, and geographies. One result is a loss of civic discourse and with it a loss of our ability to even talk about shared interests and underlying commonweal goals. Second, decades of teaching, training, and research about achieving public good outcomes, and our own practical experience leads us to observe that those in public service roles, regardless of where they sit in these roles, undervalue the opportunities to achieve public good. Staying in your lane, doing your job, and following standard operating procedures just isn't enough in today's world. But opportunities abound for those with the right perspective, the right competencies and a willingness to do “social and small ‘p’ political work.” A third influence is the nature of public problems today. The literature calls these “wicked problems.” We can call them messy. No one person is in charge. No one nonprofit, government or even level of society has the resources to solve the challenges of rural economies, climate change, educational access, or affordable housing. There is no simple causal explanation or single action that addresses such challenges. These are collective challenges and we will need new practices to address these challenges. Collaborative governance and associated theory is one such set of practices that can help those willing to help heal the fabric of civil society, take advantage of the opportunities to solve public problems and address the “wicked” challenges of our time.

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\* This blog post is informed by the thinking and writing which contributes to *New Public Leadership: Making a Difference from Where We Sit*. (2018) Morgan, Douglas F., Marcus D. Ingle and Craig W. Shinn. Routledge.