



Engaging Communities

Serving communities is only effective if your organization has a deep understanding of those communities' values, assets, and needs. As nonprofits and government entities seek to serve historically marginalized communities, they have an opportunity to operate differently.





At DeYoung Consulting Services...

... we have a long history of engaging communities whose voices go unheard by the very systems that are meant to serve them. We developed this tool to share important lessons we have learned about effectively and respectfully engaging communities in a way that furthers organizations' missions and their connections to communities.



Drivers of Effective Community Engagement



Representation: Conduct a stakeholder analysis that explores who will be impacted by organizational changes resulting from the engagement, and what interests bring them to the table. Representation of these voices should inform the development of your project plan and budget.



Relationships: Inviting community to participate in listening sessions should be part of an ongoing commitment to build authentic relationships. Organizations have often engaged BIPOC communities transactionally, “extracting” their insight in the absence of partnership. Few would describe relational community engagement as “easy;” emphasizing ongoing partnership means taking time to listen to community leaders during all phases of the work, following up after the completion of the project, and engaging in long-term reciprocal communication.



Abandoning assumptions and embracing co-learning: As organizations enter an engagement project, they may have general profiles of who they will encounter and hold preconceptions of the project outcomes. This undermines a true community engagement effort. When community members share stories that counter those narratives, facilitators must pay attention, and actively invite people to elaborate, allowing organizations to understand a more nuanced picture of that community.



IN PRACTICE: We conducted a statewide needs assessment during which we regularly engaged an advisory committee of local leaders. Using their expertise and local relationships, they offered suggestions for multiple changes to our listening tools and facilitated their own local recruitment and engagements.



Project Design



Ground the design in collaboration: As you design the engagement process, have a transparent discussion with leaders and others about what they hope to learn from the engagement. As you discuss potential stakeholders, identify the “what’s in it for me” for each group as well as their unique barriers to engagement.



Readiness for change: A common barrier to participation is community’s skepticism after being asked to engage but seeing no change. As such, it is critical to discuss your leadership team’s readiness for change. To what extent are they all aware of issues that may surface, such as historical oppression, systemic racism, or deep-seated mistrust? There is a risk of undermining your engagement efforts if community members do not see change as a result of their participation. The degree to which you are ready to enact change should inform the project design.



IN PRACTICE: To understand perceptions of breastfeeding in the African American community, we engaged a group of community members in an Equity Lab; they served as project leaders who guided the process of translating community insight into public campaign messages.



IN PRACTICE: We recently found that our outreach efforts were unsuccessful in recruiting the target audience. We regrouped, discussed significant cultural barriers, revised our messaging and sought new outreach partners. We were able to do this because the project was designed with a long, flexible timeline.



Budgeting for Effective Community Engagement



Incentives: Budgeting for participant incentives is critical. Using incentives acknowledges the value that participants bring to the effort. Historically, BIPOC community members have been asked to take part in research, often never hearing how their insights were used to affect change. Incentives signify that their expertise is respected and important. Additionally, without incentives to engage in listening sessions, some individuals will find it difficult to overcome certain barriers to participation.



Stipends for partners: In addition to individual incentives, stipends can be provided to community partners. This helps maintain relationships with partners by demonstrating the value that you place on their efforts to assist you.



IN PRACTICE: We've used a number of incentives in engagement projects, including retail gift cards, Visa cash cards, refreshments or meals, childcare, public transit fare, and stipends for outreach partners.



Outreach to Participants



Outreach timeline: Outreach is time intensive and generally underestimated and under budgeted. The tasks involved include collaboratively creating messages that are tailored to each stakeholder group (including translation into other languages), numerous follow-ups to inspire each participant to get involved, exploring participants' preferred formats of engagement, and ensuring all participants have all the necessary information to join successfully.



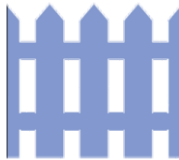
IN PRACTICE: In our outreach efforts to recruit community partners, we conducted half-hour informational meetings to learn from each potential organization. At the end of each meeting we asked what other organizations they would recommend we contact. This “snowball” method can help build new relationships organically.



Radically Respectful Engagement



Hospitality: Some organizations, as they engage communities, embrace the concept of “radical hospitality.” This refers to the practice of putting extraordinary effort and emphasis on making people feel welcome, and specifically focusing on breaking down barriers that may prevent people from participating.



Barriers to engage: Even if participants have an interest in sharing their opinions, and are motivated with an incentive, they may experience additional barriers such as lack of childcare, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with their role as a participant and/or discomfort with actions taken by hosts from the dominant culture.



IN PRACTICE: One helpful tool to overcome barriers was developed by the Metropolitan Council. [Metropolitan Council's ten radical hospitality practices](#) include “Develop clear and inviting signage,” “Train all event staff to understand that welcoming people is a priority,” “Consider the special needs of your participants,” and more.



Analysis and Reporting Findings



Analyst bias: Your community engagement project will result in the collection of numerous community comments, which will need to be analyzed for reporting purposes. Recognizing that as analysts we bring our own assumptions and biases to the data, and that barriers exist for many to participate in these community engagement efforts, it is critical to systematically and deliberately apply an equity lens to both interpreting the data and reporting the findings.



Analyzing with an equity lens: As an example of using an equity lens, we allow a narrative to emerge from the data that is generated by participants themselves, as opposed to relying entirely on pre-established language to overlay and fit to the data.



IN PRACTICE: We are often asked to wear the hats of researcher, evaluator, and reporter. This means that it is also essential that we wear an equity lens as we are listening to and interpreting all the stories we hear. Please see DeYoung Consulting Services' "[Tool for Applying an Equity Lens to Qualitative Data Analysis](#)."



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Who We Are

DeYoung Consulting Services is a value-driven and collaborative consulting firm that helps organizations untangle interconnected issues to clearly identify and achieve what matters most. We do that by facilitating an inclusive exploration of possibilities and authentically uplifting the stories of communities, partners, clients, leaders, and employees to chart a path forward. In moving from dialogue to action, we balance meticulousness and reflection with urgency and momentum.

www.DeYoungConsultingServices.com

