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## Center Square | 101 who can connect the dots

By Chris Satullo, Inquirer Columnist

Nearly everyone agrees: When it comes to civic leadership, Philadelphia is not exactly ancient Athens.

Here, the words *leadership* and *vacuum* go together like *soup* and *sandwich*.

Outside of Ed Rendell, who hasn't been mayor for more than six years, name one local political leader who attracts adjectives such as "charismatic," "dynamic" or "inspiring," as opposed to "embattled" or "indicted."

It's been a cliché for years that the region has few of the get-it-done corporate leaders who propel the civic life of Sun Belt cities such as Charlotte or Atlanta.

Liz Dow runs a nonprofit called Leadership Philadelphia, so such issues are much on her mind. She's long suspected that our problem may lie partly in how we define leadership, and where we look for it.

If we expanded our notion of what constitutes leadership, maybe we'd find that the region has more leaders than we assume. Perhaps if we recognized more types of leaders, we'd inspire more to step up.

Thanks to a famous book called *The Tipping Point* and a globe-trotting egghead named Karen Stephenson, Dow found a novel way to test her thesis.

The fruits of her effort are being rolled out this weekend. The most talked-about part will be a list of leaders that she calls "Philly's 101 Connectors."

### *Connector?*

*Connector* is a key term in Malcolm Gladwell's great book about how social change occurs. A connector is someone who thrives as a node of information and connection among diverse elements of a community. These are people who like to like and trust other people, and are liked and trusted in return. They enjoy linking up folks who might not know one another, but together might get something good done.

Being a "connector" suggests something very different from the idea of "being connected," in the sense of knowing people with money or power.

The "connector" idea isn't about being a "player"; it's more about, corny as it sounds, playing nice. It's not about having "juice"; it's about inspiring trust. The connector thinks information is most useful when shared, not hoarded.

Philadelphia's typical notion of power is heavily oriented toward politics and deal-making. It focuses on what Stephenson, a social network theorist whom Dow hired to help identify Philly's connectors, calls transactional relationships: *Help seal the deal; take your cut.*

In many social networks, she says, a different set of relationships, based on trust and sharing of knowledge, enables people to get big things done.

She and Dow set out to sketch how such networks look in this region. They asked people to name people whom



they trusted and relied on.

About 4,300 people filled out surveys, naming more than 4,800 names. The 101 Connectors are the people whose names cropped up most often. They range from the very well-known (Rendell, showing that a deal-maker can also be a connector) to some folks who function, very well it seems, in the shadow of better-known superiors.

(An awkward disclosure: To my surprise, and now yours, my name is on the list. I've covered this project along the way because Liz claims the idea occurred to her as she read a column of mine about our city's culture of corruption.)

The list tells interesting tales. Like me, 68 percent of the connectors were not born here. Most, Dow reports, say they explicitly try to link what they do in their jobs to the goal of making this region a better place. Nearly half work in the region's nonprofit sector, which is full of people who do world-class work but think it safer to fly under the radar of the city's hardball politics.

Only three on this list are elected officials. That should tell you something. The list isn't perfect: Only 21 percent of the people are minorities. So some good, effective folks got missed.

But the point, Dow stresses, isn't really the list. It's what can be learned from studying what these connectors do, and how they do it. The box to the right offers a list of traits Leadership Philadelphia distilled from in-depth interviews. The traits may seem obvious, but think: How often do you exemplify them in your daily dealings? I know I don't, but tracking this project has made me try harder.

That points to Dow's ultimate goal: Don't just identify and celebrate these useful traits; figure out how to teach them.

Her nonprofit will try to weave a curriculum around the findings, for use in its training program for adults. Most important, perhaps, Dow hopes to work with the Philadelphia Youth Network to teach the city's youth these leadership skills.

Dow said she'd barely heard of the Youth Network until two people who run it - Stephanie Gambone and Laura Shubilla - turned up on the connectors list.

Good things happen when people of good will and good ideas connect.

## **Center Square | Bringing Things Together**

More about Leadership Philadelphia in the Business section: E1

A complete list of top connectors: E3

For Leadership Philadelphia's Connector Project Web site, see: <http://go.philly.com/phillyleaders>

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