

Community Engagement: Building Trust and Impact



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Land Acknowledgement*

We acknowledge that we conduct our work on the traditional lands of the Abenaki Nations. We recognize the indigenous culture and people that thrived in N'dakinna (the homeland) long before Europeans set foot in North America. We understand that mere acknowledgment can be superficial and lead to inaction. Therefore, we are committed to ensuring it is paired with genuine conviction and tangible actions. We pledge to adopt policies and practices of cultural equity and justice to benefit both current and future generations.

(Adapted and Modified from Vermont Humanities Council)

Community Expectations

- **Prioritize Understanding & Honesty** : Listen to genuinely understand, speak your truth using "I" statements, and engage in honest conversations.
- **Embrace Discomfort & Differences** : Expect discomfort, acknowledge disagreements without aiming for agreement, and recognize the distinction between opinions and dehumanization.
- **Awareness & Positionality** : Keep the context in mind, be aware of your identities and positionality, and respect the confidentiality of shared information.
- **Active Participation & Respect** : Move up or back as needed, honor honesty and vulnerability, and understand there are no experts—everyone is learning.
- **Open Expression & Beginning** : Feel free to express yourself and acknowledge that this is just the beginning of the conversation.

Distribution Note

*Prepared for the 2024 Vermont Community Leadership Summit,
organized by the Vermont Council on Rural Development.
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What Do We Mean?

What comes to mind when you hear "community engagement"?

A community member comments:

“When people who work for organizations come to talk to us, they just assume everything. They don’t really want to listen to you. They have boxes to check, and they want to hear certain things. If you are coming to listen to us, hear us talk about everything. We don’t have straightforward answers because our problems are not that simple.”

Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation"

8. Citizen Control

Residents can govern a program or an institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which 'outsiders' may change them.

7. Delegated Power

Citizens hold the significant cards to assure accountability of the program to them. To resolve differences, powerholders need to start the bargaining process rather than respond to pressure from the other end.

6. Partnership

Shared planning and decision-making responsibilities through such structures as joint policy boards, planning committees, and mechanisms for resolving impasses.

5. Placation

Limited degree of influence in a process. Citizens are merely involved only to demonstrate that they were involved. A few hand-picked 'worthy' individuals on boards, who are not accountable and can be easily outvoted and out maneuvered

4. Consultation

Inviting citizens' opinions, when consultation processes is not combined with other modes of participation, and has no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account.

3. Informing

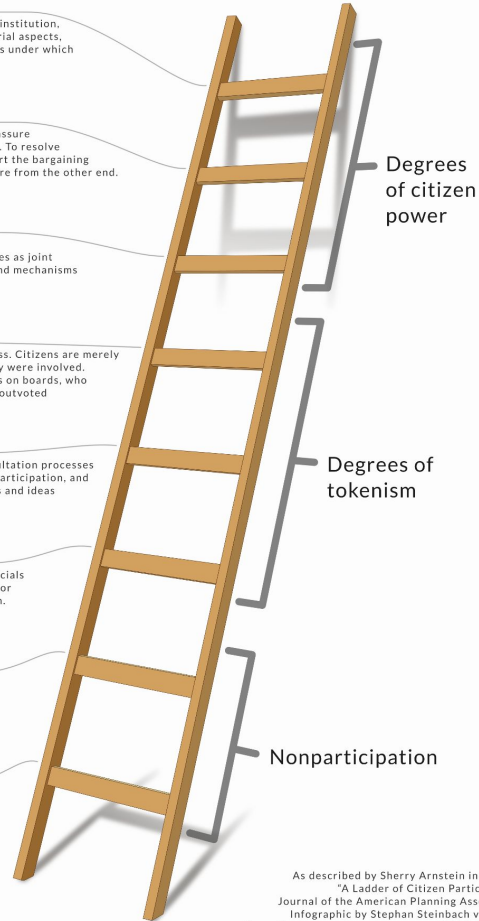
One-way flow of information from officials to citizens, with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation.

2. Therapy

Pseudo-participatory programs that attempt to convince citizens that they are the problem.

1. Manipulation

Rubber stamp advisory committees with purpose of engineering support.



Clarity and Transparency: Share NEAT

- **Necessity Evaluation (Organizational Needs or Requirements):**
 - Why are you engaging the community?
 - Is it required? If so, what is the outcome for the organization?
- **Expectation Setting (Goals and Expectations):**
 - What are you hoping to gain from the engagement efforts?
 - Will the report be shared? Will it be detailed or a summary version?
- **Aptitude Check (Required Knowledge for Participation):**
 - Do participants need to have a certain level of knowledge on a particular subject matter to participate?
 - Does the engagement opportunity offer an opportunity to learn and participate?
- **Targeted Tracking (Outcomes):**
 - What can people expect as the outcome(s)? Will there be follow-ups?
 - Who is your target audience? Do not mask it.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Planning the Basics: Who Is It For?

“Do not host meetings where people feel triggered... And have people that we know and trust there. Places, people, and things could be triggering. Avoid those things that trigger.”

“If you decide to hold a public listening session on Eid, don't be surprised if we don't come.”

- **Date, Day, and Time:** Ensure the event is scheduled on a suitable date, day, and time. Check if there are major cultural/religious events celebrated by minority communities, or if it conflicts with working hours.
- **Location:** Assess the accessibility of the chosen location. Is it a place frequented by/accessible to the targeted audience to ensure their comfort?
- **Materials:** Verify the accessibility of required materials.
- **Presentation:** Remember that how you show up matters!
- **Trusted Partners:** Consider involving community members or partners who are trusted by the community.
- **Accountability Buddy:** Identify someone with whom you can have honest conversations about your biases, positionality, and post-engagement reflections.

Lived Experience as Expertise

“For people who have gone through hardships, these big problems come with feelings, feeling of being hurt, hungry, losing sleep... For every problem we talk about - homelessness, hunger, race-based hate, etc. - there are people with stories... About food stamps, we can’t buy meals from restaurants. They say get food stamps and buy groceries. I don’t even have a microwave..., where do you want me to cook those vegetables? Even if people have a microwave, it does not cook. See, if people knew what it is like to live my life, they would have thought about it.”

Lived Experience as Expertise

- **Unique Insights:** Provides first hand perspectives on challenges and opportunities.
- **Authentic Voices:** Ensures discussions are grounded in real-world experiences.
- **Cultural Competency:** Offers culturally relevant solutions and approaches.
- **Call for Change:** Advocates for systemic changes and prioritizes inclusivity.
- **Valuable Expertise:** Recognize and compensate lived experience as legitimate expertise.
- **Informed Decision-Making:** Leads to more effective and inclusive policies.
- **Building Trust:** Fosters trust and strengthens relationships with communities.

What if They Really Contradict the Facts: Do It SAFELY!

- **Support (the individual)** : Actively listen to their concerns. Ask additional questions if needed (determine if this needs to be done publicly or privately).
- **Acknowledge** : Recognize that individual experiences are influenced by many factors. Validate their feelings and reality. If you have a relevant lived experience, share it.
- **Familiarize** : Understand the context of the experience(s) being shared. Assist community members in accessing relevant information, processes, or services.
- **Educate** : Offer information and opportunities for learning and awareness-building within the community.

Centering Human Identities



Effective Practices for Engaging Marginalized Communities

Before you begin :

Consider if it should be **you/your organization?** Reflect on history and commitment/rationale.

Throughout :

Pause and Reflect, especially when feeling/facing discomfort.

CARE:

Context and Collaboration : Self reflection, partnership, power dynamics.

Authenticity and Acceptance : Human connections, diversity of voices, active listening.

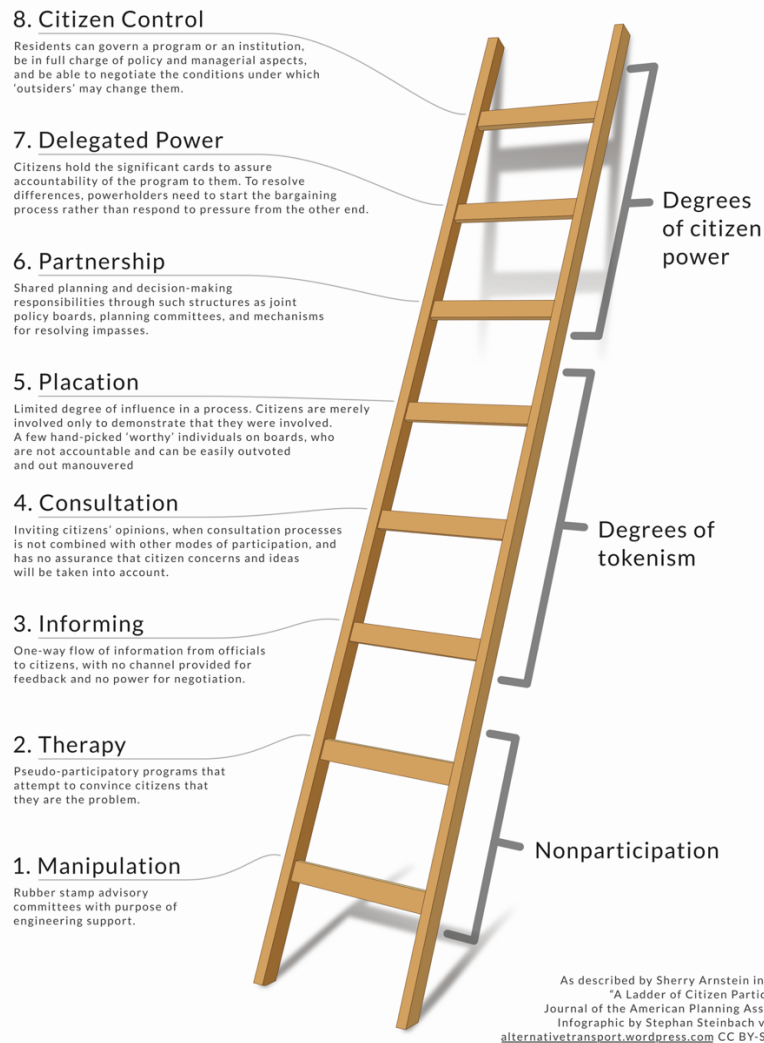
Respect and Reciprocity : Acknowledge and address harm, transparency and accountability, empowerment.

Evaluation and Evolution : Continuous learning, long-term commitment, celebrate success.

Small Group Exercise

1. Read each example carefully.
2. Identify which step of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation the example represents. Write down the corresponding step number and name. Why does it belong there?
3. Discuss with your group how the example could be improved to move up the ladder. Write your suggestions in the space provided.

Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation"



1. Manipulation: Community involvement is minimal; participation is only a façade.

- Decision-makers control information.
- Community input is not genuinely considered.
- Often used to “educate” or “cure” the public.

2. Therapy: Participation involves treating community members as patients needing help, without addressing systemic issues.

- Focus on individual well-being rather than broader community needs.
- Activities aim to “help” or “heal” rather than engage in dialogue.
- Lacks discussion of structural or systemic changes.

3. Informing: One-way communication where the community is informed of decisions.

- Information flows from officials to the community.
- No feedback mechanism or involvement in decision-making.
- Limited to announcements, newsletters, and websites.

4. Consultation: Community members are asked for their opinions, but there's no promise their input will influence decisions.

- Use of surveys, public meetings, or hearings.
- Community input is collected but not necessarily acted upon.
- Often seen as a box-ticking exercise.

5. Placation: Some community members are given a platform, but they have little real influence.

- Community representatives are included in committees.
- Limited power to influence decisions.
- Often serves to appease rather than genuinely include.

6. Partnership: Power is more equally shared between community members and decision-makers.

- Joint decision-making and shared planning responsibilities.
- Community input has a significant impact.
- Formal mechanisms for collaboration are in place.

7. Delegated Power: Community members have significant control over specific programs or policies.

- Decision-making authority delegated to community groups.
- Community controls resources and program direction.
- More balanced power distribution with officials.

8. Citizen Control: Community members have full decision-making authority and control over resources.

- Community groups make all key decisions independently.
- High level of empowerment and self-determination.
- External entities provide support without controlling influence.

Instructions:

1. Read each example carefully.
2. Identify which step of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation the example represents. Write down the corresponding step number and name. Why does it belong there?
3. Discuss with your group how the example could be improved to move up the ladder. Write your suggestions in the space provided.

Disclaimer: The examples presented are hypothetical scenarios crafted by the facilitators for training purposes. Their primary intent is to illustrate different types of community engagement and their manifestations in various communities. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is purely coincidental.

Scenario	Which step of the ladder? Why?	Ideas for Improvement
A town office sends out a newsletter about new rules for using land in rural areas. The newsletter is mailed to people’s homes and put on the office’s website. There’s no way for residents to give feedback or ask questions, and the information is only available in one language.		
A community task force is set up to address a health issue in a rural area. The local residents on the task force decide how to spend the budget and what the program should focus on. The state health department supports their decisions.		
An environmental group partners with a local indigenous community to plan conservation efforts. They meet regularly, share knowledge, and make decisions together about how to use and protect the land.		

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<p>A city council creates a committee to discuss housing issues. They include a few members from low-income neighborhoods, but these members feel like their ideas are often ignored in favor of those from wealthier areas.</p>		
<p>A local health clinic offers free classes on managing stress and anxiety, aimed at low-income families in rural areas. The classes include activities like breathing exercises and relaxation techniques.</p>		
<p>A group of local farmers manages a community-supported agriculture program. They make all the decisions about the program, including setting prices, deciding how to distribute the produce, and choosing partners, without needing outside approval.</p>		
<p>A non-profit group sends out a survey to get community opinions on a new park design. The survey is available online and at local libraries. At a community meeting, the group shares the survey results but doesn't continue asking for more input from the residents.</p>		
<p>An organization holds a meeting to talk about a new project in a small town. They show a detailed plan and schedule for the project. People can ask questions, but there's no mention of changing the plan based on what they say.</p>		

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Any Questions? Reflections? Final Thoughts?

Thank you!