

Equity & Diversity Best Practices for Neighborhood Associations

STATEMENT

Diversity in community engagement is an important factor that both improves the quality and viability of the outcomes and increases the persuasiveness and authority of decisions within the community and with outside actors. The more diverse a group of people, the more comprehensive an understanding of the neighborhood and its needs and resources the group has and the more innovative a set of solutions they can craft.

Underlying these methods is a willingness to reflect on which voices are in the room and which are not. This might entail examining the demographics of the membership and of the board for comparison with neighborhood demographics and then conducting targeted outreach to even out imbalances. It is the redistribution of power that enables everyone who is presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which they join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society.

PROCESS

“1. USE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS THAT DISPLAY AND ENHANCE MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT” – Joy Harjo’s book entitled “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings”

Be clear about your promise to people. Everyone wants to know that their input will make a difference. This is can be particularly acute for populations where there may be a history of disenfranchisement related to local decision making. So, make sure you are clear up front about how people’s input will be used and what level of impact it will have on the outcome.

“If you sign this paper we will become brothers. We will no longer fight. We will give you this land and these waters in exchange “as long as the grass shall grow and the rivers run.”

We say, put down your papers, your tools of coercion, your false promises, your posture of superiority and sit with us before the fire. We will share food, songs, and stories. We will gather beneath starlight and dance, and rise together at sunrise.”

Seek ways to build trust. Trust will be fundamental to your success in engaging new voices. Seek out community partners who will be seen as trusted organizations or leaders for those populations you are trying to engage. These partners can play several roles in your project including: helping to design and frame your effort, identifying ways to work with specific populations, and inviting or hosting community conversations.

Often neighborhood associations, service organizations or local faith leaders are good places to start. These partnerships may be informal (e.g. holding a few meetings, reaching out when there is a specific question or need) or there may be a need for a more formal arrangement. In the case of more formal partnerships, it’s helpful to review [best practices](#) in creating and sustaining these kinds of partnerships.

Also, be prepared to address top of mind questions and concerns of those you are engaging. You may find that what is a priority for them is not directly related to your project. In that case, do what you can to connect folks to more information or provide direction so that they can take action. If you can show progress then folks are more likely to trust what you have to say.

“2. PARTICIPATION THROUGH A SET CONFLICT RESOLUTION GROUND RULES”

Make participation possible and positive. Sometimes you have to hold a meeting where people come to you. In these cases, do what you can to make people’s attendance feasible. Actions you can take include: provide amenities like food, transportation, simultaneous translation, and childcare; ensure meetings are held in ADA compliant, or at least more accessible buildings; and offer stipends to help compensate for lost wages.

Getting folks in the room is just the beginning. Make sure to develop a meeting format that will ensure all feel comfortable participating and that their input is valued. For instance, low tech, high touch activities like small group conversations or methods like storytelling can help people share community experiences in their own words without being intimidated by speaking to a room full of people. High tech tools can play a role too; tools like [keypad polling](#) enable people to express their opinion anonymously on issues which can ease their fear of being confronted or judged for their perspective.

*“Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand. Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane.
Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill.*

*The land is a being who remembers everything.
You will have to answer to your children, and their children, and theirs—
The red shimmer of remembering will compel you up the night to walk the perimeter of
truth for understanding.*

*By listening we will understand who we are in this holy realm of words.
Do not parade, pleased with yourself.
You must speak in the language of justice.”*

“3. BE INCLUSIVE & GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK:”

Talk and act inclusively. The way you frame your project will affect whether people take interest in it. First, try to speak in lay terms and avoid jargon as much as possible. (Stauffer’s [article](#) for a take on key “plannerisms” to avoid). Watch for specific words that may hold contested meanings. For instance, asking for “citizen” input could inadvertently alienate people in communities with immigrant populations even if your desire is to hear from all residents.

Also, don’t expect people to come to you. Everyone is busy these days particularly those who are working multiple jobs, juggling child care or managing long commutes. The more you can do to interact with people in their everyday routines the better, so consider holding project activities in places like [laundromats](#) or at transit stations. And don’t forget the power of a regular conversation –

sometimes it's better to leave the building blocks and sticky notes at home and just listen to what people have to say.

"We speak together with this trade language of English. This trade language enables us to speak across many language boundaries. These languages have given us the poets.

This would be no place to be without blues, jazz—Thank you/mvto to the Africans, the Europeans sitting in, especially Adolphe Sax with his saxophones... Don't forget that at the center is the Mvskoke ceremonial circles. We know how to swing. We keep the heartbeat of the earth in our stomp dance feet."

"4. REDUCE DEFENSIVENESS AND BREAK THE DEFENSIVENESS CHAIN"

"We are here dancing, they said. There was no there.

There was no "I" or "you."

There was us; there was "we."

There we were as if we were the music.

You cannot legislate music to lockstep nor can you legislate the spirit of the music to stop at political boundaries—

—Or poetry, or art, or anything that is of value or matters in this world, and the next worlds.

This is about getting to know each other.

We will wind up back at the blues standing on the edge of the flatted fifth about to jump into a fierce understanding together."

"5. ELIMINATE NEGATIVE ATTITUDES DURING CONFLICT; USE WHAT YOU LEARN TO RESOLVE YOUR OWN CONFLICTS AND TO MEDIATE OTHERS' CONFLICTS:"

Think about the long game. You may find that even after you take all these steps you'll fall short of achieving greater, more diverse levels of participation. When this happens it is helpful to remember that community engagement is not a one-off thing; it takes years of effort to create a healthy culture of civic engagement. The more you can do to build a sustainable infrastructure to support public participation the better. [Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy](#) and [Slow Democracy](#) are two good resources for re-imagining how we can engage people in civic dialogue and decision making

"When we made it back home, back over those curved roads that wind through the city of peace, we stopped at the doorway of dusk as it opened to our homelands.

*We gave thanks for the story, for all parts of the story
because it was by the light of those challenges we knew
ourselves—
We asked for forgiveness.
We laid down our burdens next to each other.”*

ACTION

- Meeting at a location that is easily accessible on foot and by public transit,
- Having a volunteer childcare provider for neighborhood meetings,
- Using translation services (delivered simultaneously or by headphone sets),
- Considering school, work, and religious obligations when setting meeting times,
- Providing refreshments,
- Designating a point person to greet first-time attendees, and
- Creating pathways to participation outside of regular meetings.