



12 Tips for Community Engagement

There are many reasons you may need or want to engage individuals within your community. Maybe you are fighting for a compelling cause and need their support. Perhaps you are seeking their input on what to prioritize. No matter your purpose, inspiring community participation requires a thoughtful process. How do you reach those outside your existing network? How do you empower and engage community members who have been historically left out of decision making?

It helps to understand that community engagement is both a process and an outcome. It's a *process* in which organizations and individuals cultivate understanding and empathy to elevate and apply their collective vision for community. It's an *outcome* in that people are willing, ready, and able to advocate effectively or communicate about their shared vision.

Community engagement is used by nonprofits, private businesses, associations, government agencies, foundations, or any combination of these.

And while authentic community engagement is a complex undertaking that requires both short- and long-term strategies and investments, it doesn't have to be intimidating. Here are 12 steps and best practices to foster community engagement.

1. Determine the Purpose.

Articulate why you want to engage your community. What will be different as a result of community engagement? What do you want to learn or achieve as a result of the process? Is there a change that will come about as a result of this work? Identify the goal of a community engagement process among key stakeholders.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Ask community members what **THEY** want. Never assume you know what other members of your community are thinking. Regularly check your perspective with the perspectives of others.

Goals of community engagement include:

- ▶ Inform the community about an effort or issue
- ▶ Increase visibility for your organization or initiative
- ▶ Increase the number of partners and allies that join your effort
- ▶ Collaborate with new partners and build trust
- ▶ Identify and/or activate ambassadors and leaders in the community around an issue or effort
- ▶ Determine community needs or preferences
- ▶ Inform internal strategy or organizational direction
- ▶ Create buy-in on a particular strategy or effort

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2. Identify Target Audiences.

Whom do you wish to reach? Why are they important to furthering your cause? Create a list of audiences and leaders or influencers for those audiences you can invite to attend your meetings, serve as advisors, or interact with your organization in other ways. Share this list with stakeholders and remember to ask yourself, “Who is not on this list but should be because they are directly affected by this work?”

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Engage a variety of community members. Examine your community in terms of geography, age, education level, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and any other factors that will ensure no one is excluded from your efforts. This broad range of representation will help ensure that your strategy and communication appeal to as many people as possible.

3. Determine Your Approach.

There are many community engagement models to choose from. Do some research to figure out which one will best suit your needs. One useful model is the Spectrum of Public Participation from the International Association for Public Participation, which details a five-part pathway from low to high public impact on decision-making (see iap2.org/page/pillars for more).

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Authentic engagement is driven and led by community members. You may develop the questions, but community members must lead the conversation and identify related issues that are important to them. Ask them to define the ways in which engagement will feel most meaningful to them.

4. Tap into Existing Efforts.

Consider how you may leverage local community assets, partner organizations, and existing initiatives to meet your goals. Understand existing efforts in the community—in schools, neighborhoods, nonprofits, government agencies, and more. No one wants to re-invent the wheel, or to waste time duplicating efforts. By learning about other successful efforts, you will discover ways to amplify or improve your own.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** If you learn that a similar effort is already underway in your community, look for opportunities to contribute your organizational resources to it. It may require relinquishing some control. If it's not possible or desirable to join forces, you may need to rethink your effort's specific goals and audiences to tackle the issue in a different way.

5. 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 (which can be done virtually), text messaging, virtual group meetings



(using platforms like Zoom or FaceTime), and more. When conducting focus groups, consider segmenting your audiences by common traits—individuals may be comfortable having candid conversations with their peers and colleagues, rather than those from very different backgrounds and experiences. Afterward, you will be able to identify common themes across groups and audiences.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Use a mixed methodology (such as surveys, formal or informal focus groups, or one-on-one interviews) to gather the most input but 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.

6. Meet People Where They Are.

Engaging community members works best when you meet them where they are, or at least make it easy for them to come to you. Host focus groups in geographically diverse places around your community where residents feel comfortable or regularly visit, such as schools or libraries. Hand out surveys where people frequently gather or pass through, like community centers or grocery stores. For online surveys, work with community agencies and organizations to obtain email addresses for your target audience. Consider non-traditional spaces for conversations like a local coffee shop.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Be thoughtful about when engagement opportunities occur and how timing may affect participation by the people you are trying to reach. For example, you may want to avoid scheduling meetings and gatherings during regular business hours when it will be hard for those with full-time jobs to attend. If you plan for gatherings on weekends, consider providing free child care.

7. Build Partnerships.

No single individual or entity can engage a community alone. You need partners to help 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. 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). Work with individuals who have a particular resource or expertise to bring to bear.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Be cognizant of local politics: Don't exclude those who might think differently, are seen as naysayers, or whose absence will be seen as a gap in the effort. In fact, engaging naysayers makes your effort stronger. Ensure there is mutual understanding among partners about roles and expectations throughout the engagement process.

8. Communicate about the Engagement.

Communication can make or break a community engagement effort. Think strategically about your communication. Understand *what* you want to communicate and *to whom*; 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?). Messages are best received when delivered by someone who is trusted, and that trusted messenger differs within and between communities, so be thoughtful. *How* will your trusted messengers communicate? You may need to adapt or create materials about your effort, such as flyers, postcards, or media talking points. You also may need to consider how people you are working to engage share information—do they prefer social media and other online options, or do hard copies of information work better?

When you communicate matters, too. 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.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** **Control the message.** Communicate proactively and regularly. 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 ready.

9. Staff Up.

Community engagement is constant and dynamic, and is likely to require the undivided attention of a lead staff person. While there may be well-meaning and committed volunteers in the mix, assign or hire full-time staff if your budget allows. Ensure staff and volunteers are properly trained and supported to do this work (in some cases, community engagement staff are housed by organizational partners). If you use volunteers, be sure there is someone to train and organize their collective action, to gather and manage feedback, and to monitor to ensure best practices are being used in the engagement and/or there is fidelity to the engagement model chosen.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** **Build organizational capacity to continue the work.** More likely than not, you will need to either sustain an existing community engagement effort or launch a new community engagement effort sometime in the near 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.

10. 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. You should also identify and share a clear end date to help everyone see the light at the end of the tunnel.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** **Consider creating a “reverse” timeline** and working backward from the completion date to identify the concrete tasks that need to be accomplished to complete your work.



11. Measure Success.

What will success look like for your effort? How will you know when you're done? Identify short-, intermediate- and long-term outcomes and capture how you will measure progress toward and achievement of those outcomes. For example, an outcome could be the creation of a community-wide plan to connect all children with free pre-K.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** Schedule opportunities throughout your project to touch base on how you are progressing toward your outcomes. Measurement shouldn't happen only at the end of the effort. Regular check-ins will inform real-time changes if you learn that certain activities aren't working, and help you celebrate the small wins, too.

12. Create a Feedback Loop.

Authentic community engagement is not a one-way street. What will you do with the information that you gather from the community? Whether or not you share findings with the public, you should communicate with the community about how you are using their input. Showing them their input and participation is valuable helps create good will and fosters mutual trust.

- ▶ **BEST PRACTICE:** If you share results of engagement, think critically about what you want to share, when and with whom. Be transparent and specific up front with all stakeholders about your plans to share so they can make an informed decision about participation.

Community engagement is rarely easy, but it is a powerful way to change lives and futures in your community. By following these tips and best practices, you increase your chances to successfully engage your community and make lasting, positive changes on the issues you care about.

Want to learn more about community engagement? Download ACS' [Engage Your Community Workbook](#) and related resources [here](#).

