

# Finding the Right Path: Public Agencies and Civic Engagement

BY RICHARD C. HARWOOD

Public agencies across the nation are under increasing pressure to engage the public. Some agencies feel the pressure because they have failed to meet the public's expectations, or they are seen as disconnected from the public and must regain its trust. Others are trying to figure out how best to allocate scarce public resources or make tough decisions.

Whatever the reason, it is important to ask: What does it really mean to engage the public? What rewards and risks await those who pursue this path? How can civic engagement be more than an attempt at good public relations, or another invitation for people simply to make demands on limited public resources?

What does it really mean to engage the public? What rewards and risks await those who pursue this path?

## Making a Cultural Change

In essence, civic engagement allows those who work in public

agencies to build the necessary knowledge and relationships to imagine and act for the public good. Through give-and-take conversation with diverse groups of people, government agencies can discover new possibilities for moving ahead and deepen their credibility with the public.

The real opportunity here is for public agencies to make civic engagement a way of doing public business. This requires that civic engagement become part of an organization's very culture. Agency leaders and staff must come to understand and value learning from the public, even challenging people to think beyond their initial views. Processes must exist to feed newfound knowledge into the daily operations of the agency, from how discussion is framed and takes place to how decisions are made. Eventually, new organizational practices and reflexes will develop that strengthen the agency's ability to fulfill its core mission. But agencies that successfully engage the public must commit organizational resources—especially time and

focus—to ensure engagement can be done well.

The real opportunity here is for public agencies to make civic engagement a way of doing public business. This requires that civic engagement become part of an organization's very culture.

## A Commitment to First Principles

There are countless processes a government agency can adopt for civic engagement, whether around a single issue or topic or as part of a long-term strategy. But we have found in our work that five principles underlie all meaningful engagement. These principles can act as a touchstone for any public agency.

1. *Pursue civic engagement, not public input.* We must end the practice of asking people for quick input or comments, and then merely tallying people's responses. Civic engagement takes time, give-and-take among people, and willingness

to insist that people consider different perspectives, choices, and trade-offs.

2. *Engage people as citizens, not consumers.* We must no longer think of people as “customers” in public life, which can lead government agencies into the trap of believing they need to meet people’s unrealistic expectations or satisfy their every claim. Citizens certainly hold self-interest, but they also have a responsibility to look beyond just themselves and take on the challenges of being part of a community.
3. *Discover voices, not simply demographics.* We must be careful how we use demographics to organize people and filter what we learn through civic engagement. We must strive to analyze what we learn first and foremost around substance, not demographics, which will open us up to the possibility of people having similar voices across demographic lines.
4. *Seek common ground, not consensus.* The drive toward consensus runs the risk of watering down issues, avoiding real tension, and finding compromise at the lowest common denominator. We must strive for the test of “Can we live with this?” People may not agree

with everything, but overall can they stay at the table?

5. *Provide knowledge, not more information.* We often fall into the trap of overwhelming people with information so that they will be “educated” enough to engage. We must focus on the essential facts that create the clarity, relevance, and meaning people need to engage.

We have found in our work that five principles underlie all meaningful engagement. These principles can act as a touchstone for any public agency.

Public servants must find a way to gauge their own civic engagement and assess whether they are moving closer to acting on these principles.

#### The Basic Questions

Critical to fulfilling these principles is reminding ourselves not to fall prey to confusing civic activity with achievement. On the engagement path, it is possible to become lost in the activity of organizing events and forums, taking notes and making transcripts, and publicizing what was done.

Instead, meaningful civic engagement must begin with some basic

questions that must be answered long before any rooms are reserved, newsprint charts purchased, or press releases issued. We should start with this one: “Does the current situation *call for* civic engagement?” Not all situations we confront do so.

We should start with this question: “Does the current situation *call for* civic engagement?” Not all situations we confront do so.

For instance, differing notions of “public relations” are sometimes included under the umbrella of civic engagement. This confusion can lead to misplaced expectations and unaccomplished goals on the part of all those involved. Consider when a public agency might want the community to have a better understanding of what it does and why. In this case, basic communications are in order. At other times, elected officials might want to rally the community behind a sales tax increase (or decrease), or a mill levy to raise resources to fulfill their responsibilities. These circumstances clearly call for advocacy.

Public agencies that are not clear about their purpose in pursuing civic engagement run the risk of wasting their own time—or worse,

disillusioning staff, creating a new space for the public to make unrealistic demands, or completely misreading what the public has to say. What's more, the public can cynically view various engagement efforts as window dressing.

Making smart choices on civic engagement creates an opportunity for public agencies to discover a new course of action or way to make existing work even stronger. Thus, to clarify when and how civic engagement makes sense for public agencies, agencies need to focus on several other essential questions as well:

- Have public agencies properly prepared staff for what they might learn through civic engagement, and are they prepared to deal with the implications?
- Have public agencies framed appropriate conversations, given where they are in the policy process?

- Have public agencies set realistic public expectations, given their capacity to take action?
- Do public agencies have the necessary voices around the table to gain useful knowledge and make discoveries?

As public servants in government agencies work through these and other questions, they begin to find the path of civic engagement that best serves their agency and community.

### **Making Engagement Count**

Meaningful civic engagement requires discipline, to be clear about one's real intentions, mindful of whom one has engaged and who is missing from the conversation, and thoughtful about the questions one asks. It means listening in a way that enables new discoveries and paying attention to work practices to ensure that civic engagement informs day-to-day work.

Those who successfully embrace these practices have the potential to infuse their agency with a renewed public spirit—the one that originally drew many public servants to their work in the first place.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation asked the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to develop a strategic action tool that helps renew this spirit. This tool will help public servants figure out when to do civic engagement and whether it has made a difference, and to gauge their own readiness to even undertake this work. We hope this resource, when it becomes available, makes civic engagement truly meaningful for public agencies and the people they serve.

---

*Richard C. Harwood is founder and president of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, dedicated to helping people in communities imagine and act for the public good.*

---

For bulk reprints of this article, please call (201) 748-8789.