

**ARTrepreneur: The New Arts Leader,
Americans for the Arts 2003 Annual Convention
Innovator Interview
Dr. Rick Foster, Vice President for Leadership, W. K. Kellogg Foundation**

Abel Lopez interviewer; Craig Dreeszen recorder and editor

Lopez: We'll meet some innovative thinkers. Interviews intended to inform our own work in communities. We're not going to walk away with one answer to our leadership questions. We'll use our critical skills to respond to the questions of leadership.

We have so many expectations of leadership. We're concerned with leadership development as arts professionals and civic activists. We're concerned about the development of the next generation of leaders. What is the status of leadership development programs? Has there been a shift in foundation programs for leadership?

Foster: Leadership development programs are changing and for very good reasons. Leadership development is a mirror of changing society. The key thing we're seeing is that our communities are experiencing the fastest growth in diversity in the world. Leadership struggles to keep up with those changes. Communities have changed significantly enough that the right voices are not currently at the table. We have to provide the place and the capacity for them to be there.

Lopez: People from different communities bring new leadership skills. How does that influence the design of leadership development? Is there a shift from the individual to the community, creating an environment for leaders to emerge?

Foster: The Kellogg Foundation has been looking retrospectively at our 75 years of work and observing that the long term sustainable impact has been in our leadership development work. We thought we were doing health care, and we were actually doing capacity-building leadership that transcended into other civic needs. We've always included leadership as part of programming. We thought that was to sustain each initiative while we have really been sustaining the communities.

The former Kellogg Fellows Program developed great leaders, but to be successful they had to move on. We were extracting leaders from communities. We closed the program down. We're interested to build communities. We are concerned to develop leaders in place who have capacity to influence collective decisions.

Leading across differences is the most dramatic leadership challenge in the 21st century.

Our new program, Kellogg Leadership for Community Change, seeks out very diverse communities from across the country. We pick 25 community fellows in each community. Leadership exists in context, in place. Leadership is the journey, not the destination. Leadership is a tool.

We will tackle community education as the context for leadership development. Our premise is that once they tackle this issue and come up with solutions, their increased capacity will help them address other issues.

Lopez: Are you looking to develop leadership skills or are leaders born?

Foster: We assume leaders are made. We can influence leadership development, but it does not happen from a menu. When we ask key leaders what led to their success, at least half the time, it was some learned leadership development. The other times they were at the right time and place to meet a critical person. We develop a curriculum around diversity, conflict, and the fact that change only happens when there are differences. We can teach around that in a program of mutual learning networks.

Lopez: How do you get people to see across differences and see the assets that others have when they only see the differences?

Foster: There is no void of decision making in communities. Unfortunately that is usually a white, male structure that may not represent the community. This is the issue when we talk about collective decision making. The leaders we wanted were not among the current decision makers. We are working with very diverse communities, with people who never thought they would have voice.

A key attribute of a leader is that they create space for other leaders.

Lopez: How do you make such space for leaders?

Foster: Good leaders have the ability to suspend judgment and inference about people and cultures you're not aware of and avoid forming an opinion based on not knowing. Leaders understand that my truth is my truth and your truth is yours. Leaders suspend judgment and listen.

Lopez: Do you see that part of the leadership development is about more than individuals and about community action and results? Is this more than about skills?

Foster: Yes. Gandhi observed that leaders must be the change they want to see. You put the community first rather than individual interest. Our previous program helped individual leaders actualize themselves.

Communications technology has allowed a new interdependence, a reaching out beyond ourselves.

Globalization has also inspired localization. I have to be grounded in my own community. The more we are out there the more we have to know who we are here. That is why place makes such a difference. This helps community leaders put the community ahead of their own interest.

Lopez: How do you begin the process of leadership development that allows that space for leadership to happen? How can we be comfortable enough to take the risk to say, “I don’t agree?”

Foster: Every community has a leadership structure that evolves. If you don’t change the very top of those structures, it is difficult to empower new leadership, especially from economic disadvantage, people of color, and youth. The existing leaders have to give space. One of the ways to do this is create a vision for what the community wants and then let people of different experience to work shoulder to shoulder to achieve that vision. There will be obstacles and power struggles.

Questions and Comments from Participants:

Participant: How do you get top leadership to make room? They need to recognize new ground rules. It is difficult to open the discussion past, “We don’t do it that way.”

Foster: We ask leaders to identify the demographic make up of their schools or the purchasing power of an ethnic community. Information is curative. Without information there is little reason to change. Ask what may motivate change. The attention we bring to a community’s issue are as important as the money we bring. We leverage resources and influence.

Don Vickers: What was the key evaluation question for the former and current programs?

Foster: Our first program evaluation question was, “How did this program enable you to better serve community?” The program and our evaluation were framed on the individual. Seventy-six percent of these Kellogg fellows left their communities. Now our new evaluation question is, “What is your contribution to community leadership that is affecting community objectives?” This reaches a different kind of candidate.

Nancy Walter: I was impressed with the idea that the more global we become, the more important it is to be grounded in community. In many communities people live in one place and work in another. It’s hard to know what is your place.

Foster: There is premise of globalizing and tribalism. I need to know whom I am to participate in the larger world.

Leadership has to be vision-driven and value-based.

So many of these community systems have too much baggage to get to another place. What would happen if you define your current reality, but don’t try to fix it? If you go back to try to problem-solve this, you pull all those problems. That’s dumpster diving. Rather, know your problems but focus on what you want to be. Analyze the gaps. The change process is not past-push but future-pull. Find the vision and have the drive to change. To do that I need to know whom I am. The process is about being global but being local enough to know your place in that.

Any time that you pit rural America against a globally competitive environment, rural communities lose. Our premise is to think in the “both/and” environment. We do have a global economy. How do you then also have a local economy? The arts are a big part of that. How do you create a successful local economy? Global is about quantity, local is about quality. You can be global and local at the same time.

Participant: I’m unsettled by the pull of a vision compared to the push of problems. What does this look like?

Foster: Envision a model. In the middle is current reality. The higher tier is vision. The lower tier is problem solving. There is a change you have to make when you leave the current reality. If you go down to problem solving there is the emotional business of who was right and who was wrong. When you go down that road you spend all your time trying to resolve irresolvable problems. We tend to recreate the cycle.

If you go the other way the tension is not emotional, it is creative. It’s not what we did wrong but what do we want to do right. The decisions you make to create an arts community or good community education are based on what we envision these to be. The screen of whether it is good or bad is not about whether it solves problems; it is will it create the kind of community we want to be. You leave the personal problems behind.

Suppose we need a multicultural expression of art. Knowing that makes all the decisions for us about who should be a part of the local arts council, and which artists we should involve. It creates an environment of opportunity rather than problem solving.

Working in the Delta, we were asked, “What are you going to do about racism?” Nothing. If you lead with a problem like racism in the Delta it immediately polarizes everyone and brings the discussion to the past. Rather, we described a vision of what the Delta economy should be.

Bill Flood: I’m concerned with local leaders who describe the vision before the hard introspective work. These are the same ones who have ignored problems of racism or hard economic realities.

Foster: A vision is not just a dream. It is an informed conclusion of what you want. It has to come from a due diligence process with data. The vision process is a lengthy process with multiple stakeholders, with lots of data gathering that informs a realistic vision. The vision should be dynamic. You’ll never really achieve it, but you’ll achieve milestones. For a good discussion of this process, see the paper, *Real Change* by Price Waterhouse

You should also read *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. He says good is the enemy of the great. The best companies all have a CEO from the inside that knows the culture, who knows that there is an organizational vision. It is foolish to bring in an outside CEO who is asked to bring a vision. We have to define our vision ourselves. All these leaders approach their jobs as stewardship for the future like any good arts organization.

Russell Taylor: There is a myth of the hero leader. Effective leaders are often quiet and questioning. The arts have a problem with this. The performing arts favor theatrical style of leaders. The next generation of leaders has the potential to take a new approach.

Participant: One of the challenges of developing leaders is to help them understand their own organizational cultures. Some organizational cultures defy the efforts of new executive directors to make changes unless they understand their culture.

Foster: Culture with a capital C—their ethnicity—is not up for grabs. There is also small c culture, an institutional culture. We can change that. When making changes I distinguish between what hold sacred and what I want to challenge.

Emerson Byron: When we intervene in leadership, we assume that power imbalances are at work. The intervention gives people tools and resources to balance that. Leadership in communities needs to help people to reflect upon their changing roles and power.

Participant: What part do the arts play in your approach to community leadership?

Foster: There needs to be a reframing that the arts are a part of every framework of a community. The arts are about education, are about economic development, and are an integral part of what makes a holistic community. The arts are not on the margins. This takes a change in the public policy consciousness.

Participant: What are the inherent dangers in leadership development in your form?

Foster: How do you roll it up? We can make changes in communities, but how do you create a learning environment that is valid nationally? Leadership isn't interesting to most people unless it is connected to something else. In evaluating leadership programs, the questions are not about effective leadership itself but on how leadership impacts communities. Leadership is redefined every day as new issues are raised. Leadership must organize to respond. Leadership is contextual. It is very difficult to evaluate leadership since it's embedded deeply in context.

Marete Wester: How do those of us lower on the food chain actually begin to change the dialogue about changing the context? We're in funding crisis mode, not reflective mode.

Foster: Ask who would have the convening power to raise the dialogue to a higher level and engage them as a partner. To affect public policy you need both local demonstration projects and people who have access to the policy makers. Be strategic about who should convene discussions and who should be making public statements.