

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

When local governments work with their communities, both sides benefit. Good relationships with community stakeholders, such as neighborhoods and community development groups, can improve local government decision-making, legitimacy and overall community competitiveness. So why is it difficult to do well? Perhaps we've been too prescriptive in how governments interact with their citizens. These basic steps outline how organizations of all kinds engage with communities; perspectives from other sectors may provide some fresh pointers:

- 1. Get to know the community.** Guides and tools like this one (<http://www.etu.org.za/toolbox/docs/organise/needs.pdf>) are all over the web. The basic premise of them is the same one a good public speaker uses:
 - Understand who you want to / are going to be talking to, and make what you have to say relevant and interesting to them. Meet them where you're at, on their level.
 - Make what you have to say short, and then listen.
 - Be honest with your answers; even if it's not what people want to hear, you will be more respected for being truthful than you will for being political.
 - Be available. Not all the time, but for a while after any public event. Don't bolt for the door; one-on-one conversation can build relationships that can be helpful to your goals over time.
- 2. Choose an engagement strategy you are comfortable with.** If you aren't comfortable, your citizens will know it and they won't be comfortable either. Choose a venue you can be yourself in. It doesn't have to be a public meeting in a school classroom; it can be a booth at the Farmers Market or a stump speech at a PechaKucha (<http://www.pechakucha.org>). Green Drinks, Bikes and Coffee: there are a lot of ways to engage with face time. However, it doesn't always have to be in person. Check out the SSDN Community Based Social Marketing materials (<http://www.southeastssdn.org/network-projects/>) to learn how all the different marketing channels can work for you.
- 3. Plan the engagement process.** No one likes a poorly run meeting or event. If this isn't your skill set, consider asking a co-worker to help facilitate and interact with the audience. Keys to remember: plan the outreach, plan the event from every angle / every detail, and don't let it be a flash in the pan. Consider the follow-up as an equally important step in the process. This is the time for talking points and minute-by-minute internal agendas. Then, once you've prepped, relax at the event – your pre-planning will pay off with a smooth execution. Here's another toolkit for planning it out. (<http://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/community-engagement>).
- 4. Make it permanent.** Community Engagement needs to be a habit. If you don't like doing it, put yourself on a schedule and eventually you will come to dread it less and get better at it. Just like the SSDN Equity programming conversation (<http://usdn.org/documents/15220>), this is a long term commitment to how you operate in your community. Make it yours, and make everyone's time count.

Bottom Line

Get out there, and listen more than you talk. Once you start to really hear your community members, you start making decisions around that feedback. These decisions give your programs a successful foundation localized to your time and place.