

# Do local officials and city employees have the skills, cultural awareness and organizational support to work productively with citizens?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 14 OF 14**



## Restructuring City Hall for Engagement

San Jose, CA (pop. 964,000)

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When the City of San Jose first launched the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative ten years ago, it seemed to be a way of strengthening the relationship between local government and residents. As the initiative grew, it became clear that changes were necessary within City Hall itself in order for city employees to work effectively with the public.

San Jose changed the way its city finances are organized, moving from traditional departmental budgets to “city service area budgets” that cover offices in different departments. Some of the longstanding hierarchies and boundaries between departments were shifted. The city now has teams of people, representing different departments, who work with neighborhoods and particular groups of residents depending on the issue.

Public engagement often seems, at least at first, like an activity that is external to City Hall – it takes place out in the neighborhoods, or at public meetings or online. But it also has internal implications for the way that local governments operate. Public officials and employees may need different skills, higher levels of “cultural awareness” and better connections with other departments and organizations in order to be successful.

When local officials were asked in a 2009 NLC survey about the main obstacles to conducting more public engagement, “lack of training” came up as the most common response.<sup>1</sup> Many officials feel that they could use more training and skills in this area; an even larger number say that city staff need more background in recruitment, facilitation, issue framing and other public engagement skills.

Familiarity with engagement skills and techniques is only part of the picture; perhaps the greater benefit of training is that it gives officials and employees the chance to get comfortable with the whole idea of working more directly with citizens. City staff sometimes have a harder time with this transition than the elected officials. “The employees usually look to the elected officials – it can be a big shift for them to think that the citizens are their main constituency,” says Kevin Frazell of the League of Minnesota Cities. This may be particularly true for mid-level public employees, who are often more insulated from citizens than elected officials or rank-and-file employees like police officers or teachers.

Officials and employees may need to be more “culturally aware” and have the skills to reach all elements of the community. To do public engagement well, a city workforce needs the capacity to surmount language barriers, build relationships with politically marginalized groups and address issues of race and difference directly. Hiring a racially and culturally diverse mix of employees is one part of the response to these needs, though it is probably insufficient by itself, and it can be difficult to do in a time of shrinking city budgets. Local officials are also realizing they need to deal productively with race within City Hall – creating a working environment where people can discuss perceptions, stereotypes and tensions, and work through these issues. This kind of culturally aware workplace can be critical for recruiting job candidates of color, dealing with workplace disputes and explaining city hiring practices to the public.

Finally, the culture and working relationships within City Hall may also need to be reassessed. If the departments and agencies within local government act as separate ‘silos’ and do not work together effectively, it can be hard for city staff to interact with citizens on a broad range of issues. It can also be difficult for public employees to interact more democratically with the public if their workplaces are command-and-control environments. If city employees feel that they do not have the freedom to make changes, they will not react well to suggestions made by citizens.

## MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT SKILLS, MINDSET, AND CULTURAL AWARENESS:

- What kinds of public engagement training are available to local officials and city employees?
- What kinds of cultural awareness training are available to local officials and city employees?
- How well does the racial and ethnic makeup of City Hall reflect the demographics of the city as a whole?
- To what extent do city employees – or citizens – feel hampered by a lack of cooperation between city departments?

## POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Use surveys, focus groups, or other tools to better understand citizens' experiences working with City Hall.
- Convene small-group discussions with city employees to talk about ways to break down silos and interact with citizens more effectively.

