Community Engagement

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A local leader, public official, or planner generates an idea and prepares to launch it into action. It soon becomes clear that a key ingredient is missing: the support and ideas of the impacted community. This scenario is not uncommon and is often associated with a plan that will fail.

It seems obvious that people would be involved in activities that will impact their community. However, decisions are often made without engaging residents in conversation or offering opportunities for comments. Successful leaders understand the value of engaging local residents in developing ideas, making decisions, and implementing plans.

What Is It?

Community engagement work requires an understanding of the identified community and local issues, a listening environment, and continuous communication. It includes multiple opportunities for collecting citizen input through interaction and dialogue and identification of local solutions. Most importantly, public involvement must be focused with a defined purpose, clear expectations, an intentional planning process, and anticipated impacts. In summary, there should always be a well-designed plan for inviting citizens to be part of a conversation.

Virginia Cooperative Extension's experience with numerous leaders in Virginia's cities and counties sug-

gests that the innovative leader designs inclusive processes and values the presence of multiple stakeholders during the planning and decision-making process. The Virginia experience supports the views of a majority of municipal leaders from across the United States, as documented in the 2010 National League of Cities report, "Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials' Views About Public Engagement" (Barnes and Mann 2010). The report found that 95 percent of public officials valued public engagement processes, 60 percent of officials often used public engagement processes, and 21 percent sometimes used those processes.

Before developing an engagement plan, consider the definitions of "community" and "engagement."

Community is a term that researchers and practitioners have long debated, with hundreds of different definitions being offered (Bell and Newby 1971). Communities matter because of their role as "the sites for our housing, education, health care, daily convenience, shopping, and the other activities that sustain us physically, emotionally, socially, and psychologically" (DeFlippis and Saegert 2012, p. 3).

Project leaders may define community based on the situation by looking at who is included and who is excluded from the discussion. At other times, community is defined as "a group of people united by at least

one common characteristic, such as geography, shared interests, values, experiences, or traditions. Community is also a feeling or sense of belonging, a relationship, a place, or an institution (CDC 1997).

Engagement, though at times is difficult to define and especially difficult to measure, occurs when each participant understands the purpose of the initiative, develops a sense of ownership, commits to the process and the outcome, and actively works toward achieving success (CDC 1997).

Community engagement is called by many names, including public engagement, civic engagement, citizen involvement, public participation, and democratic governance. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1997) provided a working definition of community engagement in its first edition of "Principles of Community Engagement":

> The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.
>
> The goals of community engagement are to build trust, enlist new resources and allies, create better communication, and improve overall health outcomes as successful projects evolve into lasting collaborations. (CDC 2011, p. 3)

Philanthropic organizations such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation agree that people have the inherent capacity to solve their own problems and that social transformation is within the reach of all communities. The Kellogg Foundation seeks engagement through dialogue, leadership development, collaboration, and new models of organizing. The foundation prefers partnering with communities and nongovernmental organizations committed to inclusion, impact, and innovation in solving public problems.

Whether it is an elected official, an organization, or an individual launching a new plan, community engagement plays a vital role in designing effective responses to most situations. Leaders have a responsibility to involve the people who will be impacted. Affected citizens should contribute to the process of discussing the issue, gathering and sharing facts, identifying possible solutions through inclusive dialogue, and encouraging the participation of others in implementation and evaluation activities. Community engagement is an important part of the process, whether crafting better policies, planning healthier and safer communities, or developing a new playground.

Why Is It Needed?

By including local residents when discussing community issues, officials and leaders improve everyone's level of awareness, allow individuals to advocate for their ideas, and offer a format to gather advice or guidance based on the community's expertise and experiences.

Community engagement guides the development of project agendas by expanding or redefining the focus of the initiative, identifying unexposed information, and creating a network for revenue sources and funding partners. Public involvement processes increase the diversity and the number of identified stakeholders. Through their engagement, stakeholders become better educated on the issue and more readily apply their knowledge and skills. When community members are engaged at the beginning and throughout the project, people appear to be more receptive to the outcome, have the capacity to implement change, and maintain long-term partnerships.

There are times when a community is not yet ready for a discussion or fully resists the idea for engagement. For example, this may be the case when past efforts yielded few results or were challenged by citizen apathy or public cynicism. Russ Linden (2002) suggested that community engagement might not be feasible when a history of conflict exists, the costs are greater than the benefits, critical stakeholders refuse to participate, an agreement is not reached on project goals, or the initiators do not want others involved. Therefore, before you begin the process of full community engagement, conversations are needed with key individuals to clarify existing issues and consider how best to manage or resolve the barri-

ers. Leaders who are sensitive to community conditions will assess its readiness and consider other intervention options before launching an engagement initiative.

Who Makes It Happen?

Organizations and local governments design and implement many successful engagement processes. Often, such institutional support legitimizes an initiative. However, there are also many examples of processes initiated by innovative citizens who have a passion or vision for a particular issue or project. Ideally, individuals who want to work on a project would recognize the value of inclusion and full participation. Full participation is "an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others" (Sturm et al. 2011, p. 4). Many project leaders seek assistance from skilled process experts to build the stages of participation, but using an expert is not always the case. Others basically understand and apply the process.

What Is the Process?

Simply knowing that community engagement is beneficial to developing and implementing a project is not enough. Knowledge requires action to create impact. In "The Public Participation Handbook," James Creighton (2005) emphasizes that participation is best conceived as a kind of continuum, with steps that include:

- Inform the public.

- Listen to the public.

- Engage in problem-solving.

- Develop agreements.

For instance, a public agency or nongovernmental organization may hold a session to share information with citizens about a proposed project (inform the public) and schedule opportunities for public input (listen to the public), generating multiple solutions (engage in problem-solving) that are evaluated and utilized in the final plan (develop agreements).

Linden (2002) suggests that certain conditions must be present before collaboration or engagement can occur.

These conditions include a shared and defined purpose, the willingness to collaborate, a commitment to contributing, the participation of the right people, an open and credible process, and the involvement of a champion with credibility and clout.

The engagement process may be complex but should also be manageable. In many instances, a person with an idea will begin by talking with other people who have an interest in the issue. As the conversation expands to include new people, additional information is gathered and perspectives become broadened. In her book "The Power of Presence," Kristi Hedges (2012) refers to this as the "dial-in" process. The leader has a "vision" and then seeks to "describe, invite, acknowledge, and leverage" support (p. 170).

More proactive engagement processes, such as many of those described here, also provide opportunities for community members to engage in problem-solving in a collective "working out" of ongoing issues of concern to a particular group. Beginning when the idea is initially defined, the leader would:

- Convene a small group to clarify and validate the current issue and/or vision. Listening and questioning are key actions in this phase of the process.

- Discuss and define the initiative and its benefits, challenges, and potential impact on a community.

- Define the community impacted by the proposal.

- Explore the conditions for engaging the community in a discussion on the initiative.

- Set the purpose and goals for community engagement.

- Know and respect the community's characteristics.

- Develop a relationship with the community, build trust, work with formal and informal leadership, find the community gatekeeper, identify the project champion, meet with the local organizations, and ascertain the assets and challenges for that community.

- Find the common interests.

- Select the project sponsors and project leaders who have the capacity to guide the planning and

implementation of the community discussions (AmericaSpeaks n.d.).

∎ Build a communication strategy for publicizing the discussion and encouraging participation.

With the community defined and a relationship established, the work is ready to continue. The following four phases provide an example of a more detailed outline for a proactive community engagement process.

Phase I. Set the Stage

1. Invite the stakeholders to a conversation on the vision. Go to the community instead of having community members come to you.

2. Create a constructive environment for dialogue, allowing time to get to know the participants and remembering that every individual's time is valuable and must be respected.

3. Identify the person or the organization that has convened the group and will provide initial leadership and organizational management until a management/leadership core team is in place.

4. Outline the purpose and process for the conversation. Use a facilitator when appropriate.

5. Define the issue and why it is important. Outline what is broken and focus on what is working. Is the issue a people problem or a situation problem (Heath and Heath 2010)? Can the problem be solved with technical expertise or will it require something else (Kettering Foundation, personal communication, March 1, 2011)?

6. Determine the interest and merit in hosting future discussions.

7. Set the next steps if the group wants to move to Phase II.

Phase II. Gather the Facts, Brainstorm, and Select a Solution

1. Create an environment for discussion where people are comfortable asking questions, expressing doubts, and brainstorming new ideas (Linden 2002; Dukes, Piscolish, and Stephens 2008).

2. Gather the facts related to the issue and its impact. Include a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis where participants discuss the project's internal strengths and weaknesses or the external opportunities and threats. Use appreciative inquiry techniques, asset mapping, and other tools during the fact-finding stage (Walker and Tyler-Mackey 2012a, 2012b).

3. Clarify the issue's alignment with the community's values, ethics, vision, and mission. Establish the common ground on which conversations will be based.

4. Involve issue/content experts in providing science-based information and/or best practices (AmericaSpeaks n.d.)

5. Brainstorm and gather alternative solutions. Ask the "what if" questions. Spend time discussing the options, the alignment with the vision, and the potential impact. Allow the process to equip the participants with a vision and prepare them to change (Linden 2002).

6. Select the best practice/solution. Use decision-making tools to reduce the number of options. Too many choices may be debilitating (Heath and Heath 2010).

7. Assess the community's readiness to move to Phase III.

Phase III. Plan and Review

1. Establish planning teams for each topic area.

2. Meet with planning teams and draft the implementation action plan. Include the evaluation procedure that will answer the question "What will it look like when the change has happened" (Heath and Heath 2010, p. 69)? Remember, the action plan supports the goals by providing the steps needed to achieve each goal. Use action verbs, identify the costs, state who will be involved and who will be responsible, set a timeline, decide how progress will be measured, and report the status of the actions.

3. Discuss the proposed plan with the appropriate stakeholders searching for insight and response.

4. Use the feedback to assess and revise the plan. Stay focused on the solution.

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5. Review the proposed plan with the community.

6. Confirm the community's readiness to move to Phase IV.

Phase IV. Implement and Evaluate

1. Secure needed assets including funding, staffing, and a management team. Should a coalition be formed, ensure that the members distribute the power, offer recognition, communicate with each other and the stakeholders, and respect the roles of the members and partners.

2. Implement the plan. Remember, groups want to see rapid success. Identify an action that will provide a meaningful win within immediate reach.

3. Evaluate the impact.

4. Report the status to the community and gather feedback.

5. Revise the plan and reevaluate. (This step may involve any of the previous steps.)

Community Engagement Organizations and Resources

Leaders have access to multiple resources to guide them through the steps of inviting people to be part of the discussion and/or decision-making process. A sampling of the resources, along with a description of the services provided, is included within this publication. In addition, Virginia counties, cities, organizations, agencies, and citizens may contact the community viability specialists at Virginia Cooperative Extension (www.cv.ext.vt.edu/index.html) and request assistance in designing an engagement plan that is appropriate for the issue and the community.

Community Tool Box, University of Kansas –
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/default.aspx

The Community Tool Box is a global resource for free information on essential skills for building healthy communities. It offers more than 7,000 pages of practical guidance for creating change and improvement. The Community Toolbox also features a list of promising practices for community health and development at http://ctb.ku.edu/en/Databases-Best-Practices.

Deliberative Democracy Consortium –
www.deliberative-democracy.net/

The Deliberative Democracy Consortium is a network of practitioners and researchers representing more than 50 organizations and universities who are collaborating to strengthen the field of deliberative democracy. DDC seeks to support research activities and to advance democratic practice at all levels of government, in North America and around the world.

DDC affiliates have provided assistance to hundreds of public involvement projects that have engaged hundreds of thousands of people in dialogue, deliberation, and problem-solving. Many of these projects included large numbers of people who are often considered hard to reach, such as young people, recent immigrants, and low-income people. Issues have included economic development, education, crime, immigration, public finance, racism and race relations, planning and growth, neighborhood revitalization, youth issues, and environmental protection.

Public engagement has resulted in greater individual volunteerism, small-group action efforts, effects on indicators like school test scores and crime rates, changes made by organizations, changes in government budgets, and changes in public policy at the local, state, and federal levels.

Everyday Democracy (study circles) –
www.everyday-democracy.org

The goal of Everyday Democracy's programs and services is to help create communities that work better for everyone because all voices are included in public problem-solving, and to link that work to creating a stronger democracy.

Community assistance is the heart of Everyday Democracy's work. Everyday Democracy focuses its assistance where people of different backgrounds are committed to working together to solve public problems. It helps communities adapt ideas and tools to fit particular needs and circumstances and works with neighborhoods, cities, towns, regions, and states to help them pay attention to how racism and ethnic differences affect the problems they are facing. In communities where it provides customized technical assistance, Everyday Democracy coaches local people, serving as resources and trainers to help communities build their own abilities to create change.

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National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation –
http://ncdd.org/

The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation is a network of more than 1,700 innovators who bring people together across divides to discuss, decide, and take action on today's toughest issues. NCDD serves as a gathering place, a resource center, a news source, and a facilitative leader for this vital community of practice. The NCDD website is a clearinghouse for thousands of resources and best practices,

NCDD provides opportunities for members of the broadly defined dialogue and deliberation community to share knowledge, inspire one another, build collaborative relationships, and have a greater collective impact.

National Institute for Civic Discourse –
http://nicd.arizona.edu/

The National Institute for Civic Discourse supports a Congress and executive branch capable of working to solve the big issues facing our country. The Institute supports a media that informs and engages citizens. Chaired by former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the National Institute for Civil Discourse is committed to fostering an open exchange of ideas and expression of values that will lead to better problem-solving and more effective government.

National Issues Forums Institute – www.nifi.org/

National Issues Forums bring people together to talk about important issues. They range from small study circles held in peoples' homes to large community gatherings modeled on New England town meetings. Each forum focuses on a specific issue, such as illegal drugs, Social Security, or juvenile crime.

The forums help people of diverse views find common ground for action on issues that deeply concern them. They are structured, deliberative discussions led by trained moderators. Using nonpartisan issue books, participants consider possible ways to address a problem. They analyze each approach and the arguments for and against.

Closing Thoughts

Throughout the community engagement process, communication, diplomacy, respect, patience, and flexibility

are essential. The core team must keep the participants informed through discussion agendas, written summaries of previous discussions, goals/assignments for the next discussion, and progress reports providing accountability for delivering what was promised.

Engaging a community may foster a struggle for control and recognition. This need for power may lead to behaviors that are difficult to manage in group situations. Some may arrive with a self-serving bias, meaning they value their own contributions more than they are willing to listen to other participants. Engagement is risky when people feel they are losing autonomy of their vision or control of their own turf — whether it is space, expertise, or thoughts. Ultimately, it is the lack of trust and confidence in the process or in the other participants that will undermine any initiative (Linden 2002).

For every risk that is overcome, the rewards are abundant. Individuals are better informed, new resources are discovered, relationships are strengthened, and an environment that enhances the community's capacity for problem-solving is established.

Acknowledgements

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