

@ a glance

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Community Engagement

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Introduction

Community engagement is a key building block of healthy communities. There are many different ways that people can participate in creating a healthy community; for example, volunteering at a tree planting, participating in a workshop, joining a citizens' advisory committee to improve community services or creating a community coalition to research and develop policies that will promote healthier eating. An engaged community has stronger social support networks, greater knowledge of community resources and more responsive government services, all of which contribute to its social capital and the health and well-being of its residents.

By sharing our knowledge and experience with each other we come to understand the many different perspectives that exist within a community, and thus are able to create more effective and sustainable solutions to pressing issues. Voluntary participation in community initiatives encourages greater sharing of responsibility and workload, and also helps decrease conflict. It ensures efficient use of resources and helps build trust and understanding among the broader community. At the organizational level, engaging community members helps to ensure that the organization reflects the local population and that services continue to be relevant to the intended users, even if there are changes in demographics. The success of initiatives designed to bring about widespread community change is largely dependent on achieving a high level of community engagement. If people have a real say in the change process, they are much more likely to "buy in" to the need for the change and help to make it happen. Effective community engagement leads to a more efficient use of resources and enhances the community's capacity to create the conditions that will enable its members to thrive.

"...high trust relationships and high investment relationship building are the most fundamental elements in creating lasting community change."

(Homan, 1999; p. 181)

"Much of the work in a [community] change effort is commonly done by people who are not paid to do it. This requires special attention."

(O'Grady, 2000; p. 54)

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This resource describes various levels and types of community engagement, defines key terms and provides tips on how to develop and manage a successful community engagement process. A list of resources has also been compiled to aid your further investigation of this topic.

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What is Community?

Communities have been defined in many different ways, but at its core is a sense of belonging, which is based on some common characteristic(s), such as

- Shared place
- Shared interest
- Shared religion
- Shared ethnicity
- Shared circumstance

What is Community Engagement?

Community Engagement is "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those involved". (Tamarack)

Planning a Community Engagement Process

There are several steps to planning an effective community engagement process. They are listed below in a rational, chronological order, but in reality, often the steps will become blurred, with a new step starting before the previous one has finished, or different individuals being involved in different steps at the same time. Sometimes some of the steps are skipped altogether, particularly if they don't seem appropriate to the situation or timing.

- 1. Issue identification** - what is the change that you want to effect?
- 2. Stakeholder identification** - who needs to be involved?
- 3. Goal identification** - what do you want to actually accomplish?
- 4. Planning steps/time** - how are you going to go about it?
- 5. Process/resource development** - what organizational structures, processes and resources do you need?
- 6. Implementation strategy** - what are the details of your plan? Who will do what, and when?
- 7. Evaluation strategy** - how will you know if you have succeeded?
- 8. Report & Recommendations** - how will you let others know about your accomplishments?

Four Levels of Community Engagement

Community engagement is a continuum from low to high levels of involvement. Levels of community engagement have been characterized differently by various authors. The simplest breakdown that is meaningful within the scope of community-based health promotion practice divides the continuum into four levels: informing, consulting, collaborating and empowerment.



However, the continuum doesn't proceed in discrete levels; some community engagement processes may only involve one level, while others may include two or three levels at different times or even at the same time.

Informing Community Members

For the most part, information flows in one direction, usually from a government department or organization to community members. Often it is provided as a means of raising awareness or educating community members in areas that affect their well-being.

While this is very important, the level of engagement with communities is generally very low when using one-way channels such as radio, TV and print media, or posters and brochures. Use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter may be more engaging than traditional communication methods but require a significant commitment to keep them fresh and up to date. Often the dissemination of information will precede more intensive community engagement strategies. A social marketing campaign, designed to change attitudes and behaviour, may utilize a community engagement strategy; however, professional skills are required for the campaign to be effective and to avoid creating any unintended harm.

When developing a plan to provide information to community members, it is best to include a number of different approaches to ensure you reach as many people as possible. For example, you could place posters in areas frequented by the people you want to reach, deliver presentations at various meetings and events that you attend and arrange to be interviewed by your local television station. Text size and font, use of graphics, colour and clear language are important considerations when you are attempting to engage people through print or online materials.

Meaningful Community Consultation

Before initiating any community consultation process it is vital that sufficient time and resources are allocated to conduct a community assessment to ensure that the community is ready and willing to be involved. Effective consultations require:

- A clear understanding of your own goals; for example, are you consulting the community for their input, for confirmation of your research findings, or to educate them on an important health concern?
- A clear understanding and acknowledgement of the community's interest; i.e., what is in it for them? For example, will they be able to increase their ability to impact public policy and program decisions, or increase the level of awareness and responsiveness of government to their situation?
- Democratic processes; minority voices are heard and efforts are made to engage and welcome individuals from marginalized sectors of the community.
- Sufficient time; for appropriate planning, communications and relationship building at the start of the process, to carry out the consultation effectively, and to follow up on the results.

Presenting Options

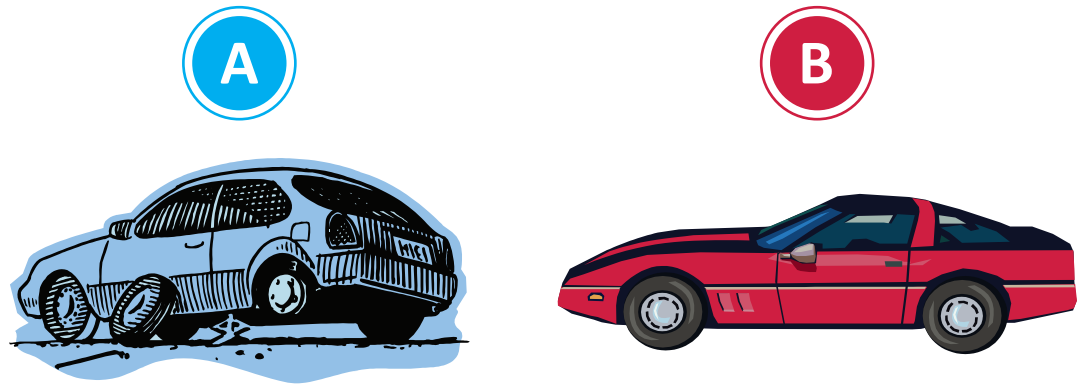
If you are presenting options for community members to choose from, you will first need to identify the level of input desired. For example, asking "Where should we go on vacation this year?" is very different from saying "We're going to the beach. Do you want to come?" If you are only considering one way of doing something, there is no reason to consult. If there is more than one way, you need to present sufficient information about the options and their strengths and weaknesses so that community members can make an informed choice.

“Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it’s the only one you have.”

(Emile Chartier, French philosopher)

It is also important to understand the difference between opinion, which is a statement of personal preference based on initial response, and judgment, which is a thoughtful assessment based on facts and evidence. The more people know about the options, the better their input will be.

For example, which of the two cars below would you prefer to have?



Based on a cursory glance, most people would choose Car B. But what if you found out that Car A gets excellent gas mileage, the flat tire is easily repaired, and is generally inexpensive to maintain and insure? It is also unlikely to be stolen. Car B, on the other hand, gets poor gas mileage, is expensive to repair, expensive to insure and is more likely to be stolen. There is also a skunk smell that just won’t go away and large permanent stain in the interior. And it has a blown engine. Given that information, most people would re-evaluate their choice.

A Consultation Model		
Identify the Goal		
PRESENT OPTION 1	PRESENT OPTION 2	PRESENT OPTION 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How it meets the goal • Cost • Pros • Cons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How it meets the goal • Cost • Pros • Cons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How it meets the goal • Cost • Pros • Cons
Decide on the method of consultation; e.g. individual interviews, focus group, door-door survey, online survey, mail , etc.		
Report Back to Community		

Effective Collaboration

Not all problems in a community are best addressed by creating a collaborative. Successful community collaboration requires a high level of human and organizational resources and the management of complex relationships. Members must have a high level of commitment, investment and sense of ownership over the collaborative process. Because of this it is important to have a strong rationale for implementing a collaborative strategy.

Collaborative structures are appropriate and perhaps even necessary when tackling broad community or population level goals, such as reducing poverty, increasing physical activity, decreasing homelessness or combatting air pollution. In order to have a significant impact in any of these areas, a number of organizations in different sectors need to work together to develop and implement a coordinated plan. Community collaborations are also useful when the goal is to coordinate the delivery of services, address systemic concerns or create a coordinated community response to a particular issue.

Government programs, businesses, community organizations, faith-based organizations, health, recreation and social services and many others will have valuable contributions to make. However, if the goal is to maintain the initiative past the last grant payment, there must be a significant voluntary component which will rely on the engagement of individual community members.

During the planning phase it would be wise to take the time to discover whether or not there are coalitions or networks already in place that have an interest in the goal or issue being addressed. It may be useful to link with them, and it will almost certainly create problems if they are ignored.

For collaborations to be successful there must be a high degree of trust between partners, as well as a clear and transparent process with agreed upon goals and terms of reference. Members may play different roles within the collaboration; e.g. convener, technical assistance, community organizer, or fundraiser.

THERE ARE MANY BENEFITS TO COLLABORATION:

Synergy: the accomplishments of the collaborative will be greater than each group working on its own could ever hope to achieve.

Community Capacity: Increased awareness of community issues, needs and assets will foster the sharing and expansion of resources and the emergence of innovative solutions.

Reduction of Barriers: Obstacles faced by one group may be overcome by another group with a different set of resources and connections.

Community Representation: A collaborative has a stronger voice than a single organization because it has broader community represented.

Effectiveness: Working together can help ensure efforts and services aren't being duplicated, increase the accountability of both organizations and individuals, and lead to a more equitable distribution of resources.

“The problem isn’t just that we are speaking different languages, but that we live in different worlds”

(Klein, 2011)

However, there are many challenges as well. Conflicting agendas and organizational philosophies can hijack the collaborative, or well-meaning members may become so focused on accommodating all partners that their strategies either become too broad to accomplish anything concrete, or they take on too many issues and overextend the capacity of the collaborative. Varying skill and comfort levels as well as differences in energy and commitment of participants can cause tension within collaboratives. Challenges may also be encountered when the individuals involved have vastly different perspectives on the issue due to a wide span of cultural, political or economic experiences. There is usually a positive correlation between the services of a skilled facilitator, whether paid or volunteer, and successful collaborations.

Despite the challenges of collaboration, when it is working well, it is a powerful force that will yield great benefits to communities.

Principles of Effective Collaboration

Here are some tips on effective collaboration from Professor D. Brackenreed at Nipissing University in North Bay.

A. Establish common goals

- Develop a relationship
- Engage in small-scale efforts initially
- Develop common perceptions

B. Voluntary participation

- Collaboration cannot be forced by directives from superiors.
- Involve key stakeholders
- Invite participation

C. Recognize equality among participants

- Each person's contribution is equally valued
- Each person has equal value in decision-making
- Use names, not titles, when interacting
- Rotate and share team roles
- Structure ways to facilitate participation

D. Share responsibility for participation and decision-making

- Share perspectives about the problem
- Balance between coordination of tasks and division of labor
- Brainstorm before decision-making
- Establish clear delineation of agreed-upon actions as follow-up procedures

E. Share accountability for outcomes

- Acknowledge risks and potential failure
 - Everyone shares in both successes and failures.
 - Celebrate success together
 - Learn from the failure together
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F. Share resources

- Identify respective resources
- Each person has resources to contribute.
- Use joint decision-making about resource allocation

Community Empowerment

Empowerment is “a social process of recognizing, promoting and enhancing people’s abilities to meet their own needs, solve their own problems and mobilize the necessary resources in order to feel in control of their own lives.” (Gibson, 1991 p. 354)

You can’t empower people, but you can help create the conditions in which they can empower themselves. When we engage community members in a way that promotes their empowerment, we work with them on an equal basis to explore issues and find solutions.

Here are a few principles for promoting community empowerment.

1. COMMUNITY ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

Workers who are assigned the task of “engaging the community” often find themselves in the situation of trying to promote interest in an issue that doesn’t seem to be very important to community members. For a community initiative to be successful over the long term and especially if it needs to bridge gaps in funding, the issue(s) to be addressed must be identified by the community as a priority on which they feel compelled to take action. Aligning the mandate of a funded program and the interests of the community can be tricky, and may require some intervening activities, such as linking your work with other community priorities, raising awareness of why the issue is important, or narrowing the sectors that will be involved to those that are most directly affected. Ultimately, if there is no real community commitment the initiative will fail.

2. COMMUNITY CONTROL

Empowered communities hold onto the reins of their community projects, from their initial conceptualization, through the planning phases to implementation, evaluation and communications. Throughout these phases, decision-making power rests with the community - not because an external agency is “allowing” them to make decisions, but because they actually have the power to do so. In a healthy community, decisions are made within a democratic or consensus governance structure.

3. COMMUNITY EXPERTISE

In every community there is a wealth of knowledge, skills and experiences that can be harnessed to help solve community issues. Discovering the assets, capacities and abilities of a community is an important activity in any type of community work. They can then be connected in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. Community members are the “experts” on their own community; they know what will work and what won’t, who needs to be involved and what it will take to achieve success.

4. ACCESS TO EXTERNAL RESOURCES

While there are often untapped resources in a community, large scale change efforts generally involve outside assistance. Operating funds, expert consultants to provide technical assistance and other resources may be required. An empowered community will decide which funding sources to approach and the scope of the work they wish to have funded. They will hire the consultants of their choosing and negotiate a work plan with them.

Success Factors for Community Engagement

There are several characteristics that community engagement processes must strive to attain if they are ultimately going to be successful.

- **INCLUSIVITY**

Community engagement processes should be accessible to all members of the community. The critical question for any community engagement process is not so much who participated, but who did not, and why. We need to be inclusive of many dimensions of diversity:

- Ethno-cultural/religious
- Income
- Sexual orientation
- Age
- Education
- Geographic
- Socio-Economic Status

- **TRANSPARENCY**

The aims of the community engagement process and the interests of the leaders are known by all participants. Everyone needs to be clear about why they are involved and what will and will not be expected of them. Most community members are pretty quick to detect any attempt to deceive or manipulate them.

- **RESPONSIVENESS**

Every community engagement process is different because each responds to local knowledge and conditions. While there may be a general process applied to engage communities, the sequence of events and activities will vary from one application to another. Remember that one size never fits all and changes to your plans are inevitable.

- **RELEVANCE**

Community engagement builds on local knowledge and values the input and perceptions of diverse groups. A fundamental community development principle is to start where the community is at present; this means that there may be some initial issues that need to be resolved before the community is ready for the work you are hoping they take on. Local residents who feel their needs are addressed are more likely to participate in its implementation and ongoing management. Another principle is to access knowledge from wherever it is; often an unlikely source can provide a wealth of valuable history and information.

- **SUSTAINABILITY**

Many community projects fail because when the facilitators go home or the funding stops the community can't sustain the effort. A high level of community engagement will foster the development of skills and capacities as well as a strong sense of personal responsibility and commitment to action, thereby supporting project sustainability.

Key Terminology

Advocacy – a combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support for a particular health goal or program.

Awareness – having or showing realization, perception, or knowledge

Collaboration – organizations not only sharing information but also making adjustments to their services – they share resources to help each other do a better job.

Community Capacity Building – activities, resources and supports that strengthen the skills and abilities of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities

Community Development – the process whereby community members come together to take collective action to identify problems, locate resources, analyze power structures and needs, and create and implement an action plan to address this need.

Community Alliance – an agreement between two or more persons, groups or organizations in order to advance common goals and to secure common interests.

Cooperation – organizations helping each other expand or enhance their capacities to do their jobs.

Coordination – a relationship between organizations when they modify their activities together, they provide better services to the community.

Empowerment – an intentional ongoing process, centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people gain greater control over the decisions and actions affecting their health.

Enabling – taking action in partnership with individuals or groups to empower them, through the mobilization of human and material resources, to promote and protect their health.

Health Communication – the use of communication techniques and technologies to positively influence individuals, populations and organizations for the purposes of promoting conditions conducive to human and environmental health

Health Education – consciously constructed opportunities for learning that involve some form of communication designed to improve health literacy

Knowledge Transfer – expertise and skills acquired through experience or education

Networking – a relationship between organizations that involves exchanging information in order to help each organization do a better job.

Policy Development – the process of developing legislative and regulatory measures that protect the health of communities and make it easier for individuals to make healthy choices.

Social Marketing – a technique which aims to raise public awareness and provide advice on health issues through channels such as literature, advertising and other media. It also aims to change behaviour that will lead to improvement in the health of society.

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