

Potential Priorities for Democratic Governance in your Community

Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure

In developing a long-term public engagement plan, it is important to think carefully about everyone's interests and goals. Why is it beneficial for the community to have people involved in public life? Why is it beneficial for people to be involved? One common mistake is to focus on the engagement goals of public officials and other local leaders, and not take into account why citizens might want to be engaged.

Here are some potential answers to the question of "Why is it important for people to be engaged?"

PRIORITY 1 – INFORM CITIZENS ABOUT PUBLIC ISSUES AND ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

In a democracy it is essential that people know their rights and responsibilities. It is also important that they have some basic level of knowledge about public issues, and about opportunities to have a say in the policymaking processes on those issues. Engaging them can help them learn more about their legal protections, their civic responsibilities (such as voting) and how their governments function.

RELEVANT BUILDING BLOCKS:

1. Democratic spaces in neighborhoods schools, and other settings
2. Democratic spaces online
3. Democratic spaces for young people
6. Public information dissemination
7. Engagement skills training
10. Recurring deliberative processes on key issues and decisions

PRIORITY 2 – BUILD A STRONGER SENSE OF COMMUNITY, CONNECTEDNESS AND ATTACHMENT TO PLACE.

Communities are more successful, both socially and economically, when people are connected with one another and feel an attachment to where they live. Furthermore, this feeling of attachment may be inextricably interwoven with efforts to promote engagement: "It is hard to have citizen engagement without a sense of community, and it is hard to fashion a sense of community without citizen engagement," argue the political scientists James Svara and Janet Denhardt. This sense of belonging, and of "feeling heard" (an emotion our Founding Fathers would have called "public happiness" is perhaps the most intangible, and also the most prevalent, outcome of successful public engagement efforts.

PART 2 INTRODUCTION

RELEVANT BUILDING BLOCKS:

1. Democratic spaces in neighborhoods, schools and other settings
2. Democratic spaces online
3. Democratic spaces for young people
4. Buildings that can house citizen spaces — physical hubs for engagement
9. Official public meetings that are more participatory and effective
10. Recurring deliberative processes on key issues and decisions
12. Cross-sector problem-solving teams

PRIORITY 3 – REDUCE TENSIONS AROUND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES AND BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE.

Many communities are now deadlocked between different issue interests, between demographic populations or more generally between citizens and government. Some of the tensions arise from a lack of understanding about what motivates people who are different from us, or who have fundamentally different opinions. In most cases, the only way to alter this dynamic is to bring people together in safe environments where they can learn more about one another, share their experiences and motivations and discuss public issues in a more structured way.

RELEVANT BUILDING BLOCKS:

9. Official public meetings that are more participatory and effective
10. Recurring deliberative processes on key issues and decisions

PRIORITY 4 – TAP INTO THE POWER OF CITIZENS TO HELP SOLVE PUBLIC PROBLEMS.

Citizens can bring many skills and talents to bear on public problems and opportunities. The various groups and networks they belong to — including businesses, faith institutions, neighborhood groups and many other associations — are also in themselves sources of great problem-solving capacity. Engagement can bring those assets into play by giving people better opportunities to solve public problems and make improvements to their neighborhoods and city. Asking residents to take a hand in problem-solving can lead to better, more sustainable solutions and reduce the strain on government.

RELEVANT BUILDING BLOCKS:

1. Democratic spaces in neighborhoods, schools and other settings
3. Democratic spaces for young people
7. Engagement skills training
8. Tracking, measurement and technical assistance to improve engagement
10. Recurring deliberative processes on key issues and decisions
11. Systems that encourage innovation by citizens
12. Cross-sector problem-solving teams

PRIORITY 5 – HELP LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEVELOP SMARTER, MORE BROADLY SUPPORTED PUBLIC POLICIES AND SERVICES.

Engagement of all kinds of people is essential for ensuring that public policies reflect what residents want, and that public services are provided efficiently and effectively. Citizens need to understand the trade-offs and limitations inherent in public decisions, and they need to know about the services available to them. Public managers need to understand the priorities, needs, concerns and skills of the people they are trying to represent and serve. Traditional methods of gathering input — public hearings, comment periods — usually fail to harvest new ideas or make people feel heard; more proactive methods can help ensure that the resulting policies are more informed and more broadly supported.

RELEVANT BUILDING BLOCKS:

1. Democratic spaces in neighborhoods, schools and other settings
2. Democratic spaces online
3. Democratic spaces for young people
5. Engagement leadership
9. Official public meetings that are more participatory and effective
10. Recurring deliberative processes on key issues and decisions
11. Systems that encourage innovation by citizens

PRIORITY 6 – GIVE MARGINALIZED PEOPLE A PLACE AT THE TABLE.

In most communities, there are fairly stark political and economic inequities between different socioeconomic groups. A key goal of public engagement planning should be to amplify those “marginalized” voices, and to provide arenas where they can bring their ideas and concerns to the table. Engagement with an eye to social and racial equity will give the potentially “involved” — rather than just the “involved” — a chance to help set the agenda for public discussion and decision-making.

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