Empowering the
Public-Private Partnership
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George Voinovich was a practical man, and this book is a primer for practitioners. Written in plain language, it is a handbook of best practices for elected and appointed officials and for leaders from the private and philanthropic sectors who partner with them for the betterment of their community. His words here distill the knowledge and wisdom of a man who dedicated his career to public service at the local, state, and federal levels and who was, as a result, a person uniquely qualified to reflect on the qualities of civic leadership required to get things done.

Voinovich was passionate about the power of public-private partnerships (P3s) to transform a community. He was widely respected for his honesty, authenticity, and straight talk, so you can believe him when he says that these partnerships will work for you—because he tried them himself in his positions as mayor and governor. In this primer, he describes the critical steps to follow when building any partnership
and tells the story of how the practice of partnering unfolded in the City of Cleveland and the State of Ohio under his stewardship.

Voinovich was a storyteller. But unlike those who delight in telling stories that reflect well on themselves, he’d tell stories about the people who joined him in the efforts to rebuild Cleveland after years of contentious political infighting and later to set the State of Ohio on a fiscally sound trajectory. Voinovich campaigned for mayor of Cleveland on the slogan “Together We Can Do It.” This primer is about how “together we did it.” Here he tells stories about the individuals and organizations he brought together to advance their common interest in the community whose history and future they shared.

Voinovich saw community as a dynamic, interactive system that performs best when its leaders adhere to rules of civility and value the interests and humanity of each person with whom and for whom they work. He summed up this complex process in one word: symbiosis. Drawn from the world of biology, it describes an interdependent or mutually beneficial relationship between two or more organisms. He delighted in dropping “symbiosis” into the middle of otherwise mundane remarks at a ground breaking or ribbon cutting and then telling his audience that the project they were gathered together to celebrate was a perfect example of how people could accomplish great things by working together. This primer is filled with stories about the ways in which he engaged parties with seemingly disparate
interests, encouraged them to find their mutual goals, and urged them to collaborate for the common good. These stories suggest how you, too, can encourage the symbiotic civic relationships that will foster long-term success in your community.

Voinovich was a teacher who practiced civic pedagogy everywhere he went. He taught several generations of public servants how to work together to “do more with less” and “work harder and smarter.” He believed that the art of public leadership requires establishing clear, easily understood goals, communicating them relentlessly, and monitoring them consistently. He had no patience with cynical indifference, bureaucratic infighting, or empire building. This primer tells how he and his chief of staff, Tom Wagner, used Cleveland’s Operations Improvement Task Force (OITF) to engage city staff in creating a practical plan for improving operations and then to hold those staff accountable for carrying out their own recommendations.

Voinovich respected the intelligence and dedication of those who choose to make a career in public service. He believed that the vast majority want more than just “to do their job and collect a paycheck.” They want to improve the lives of their fellow citizens. He believed that many public servants have an untapped desire to work beyond the limits of their job description to make a real difference in their community. The OITF brought these desires to the surface and channeled them into specific initiatives that have made a difference for Cleveland and its citizens. This primer tells of how he
took the lessons learned from the OITF and applied them statewide through a disciplined system of Total Quality Management (TQM). He believed that the lessons of civic collaboration are scalable and can improve performance at every level of government.

Finally, Voinovich was a leader. Modest and unassuming, he avoided grand promises and high-sounding rhetoric. He preferred, instead, to speak about practical accomplishments and the important role that others played in making those accomplishments possible. At his core, he was a leader committed to putting good ideas to work for the benefit of the communities he served. He firmly believed that those privileged to lead a government, a corporation, a university, or a philanthropy have an obligation to serve interests beyond their own. Not unremarkably, he found that when asked, most of those in leadership positions responded positively—if they could be assured that their contribution would be valued and effective. He believed that one of his roles as a public leader was to make good on that promise. By valuing and celebrating the accomplishments of others, he restored civility and trust to Cleveland’s civic life and established a virtuous cycle of public and private reinvestment that has fueled several decades of increasingly sophisticated development initiatives in the city’s downtown and its neighborhoods.

Voinovich wrote this primer about P3s as a practical tool for meeting the challenges of public management in a world of straitened circumstances. The lessons that he learned during his ten years as Cleveland’s
mayor and eight years as Ohio’s governor are even more relevant today than they were in years past. When he was sworn in as Cleveland’s fifty-fourth mayor in 1980, constrained municipal resources were more the exception than the rule for local governments. Today they are more the rule than the exception. He tells how, in the face of the city’s dire economic conditions, he turned to Cleveland’s business and philanthropic communities for help—first in analyzing the city’s finances, operations, and economic prospects, and then in taking concrete steps to address together the challenges they found.

Chapter 1 lays out those challenges that Voinovich faced when he took the helm as mayor in November 1980 following two years of municipal chaos, conflict between city government and the local business community, corrosive racial strife, neighborhood disinvestment in the face of court-ordered school busing and accelerating white flight, and growing economic hardship as the first wave of deindustrialization hit Cleveland’s factories and the neighborhoods that surrounded them.

This chapter goes on to describe the process of developing the city’s first P3—the OITF—which laid the groundwork for other partnerships to follow. Hidden within the accounts of specific actors and their contributions is a powerful lesson about the value of beginning any collaboration with an honest and detailed analysis of the facts on the ground. Voinovich takes up this theme and continues to explore it in subsequent
chapters, in which he describes his efforts to sustain the involvement of the business community in the work of city government and to encourage local foundations to invest in improving city operations and developing catalytic downtown and neighborhood projects. Simply put, he learned that when business and foundation leaders are actively involved from day one in identifying and analyzing a problem, they are more likely to invest in addressing and solving that problem in the months and years that follow.

Finally, he argues that a community’s infrastructure of human relations is more important than its visible, physical infrastructure. He believed that Cleveland’s leadership had to deal honestly and directly with the city’s underlying racial tensions before it could hope to build successful partnerships, and he describes the Cleveland Roundtable, a P3 created expressly to redress the persistent inequities that had fed anger and mistrust and had stymied the city’s progress for several decades.

Chapter 2 describes in detail the process he used to put P3s to work in Cleveland through the OITF. It should be read not just as a war story about how Cleveland began its decades-long recovery but also as a case study about the practical aspects of partnering at a municipal or state level. To this end, he details the steps he took and the lessons he learned in creating and sustaining the OITF. This checklist is a practical tool for taking the first step toward a municipal P3—establishing an operations improvement task force to
engage civic leaders and public servants in defining and analyzing the challenges the city faces and beginning a disciplined process of addressing them one by one.

Chapter 3 speaks to an important initiative that paralleled the OITF: the audit. Voinovich details the dire financial condition in which he found the city and the steps he took to engage both state officials and local business leaders in finding a way out of the fiscal mess he inherited. While Cleveland’s fiscal condition in 1980 was extreme, the realities of municipal fiscal stress are not uncommon today. This chapter once again makes the case for engaging local business leadership, as well as state and federal officials, in finding ways in which your city can “do more with less” and deliver basic services while operating within its means.

Voinovich recognized that in a democracy, power and responsibility are shared. Chapter 4 speaks to how he engaged his political competitors, local unions, and civil servants in making quality everyone’s business. Every city has a complex mix of organizations and individuals whose interests must somehow be addressed if progress is to be made. Voinovich tells how he engaged Cleveland’s powerful city council president, George Forbes, as a full partner in the city’s recovery and shared the credit for work they did together. He relates the importance of involving union leadership and respecting the work of union members in the life of the city. And finally, he emphasizes the value of engaging the city’s employees as full participants in the city’s recovery. In so doing, he unleashed the creativity and enthusiasm...
of dedicated public servants whose contributions had too often been overlooked by prior administrations.

This chapter also shows how Voinovich used the experience of implementing Cleveland’s OITF to adapt and improve the method at the state level when he became governor in 1991. By that time, many of the same principles and practices that he and his public- and private-sector partners had worked out on their own had been systematized and were going by a new name: Total Quality Management.

Chapter 5 addresses the challenge of sustaining civic participation in the work of the city. Voinovich believed that too often, members of blue-ribbon committees like the OITF do their work, issue their report, and then return to their day jobs. He believed that it was critical to the city’s long-term future that the enthusiasm of these civic volunteers be sustained for the months and years that it would take to bring about real change in the way the city did its business. To that end, he created the Mayor’s Operation Volunteer Effort (MOVE). This multifaceted initiative established a volunteer program to continue bringing loaned executives into city departments, convened a public relations advisory board to address the city’s poor national image, and established the annual Mayor’s Award for Volunteerism to thank volunteers for their work and give them the recognition they richly deserved. Finally, he discusses how he applied the lessons he learned through Cleveland’s OITF to the State of Ohio, instituting TQM and encouraging the state’s business
leaders to institutionalize their own civic engagement by establishing the Ohio Business Roundtable.

In chapter 6, Voinovich identifies a fourth “P” that has played a critical and continuing role in the city’s sustained recovery: local philanthropy. Cleveland is blessed with multiple local foundations and a generations-long history of philanthropic investment in the city. He details the important roles that local philanthropies—the Cleveland Foundation and the George Gund Foundation in particular—played in the city’s recovery by supporting baseline studies on municipal operations, finances, and infrastructure; providing significant funding for the OITF; and leading the effort to implement the OITF through targeted investments in staff training, critical personnel initiatives, land information systems, and other innovations for which scarce tax dollars were unavailable. Voinovich writes with obvious pride of the partnership’s success in encouraging the foundations, businesses, and civic leaders to invest in two of the city’s most successful downtown development projects: the Cleveland lakefront, home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Great Lakes Science Center; and Playhouse Square, the nation’s second-largest theater complex.

This chapter is important not just for its recounting of the catalytic role that philanthropy has played in Cleveland. Voinovich wrote it in the hope that he could encourage other communities to engage their own philanthropies in the work of their city. He firmly believed that civic partnering is everyone’s business
and that no organization or individual who cared about their community could be left on the sidelines watching the game. In his roles as mayor and governor, he did everything he could to encourage everyone to get in the game.

Finally, Voinovich was a civic entrepreneur who understood instinctively that in order to accomplish great things, a community must develop trust among its members and build a record of success through collaboration to replace a history of frustration and conflict. He accomplished this by bringing together all of the parties who had an interest in pursuing a big idea and then relentlessly challenging them to “do the doable.” He began with the OITF, an initiative that bore long-term results. By focusing first on achieving basic operational improvements in city government, he and his team built the skills, credibility, and relationships of trust, both within and outside city hall, that enabled the city to pursue increasingly complex projects. Simply put, he believed that by beginning at the beginning with an operations improvement task force, a new mayor or governor can build a network of P3s that can tackle the difficult challenges they face.

Voinovich did not write this primer as a biography celebrating his considerable successes as a public leader. That, he believed, would be for others to do. He wrote it for the leaders of today and tomorrow who, as he was, are confronted with the challenge of doing the public’s work in the face of economic uncertainty and severely constrained resources. He believed that
“together we can do it” and daily put that mantra to work in a public career that spanned five decades and earned him the reputation as the most successful public leader in Ohio’s history. He wrote this primer in the hope that by applying his hard-won lessons, you, the reader, might navigate with greater certainty the uncharted waters of public service in the months and years ahead.