



Tips and Best Practices for Engaging Your Community

You might have a compelling cause. Or, you might want to better understand what a community needs or wants from its leaders. Or perhaps you want to create a shared vision for your community among residents. Inspiring community participation takes a thoughtful process. How do you reach those that have opinions but have not had a voice in community decision-making in the past? How do you empower and encourage community members to participate?

First, it helps to understand that community engagement is both a process and an outcome. It's a process in which organizations and individuals build ongoing relationships in order to elevate and apply their collective vision for community. It's an outcome in that people are willing, ready and able to advocate effectively for that vision.

Community engagement can be used by nonprofits, private businesses, government, foundations, or any combination of these to help rally a community to a cause. It's a complex undertaking that requires both short- and long-term strategies and investments. But don't be intimidated. Here are 10 key elements that will ensure your community engagement efforts are as smooth and effective as possible:

10 Key Elements of Community Engagement:

1

Determine the purpose. Determine the shared goal of a community engagement process among key stakeholders. What will be different as a result of community engagement? What do you want to learn or achieve as a result of the process?

2

Identify Target Audiences. Who is it you wish to reach? Why are they important to furthering your cause? Create a list of audiences and leaders or influencers for those audiences who you can invite to attend your meetings, serve as advisors, or interact with your organization in other ways. Think through if this list is diverse enough.

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10 Key Elements of Community Engagement: *(continued)*

3



Define Your Method(s) of Engagement. There are many ways to engage community members, and your efforts shouldn't be limited to just one. Concentrate on asking for input and engaging in conversation, rather than delivering your own agenda. Methods may include focus groups (guided discussion to provide feedback on priorities or perspectives), online surveys, paper surveys distributed at community events, one-on-one interviews, and more.

4



Find Ideal Locations. Engaging community members works best when you meet them where they are, or at least making it easy for them to come to you. Host focus groups in geographically diverse places around your community where residents feel comfortable or regularly go to, such as schools or libraries. Hand out surveys at places where people gather or visit often, like community festivals or grocery stores. For online surveys, identify email lists that best overlap with your target audience.

5



Create Partnerships. Depending on your issue, identify organizational partners who can amplify your effort—for example, a school or university for an education issue, or a hospital for a health-related issue. In addition, look for “unlikely” partners whose voice in support of your cause will attract attention (such as a chamber of commerce promoting preschool or a church advocating for teen pregnancy prevention). Also look individuals who have a particular resource or expertise to bring to bear OR others who might create problems if they were left out. For all partners, be sure there is mutual understanding of their roles, commitments and requirements as you move forward.

6



Communicate about the Engagement. Communication can make or break a community engagement effort. Take time to think strategically about your communication. Understand what you want to communicate and why, then develop a clear message. Decide who should carry that message (a grassroots leader? an elected official? a business leader? youth? or someone completely unexpected?) and to whom they should carry it (to local groups or to major media? to hospital executives or to neighborhood associations?). Plan the timing of your communication to align with key steps in your engagement process, so that your message doesn't get too far ahead of—or behind—your work.

7



Create Materials. What materials do you need to inform people about your effort? How will you use them? Look for materials that already exist that you might share or adapt, then determine what other materials you will need to develop. For example, a one page background document, pamphlet, or a recent news article about your issue.

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10 Key Elements of Community Engagement: (continued)

8



Staff Up. Community engagement is constant and dynamic, and can require undivided attention. (Think of juggling cats or nailing Jello to a wall.) While there may be well-meaning and committed volunteers in the mix, look for staff to support your process if your budget allows. Then, ensure that those staffers have the training and support they need to serve your effort well. (In some cases, community engagement staff are housed by organizational partners.)

9



Set a Timeline. Determine how long it will take you to get your community engagement effort off the ground and identify a “launch” date to motivate your team. But don’t leave them hanging. Identifying a clear end date also motivates action and helps everyone see the light at the end of the tunnel. Determine if a phased approach is appropriate.

10



Measure Success. What will success look like for your effort? How will you know when you’re done? When will you know it’s time to celebrate? As you determine how to define and measure success, be sure to identify milestones in the process and assign measures of success to them as well. That way, you will know if you need to adjust your strategy before it’s too late.

Incorporating these 10 key elements will help your community engagement effort achieve its full potential. To ensure a high-quality experience for everyone involved, check out our ten proven best-practices that can overlay your community engagement effort.

10 Best Practices for Community Engagement:

1



Ask the community what THEY want. Never assume you know what other members of your community are thinking. Constantly test your perspective against those of others.

2



Meet community members where they are. You want to make it as easy as possible for community members to engage with you and feel comfortable. That means going to places where they gather or visit, choosing a time of day that works with their schedules, and even wording questions in a way sounds familiar to them.

3



Understand the efforts that are already successfully underway in the community—in schools, neighborhoods, nonprofits, government agencies and more. No one wants to re-invent the wheel, or to waste time on an effort that’s duplicative. By finding about other successful efforts, you will discover ways to amplify or improve your own.

4



Tap into authentic engagement that is driven and led by community members. You may pose the questions, but allow community members to lead the conversation and surface related issues that are important to them. Ask them to define the ways in which engagement will feel most meaningful to them.

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10 Best Practices for Community Engagement: (continued)

5 →

Leverage partners and champions (those that support your issue, but do not have a direct stake in it). No one individual or entity can engage a community alone. You need partners to help you carry the load, and champions to help you carry the flag. Find those whose strengths and networks complement your own for broader reach and deeper resonance.

6 →

Engage a variety of community members. Examine your community in terms of geography, age, education level, socioeconomic status, race, and any other factor you can think of that will make sure no particular group is unintentionally excluded from your efforts. This broad range of representation will help ensure that your strategy and messages appeal to everyone.

7 →

Use a mixed methodology in order to gather the most input (including surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one interviews) but be sure to use a standard list of questions. That way, you will be able to synthesize the input you have gathered in a consistent and meaningful way.

8 →

Target separate audiences in focus groups. In some cases, members of one neighborhood or profession or age will be more comfortable and more candid in conversations with their peer group. Once you have pulled various focus groups together, you can see the common themes and issues that appeal to all of them, as well as particular points you may need to address to keep all of them on board.

9 →

Control the message. Communicate proactively and frequently. Arm champions, partners and allies with materials and information to share. Build relationships with media outlets. Identify approved media spokespersons to field reporters' calls. And just in case, have a crisis communication plan at the ready.

10 →

Build organizational capacity to continue the work. More likely than not, you will need the ability to either sustain an existing community engagement effort for a period of time, or launch a new community engagement effort sometime in the not-too-distant future. In either case, you will want to help your staff understand their roles and responsibilities with regard to community engagement, and provide the training and other support they may require.

Community engagement is rarely easy, but it can truly be a powerful way to change lives and futures in your community. By following these key elements and best practices, you will successfully engage your community to make lasting, positive changes for the issues about which you care.

Want to learn even more about community engagement? Visit our online resource center and find us on the web at www.advocacyandcommunication.org.