A Practical Guide to Successful Civic Engagement:

A Tool for Building Trust Between Citizens and Government

(July 2013)



Introduction

Today, terms like "civic engagement" and "public participation" are used as if everyone has heard of them and knows exactly what they mean and why they are important. There are increased requirements from federal and state governments that public agencies at all levels include "public participation" in their decision-making. Local governments, too, are learning that citizens are no longer happy to let decisions that affect them be made without giving consideration to their opinions and priorities.

The late political scientist, scholar and presidential adviser Edward Banfield observed,

"Society works better when people trust one another."

One doesn't have to spend much time answering the phone at a public agency, tending a customer service desk in a municipal office or attending a city council or county supervisors' meeting to recognize that there is a significant level of mistrust and skepticism between some citizens and government.

Clearly there is a need for methods that demonstrate responsibility and accountability on the part of government and that give citizens the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions in a civil manner.

Few who work in the world of public administration receive much in the way of professional education about civic engagement. Engineers were trained to be engineers. Accountants were trained to be accountants. Librarians were trained to be librarians and school principals were trained to be educators.

Until recently, listening to the public meant taking notes at council meetings, holding public hearings that might or might not be well or representatively attended, counting phone calls to the mayor's office and paying close attention to the local letters to the editor.

Meaningful civic engagement provides strategies and tools that can be used to bridge some of these gaps and create a more constructive, respectful, civil and ultimately successful dialog between citizens and government.

A Practical Guide to Successful Civic Engagement is not intended to be an academic treatise. It is purposely short on theory and long on common sense and practical applications. We hope you will find it useful.

What is Civic Engagement?

The terms "civic engagement" and "public participation" are commonly used to describe any of a number of processes that can be used to create constructive interaction between citizens and government that leads to better decision-making. They can refer to participation in matters related to an area as small as a neighborhood or as large as the entire nation. Usually they refer to matters closer to home, ranging from the placement of a public playground to decisions about schools, highways, sewer systems, garbage pickup and the environment. For the purpose of this Guide we will use the term "civic engagement" and be talking about engagement in the context of local or regional government.

The difference between the modern practice of civic engagement and some of the methods local governments and public agencies have used in the past is that modern civic engagement is:

- A two-way communication.
- An open and transparent process that gives all stakeholders an opportunity to participate in the process.
- A tool that shows citizens and government how to work better together.
- A process that prevents the hijacking of public meetings by extremists or those who simply seek to dominate the discussion.
- Not just about addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations (e.g. low-income, disabled, minorities, etc.).

Successful civic engagement requires three conditions:

1. Citizens willing to take part in the process.
2. Timely and accurate information about the issue being discussed.
3. Process that leads from confusion to conclusions and, where possible, consensus.

Because some citizens and public agencies get confused about civic engagement, let's be clear about a few things:

- Civic engagement *is not* a replacement for responsible day-to-day communications between governments and citizens.
- Civic engagement *is not* a process for micromanaging governmental functions, nor is it government by consensus or by proposition.
- Civic engagement *is not* a tool for slowing down government decision-making.

Why is Civic Engagement Important?

Civic engagement is important because there is a very strong correlation between the amount of citizen participation in the processes of governance and citizens' perceptions of the effectiveness, accountability and efficiency of government.

Successful civic engagement is anything that allows citizens and government to work together effectively and cooperatively to make decisions.

Successful civic engagement creates an environment of trust. While some public sector employees may find civic engagement at least initially intrusive to their normal practices, in the long run bringing citizens into the process of governance makes getting things done easier, faster and, as often as not, less expensively.

What Does Successful Civic Engagement Look Like?

Let's be honest: Some citizens are difficult to work with. Some public workers, too, see engaged citizens, even friendly citizens, as an intrusion, as amateurs telling professionals how to do their job.

Nothing gets done in such a climate. If it does it happens over a long period of time at great cost, frustration and wear and tear to all involved.

The goal of civic engagement is for citizens and government to reach decisions in a way that is efficient, that instills trust and that makes it possible for citizens to bring their best and most constructive thinking to the process of public decision making.

Successful democracy is a two-way street. It requires government and public agencies that respect and invite citizen input. It also requires citizens to step up and participate and to be constructive and respectful in their engagement.

In theory, the burden for creating a climate of successful civic engagement should be shared equally. But in practice the burden most often falls on the local government or public agency to create the climate where successful civic engagement can take place.

No matter what methods of civic engagement are used, there are elements and values that apply to all:

- Purposeful outreach
- Open
- Accessible
- Multiple points of contact
- Close
- Reliable information
- Timeliness
- Honesty and transparency
- Fair
- Respectful

Purposeful Outreach:

Successful civic engagement does not happen by itself. It does not come naturally to citizens who cannot express themselves civilly or constructively, or to public employees who see citizens as intrusive. Successful civic engagement requires dedicated attention and commitment from everyone involved in the process. It requires appropriate and necessary investment to create awareness, invite citizens into the process, provide a safe and constructive working space and appropriate funding to communicate the progress and conclusions of the process.

Open:

One of the hallmarks of the American concept of democracy is equality. Citizens come in all shapes and sizes and perspectives. Whether they show interest or not, they are all stakeholders in the work of public governance and, as such, deserve to be included in any discussion of public issues that affect them. That means including people who agree with the public entity's point of view and those who disagree. It includes those who pay a lot of taxes and those who pay none. It includes people who are congenial and cooperative and people whose initial approach may be hostile.

Accessible:

Successful civic engagements requires that everyone whose life may be impacted by the issue being considered have reasonable access to the process in which that decision is being made. Every effort must be made to make public input opportunities to available to the widest range of citizens, not just those for whom it may be convenient to show up. Public meeting should take place at times that maximize the number of people who can attend, in places that are accessible to people who depend on public transportation and in settings that are not socially, racially or economically intimidating.

Multiple Points of Contact:

Successful civic engagement initiatives almost always have multiple points of contact so that no citizen is deprived of the opportunity to have input.

Accessibility is not just a matter of physical location. Though budget constraints may compel us to think about confining our civic engagement activities to a single, most affordable option, the truth is no single mode of communication between citizens and government is enough. Not everyone can come to a public meeting. Many people are uncomfortable or easily intimidated speaking before a group.

Today's rapidly evolving online resources and social media make possible many opportunities for citizens who would not otherwise have access to the process to participate in deliberation and decision-making.

Closeness:

Trust is built through close association. The best collaboration likewise occurs when people work things out face-to-face. Successful civic engagement cannot be accomplished by relying on methods that keep citizens and public agencies at arm's length from one another.

Reliable Information:

As Thomas Jefferson famously pointed out, the best citizens are informed citizens. Successful civic engagement is not only about interacting with citizens, but also about providing reliable and timely information about not only the issue at hand, but also the bigger picture of which the issue is part. As in other parts of this discussion, the onus is on the public agency to provide the information in forms that meet the different informational needs of different citizens.

Timeliness:

Citizens need to be brought into decision-making processes when their contributions of ideas and suggestions can have the most constructive input. There is little value, and a good chance that citizens will only become angry, if they are brought in to discuss an issue after key decisions have already been made.

Honesty and Transparency:

Citizens are understandably wary and mistrustful of government representatives whose interest in citizen input is superficial. They have experienced public meetings where their input was only "window dressing." Any government or public agency that enters into an engagement initiative with citizens must therefore be honest and open in its intention and needs.

Fair Process:

It should not be necessary to point out that successful civic engagement requires absolute fairness. Successful civic engagement requires that all points of view be given an opportunity to be expressed, no matter how popular or unpopular they may be.

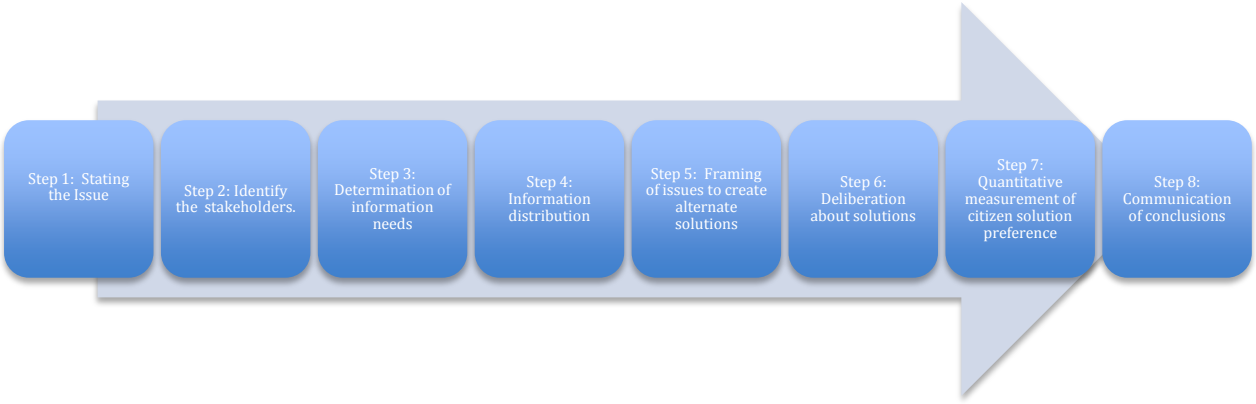
Respectful:

Successful civic engagement requires that everyone enter the process with respect for all of the other participants in the process. It is natural that some people will have disagreements. Many issues are guaranteed to be fraught with skepticism, cynicism and at least initial wariness. Uncivil behavior, however, cannot be tolerated.

But there must be respect for the time, energy and commitment each member of the discussion is expending to be part of the process. Even those who disagree with each other must have respect for the legitimacy of the right of other opinions and respect for the civic engagement process.

Finally, it is absolutely critical that citizens not be invited into discussions of issues where their input will not be taken seriously and incorporated into the final decision-making process.

Typical Civic Engagement Process



Step 1: ***Stating the Issue****:*

This is where you ask, "Why are we here?" You start by describing the situation and the goal. What is the purpose for this civic engagement initiative? What decision(s) need to be made?

Step 2: ***Identify the Stakeholders****:*

Not every issue involves everyone in the city, county or region. Sometimes it's as few as the representatives of key groups or the people who live around a single neighborhood park. The most important part of this stage is answering the question, "Who are the stakeholders for this issue?" The answer to this question identifies the people who need to be notified that a civic engagement project is being initiated that warrants their attention and participation.

Step 3: ***Determination of Information Needs****:*

The next step is to determine what information will be needed for participants in the process to be able to make informed decisions.

Information falls into three broad categories and should be grouped accordingly:

- Undisputable facts.
- Generally accepted opinions
- Opinions that are not generally accepted

Step 4: ***Information Distribution****:*

Information is of little use if the people who need it can't find it. Information can be distributed in any number of ways and can take the form of paper hand-outs, brochures, booklets, videos, subject expert presentations, paid advertising, web sites and webinars. Nearly all successful civic engagement projects involve the use of multiple information distribution channels.

Step 5: ***Issue Framing to Create Alternate Solutions****:*

Making smart decisions requires the consideration of many possible outcomes. Rarely is the first thing that comes to mind the best solution. This step is sometimes referred to as "issue framing" because it involves the identification and exploration of different decision choices. No ideas should be dismissed at this stage. The whole idea is to get as many ideas out on the table as possible.

Step 6: ***Deliberation about Solutions.***

Research shows that the optimum number of choices for citizens to ultimately consider is no more than three or four. Since a larger number of decision choices may have been created in the previous stage of the process, this step is about sorting through all of the options and, weather through the consolidation of ideas or simply dismissing some of the alternatives, getting down to that manageable number of choices.

Step 7: ***Quantitative Measurement of Citizen Solution Preference****:*

The kinds of discussions that have taken place up to this point typically involve small groups of people working together. Unfortunately, their findings are not statistically valid so far as being able to project their conclusions to the larger population is concerned. Therefore it is necessary to conduct properly done quantitative survey research to test the ideas produced in the earlier stages and let a larger sample of citizens or stakeholders weigh in on the choices.

The outcome of this step is typically a report that summarizes the survey and outlines citizens' overall preferences.

Step 8: ***Communication of Conclusions****:*

This final step involves not only the practical matter of getting on with the work of the decision that needed to be made, but also building trust by reporting back to citizens the results of the entire process and how citizen participation resulted in a solution or decision that both met the needs of the government and was made smarter and better because of the participation of the citizens in the process.

Common Civic Engagement Techniques

The full spectrum of civic engagement tools is quite full[1]. Here we will address only some of the most commonly used methods. They all have value. It is important to understand their limitations as well.

But first, a word about cost: We understand that government offices at all levels are being charged with getting more work done with fewer financial and human resources. In this environment, starting a civic engagement process might be seen as a costly and time-consuming intrusion. In fact successful civic engagement should be seen as an investment that pays off not only in a positive resolution of the current issue at hand, but also in the form of a more informed and cooperative citizenry in the future. New research tells us that citizens who feel they have a voice in their local governance are not only happier, and happier with their local government, but also healthier. In short, the investment in civic engagement results in positive outcomes that payout over a very long time.

Utility/Tax Bill Statement Stuffers:

Municipalities and public agencies frequently attempt to engage citizens using this seemingly comprehensive and inexpensive communication method. The problem with statement stuffers is that they are frequently discarded without ever being read and also rarely reach any more than they person in the household who opens the bills. As such, statement stuffers can be useful for getting basic information out. But their lack of effective "reach"—as measured by the number of people who actually read them—does not make them a good tool for interacting with citizens.

"Blue Ribbon" or Expert Committees:

It is very popular for elected bodies to appoint committees or advisory groups to study issues, particularly high level and long-range issues where business, technical or professional knowledge is considered necessary. Such committees can be highly effective from a deliberation standpoint. But because of their exclusive membership, they do not represent the input of "regular" citizens and may overlook or ignore aspects of issues that are both intuitive and highly important to citizens at large.

Media:

Many municipalities and citizens alike look to their local media sources to keep them informed about important issues. However, neither the newsmaker nor readers or viewers can control what the media says. Plus, media news staffs are, at the very least, stretched thin. This is especially the case with newspapers,

[1]Readers who want to see a much more finely segmented array of methods than are presented here are encouraged to visit the web site of the International Association of Public Participation at www.iap2.org.

which have traditionally provided the broadest and deepest coverage of government news. Local television stations tend to feature only the most sensational issues, and also are known to de-emphasize their coverage of a government news story or event if they know that a competing station is covering that same issue or event.

Consumer consumption of media news has also become so fragmented that no single or group of stations reaches everyone as thoroughly as it did in the past. Many citizens also select news sources that reinforce their particular biases, resulting in skewed or wholly inaccurate information.

In short, a public agency cannot depend on the media to tell its story. It must be proactive in getting its story out, whether this means sending letters to residents, holding news conferences, posting information on the municipal web site or paying for advertising.

Municipal Web Sites:

The Internet is a pretty dazzling place. Many people use it in one form or another every day. But not everyone does. And in most cases, citizens have not embraced municipal web sites as a day-to-day news and information resource. Furthermore, many municipal web sites are not easy or intuitive to use, and most are far behind when it comes to the graphic and user engagement standards of the best commercial web and e-commerce sites.

This will undoubtedly change over time. Already, many cities and counties are developing mobile applications that make it easier for citizens to navigate and interact with their local governments. There is also a growing body of citizen engagement software applications being developed for municipal web sites.

But for now, municipal web sites can be a good place for providing background information about issues so long as citizens can find it with a minimum of fuss and bother. Municipal web sites are not yet a good place for creating awareness or introducing issues.

Municipal TV Stations:

Many of the same conditions that apply to municipal web sites also apply to municipal television programming. The net reach—the percentage of households viewing—is quite low and not sufficient at this time for anything more than providing background for citizens who want to take the time to look for and watch such programming.

Local access television programming by municipalities can be a good place to produce and distribute information programming about issues. But it is not the only or best place to create awareness of the issues because of the small audience, the expense of production, the inability to know whether citizens are seeing it or not and the inability to know whether it has helped them to become better informed.

Libraries:

Libraries are among democracy's greatest champions. They are valuable information resources available to anyone and everyone in a community, whether they have a library card, or not. Libraries are seen as politically, economically and socially neutral and, as such, can serve as valuable meeting places for citizens interested in tackling local issues.

However, like web sites and bill stuffers, not everyone patronizes libraries. So the reach of information posted at libraries is limited.

Focus Groups:

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research, extremely valuable for studying citizen behavior, perceptions and priorities. In the hands of skilled moderators, focus groups can be critical tools for studying how and, more importantly, *why* citizens feel the way they do about issues.

The major flaw of the focus group method is that for all the insight they produce, and no matter how many focus groups you conduct, the results cannot be projected to the larger population. If not conducted properly, focus groups can also be subject to bias in design logic, the logic of the conversation and the interpretation of the results.

Focus groups, like many of the methods described in this *Guide*, should be designed and executed by professionals.

Survey Research:

Survey research can be the great leveler in terms of measuring citizen opinion. Properly designed and executed survey research gives all affected citizens an opportunity to be included in the study and provides an accurate snapshot of public opinion and preference.

[If you learn nothing else from this section, remember this: the legitimacy of survey research findings is not just a function of how many people take part in the survey. A survey with 5,000 self-selecting participants can be dangerously misleading.]

Survey research is typically one of the last steps in successful civic engagement because it is used primarily to quantify citizen perceptions and either affirm or deny hypotheses formed during prior civic engagement steps. It is a one-way communication between citizens and government. There is no opportunity for two-way dialog.

There are several kinds of surveys:

- *Telephone surveys* remain the best way to conduct surveys because they allow researchers to observe the highest standards of sampling and research practice. They are also the most expensive, but when properly done have none of the methodological problems of some less expensive forms of survey research.

- *Online* and *Mail* surveys. Online and mail surveys offer advantages, particularly in participant convenience and production cost. But they are dependent on the willingness of citizens to complete them and are, as such, frequently not representative of the larger populations of citizens from which they came.

Fairs & Events:

Fairs and events can seem like a good place to engage citizens because they're easy places to find large numbers of people. However, they are not usually very good places to conduct civic engagement programs for several reasons:

- They are not representative samples of citizens.
- Because citizens typically did not attend the event in order to take part in a civic engagement project and are not, therefore, predisposed to spend the time or energy to become engaged in the civic engagement activity.
- Municipal agency personnel can engage with only so many people at one time.
- There are too many distractions.

Meetings with Existing Groups:

Existing groups—e.g. civic leagues, service clubs, social groups, etc.—can be convenient places to get citizen input, but they are not representative of the larger population of citizens.

Ongoing Advisory Panels:

Ongoing advisory or citizen deliberative panels can be a wonderful method for allowing small groups of citizens to work through issues. They typically allow for multiple meetings where information can be developed and shared and where discussion can evolve as participants learn more and consider options. The downside of ongoing advisory panels, however, is that they do typically include only a small number of persons (relative to the total population), may not accurately reflect the full social, economic, racial, occupational, educational and gender profile of the municipality's or public agency's stakeholder population. Citizens who were not part of the ongoing advisory panels tend to feel left out or otherwise overlooked and consequently can be reluctant to accept the conclusions of groups that did not include them.

Open Houses:

Open houses are popular with many public agencies because they are easy to organize and generally easy to staff. The problem with open houses, as with many of the methods described here, is that they do not typically include either enough or a representative sample of citizens.

Town Hall Meetings/Public Hearings:

Citizens find public hearings to be among the least popular of places for them to share their opinions. There are time limits on citizen comments and little opportunity for two-way communication between citizens and government representatives.

Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement

The Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement (HRCCE) is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit, non-partisan organization that promotes, designs and facilitates civic engagement programs that increase the collaborative decision-making capacity of the region.

For more information, to speak with someone or to share your support for HRCCE, please feel free to contact us at:

Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement
5200 Hampton Boulevard
Norfolk, Virginia 23508
info@hrcce.org
757-889-9359

Additional Resources

America Speaks: http://americaspeaks.org/welcome.html

Deliberative Democracy Coalition: http:www.deliberative-democracy.net

Hartwood Institute: http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/

International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org

Kettering Foundation: www.kettering.org

National Issues Forum: http://www.nifi.org/

Orton Family Foundation: http://www.orton.org/

The Saguaro Seminar/Harvard Kennedy School: http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/