

Collective Impact in Neighborhood Revitalization Part 2: The Problem with “Community Outreach”

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In many instances community development efforts start by first identifying problems and then posing solutions. After this initial set of concepts are envisioned, “community outreach” is undertaken – with the best of intentions.

The goal of outreach is to solicit and receive community review and support. This approach runs counter to the trust creation process in that it leads with pre-conceived “solutions” as opposed to listening. It demonstrates that solutions have been created that are important to the “conceivers” (developers, government, architects, planners, etc. . . .) without regard or with less regard to what is meaningful to (individuals in) the community.

Often, impressive communication materials are created to demonstrate the validity of the proposed solution(s). The “impressiveness” of the concept presentation media often leads community members to believe that “those in charge” have already decided to implement the proposed solutions. The proposed solutions seem to be “fait accompli” with the risk of leaving residents to feel inconsequential.

There is a larger opportunity lost when this approach is applied. It often treats local residents as “consumers” of the solutions and not “producers”. This negates any opportunity to utilize local talent, skill, and passion as part of the “collective” that produces the “impact”.

Here are two scenarios designed to illustrate the difference between these two approaches. Imagine a public hearing conducted for the public review of community development solutions.

Public Hearing

Imagine the different outcomes from these two public meeting scenarios:

Scenario 1:

The local government, philanthropy, regional non-profits, and the private sector launch a collective impact community revitalization effort. Backbone staff are assigned, planners/architects are hired, and developers are notified. A planning team is convened, undertakes baseline research, and begins to churn out concepts. The team deliberates,

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ideas are reviewed, a specific set of recommendations rises from among the many choices and the decision is made to bring a set of concepts forward, holding them out for public consideration.

A public meeting is scheduled. Local residents and other stakeholders are invited utilizing mail, fliers, email, public announcements and telephone calls. The time for the public meeting arrives. Thirty minutes before start time its organizers are nervous, hoping people will come while wondering who will and how they will react.

The meeting commences and the first sixty minutes of the agenda consists of a presentation by the planning team disclosing the concepts that they have created. A discussion ensues.

Some resident members of the audience ask questions seeking clarity on what they have just heard. Other resident members of the audience make statements taking a “public stand” that challenges the professionals. At times it seems as if these “responders” are speaking more to the other members of the audience than they are responding to the presenters, and the audience is rewarding them with acclamation. Within twenty or thirty minutes the room is clearly divided and the professional planning team is now struggling to defend their work.

Outcome:

While some residents have clearly become “engaged”, their engagement seems to have created an opposing force challenging the work of the professionals. After the meeting the sponsoring agencies are somewhat frustrated and now must turn their attention to remediating the situation.

Scenario 2:

The local government, philanthropy, regional non-profits, and the private sector launch a collective impact community revitalization effort. A backbone team is selected. Backbone staff are selected, planners/architects are hired, and developers are notified.

The backbone team then launches a three to six month process to:

1. Convene a core team of 10 to 20 neighborhood residents – people who have a special place for this community in the middle of their heart.
2. Staff and core team members create an inventory of community leaders. A robust list (no less than 100) that has two types of leaders included:
 - Residential leaders who live within the target community. The definition of a Resident Leader is that they are individuals who have a “following”, i.e. they have the trust of others

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- Leaders of agencies, organizations and institutions serving the neighborhood. The definition of these leaders is that they are individuals whose agency, organization, or institution has productive capacity, i.e. they have a demonstrated ability to achieve accomplishments.
3. Next, the core team is trained to conduct relational meetings utilizing a method that emphasizes active listening, and recording what they learn. The core team then conducts their first round of relational sessions with each other to rehearse and perfect their technique.
 4. The core team conducts “one to one” relational meetings with the identified leaders. Backbone staff assist the core team members with logistics and scheduling of meetings with the listed leaders and produces written records of the meetings that have taken place.
 5. As information is collected from the “one to one” relational meetings, it is analyzed and organized into report form.

The backbone team convenes the planning team which undertakes baseline research, reviews the product of the one-to-one relational meetings and begins to churn out concepts based on both the research and meetings.

The team deliberates, ideas are reviewed, a specific set of recommendations rises from among the many choices and the decision is made to bring a set of concepts forward, holding them out for public consideration.

A public meeting is scheduled. The backbone team convenes a meeting of local leaders who have articulated critical concepts in the one-to-one conversations with members of the planning team and are oriented on how the ideas that they raised have influenced the planning concepts. A discussion ensues that leads to further refinement of the embryonic planning concepts.

Backbone team staff solicit local leaders who have exhibited knowledge and passion concerning critical ideas to join with members of the planning team when they present these concepts publicly, therefore creating a joint neighborhood and professional presentation team. Presentations are prepared and three to four rehearsals are conducted so that the presentation team achieves mastery over the subject matter and operate as members of a team.

Attendees are invited to the public meeting in the following manner:

- Core team members contact those that they interviewed and solicit them to attend, and also bring members of their constituency. Leaders of agencies, organizations and institutions are asked to bring members of their board and staff. Through this contact, core team members will inform interviewees about the degree to which their information has influenced the work thus far, and solicit them to come to continue to support their concepts. Core team members will also

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seek a commitment for a “number certain” that each leader will bring to the meeting.

- Local residents and other stakeholders are also invited utilizing mail, fliers, email, and telephone calls.

The time for the public meeting arrives. Thirty minutes before start time its organizers and core team members are preparing to welcome those who they are assured are coming. They meet them at the door, greeting them in a manner that acknowledges the relationship they have created, and escort them to the sign in table. In the idle time before the meeting starts they introduce them to other leaders so that a denser web of relationships might evolve.

The meeting commences.

1. Call to order and focus statement on the revitalization initiative and the purpose of this meeting
2. The next item on the agenda is something “local” that speaks to the importance to the work at hand, such as a group of local elementary school students presenting the results of a class project where they have imagined their best possible future and how neighborhood transformation is critical to achieving that future.
3. Next up are 30 minutes of rehearsed “two person” five to six minute presentations by paired local leaders and planning professionals, which disclose the project concepts, parameters, and timeline. The 30 minute presentations actually take 60 to ninety minutes because audience members are encouraged to raise questions and comments during/after each presentation. Through the invitation phone calls made by core team members those in the audience who were participants in the “one to one” relational meetings were encouraged to speak up during these presentations to express the importance of these ideas to the community and to the success of the transformation initiative. The meeting chairperson knows who in the audience is supportive of the concepts being presented and may call on them to comment.
4. The last 30 minutes of the meeting is spent in topical breakout sessions where participants imagine additional ways in which they can lead/support/cause the neighborhood transformation.
5. Meeting summary and announcement of next steps.

Outcome:

Residents are engaged as part of the “force for transformation”. After the meeting the sponsoring agency feels that there is a new potential human asset base to support the work and wonders how it might practically do so.

The Differences?

The difference between these two scenarios is readily apparent. Scenario 1 treats the Public meeting as the beginning of resident engagement while in scenario 2 resident

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engagement is well underway, and is influencing the revitalization planning efforts long before the first public meeting is held. Both scenarios seek to accomplish resident engagement. In the first case, if engagement occurs there is a possibility that engaged residents might become antagonists to the revitalization process. In the second scenario, engaged residents are part of the revitalization leadership team and vested partners in the initiative.

What has your experience been like? What community outreach activities have worked well (or not) when developing community engagement for your collective impact initiative?

Posts in this Series

Read [Part 1 - Engagement and Building Trust](#)

Read [Part 3: Residents as the "Engagers"](#)

Read [Part 4: So, What Does It Look Like When It Works?](#)

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