

## ✓ **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING COMES FIRST AND REMAINS AT THE CENTER**

The deeper goal of any public engagement activity is not the issue at hand (where to build a new road or whether police officers should wear body cameras). It is fostering trusting and collaborative relationships between community and government because these relationships lead to better government policy and better outcomes for communities. So, see each engagement activity as an opportunity to build relationships. Because in the long-run these relationships are more important than the issue at hand, do what needs to be done in the moment to respond to the needs of the participants rather than adhering to your plans or agenda.

Turn out is one of the most challenging aspects of public engagement – especially getting beyond the usual suspects. A relational approach is the best way to drive turn out. Invest in developing relationships with individuals and community institutions (schools, houses of worship, nonprofits) and use those relationships to turn out participants. Posting events online and in the media is less effective than having friends, clergy, teachers, and other community members invite each other.

## ✓ **KNOW YOUR PURPOSE AND DESIGN ACCORDINGLY**

Too often a unit of government doesn't consider the true purpose for the engagement activity – is it to inform the public about a decision already made; to get feedback on options; to work collaboratively toward a decision or something else? Know where your purpose falls on the [IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation](#) from inform to empower. Know your specific goals for the activity. The purpose and goals for the meeting should determine every aspect of the agenda and all the plans. So first take the time to get clear about the purpose of the activity.

## ✓ **PLAN, PLAN, PLAN**

You simply can't over plan a good public engagement activity, whether it is preparing accessible background on the issue for attendees, identifying and inviting a broad array of attendees, creating a warm and welcoming environment, planning for displays of strong emotion (sometimes called disruptions), and so much more. The more you plan the better your outcomes will be – from participant satisfaction to quality of information gathered. Resources for better planning include [Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and other Challenges to Public Engagement](#) and [Planning Public Engagement](#).

Consider creating a planning team made up of representatives of the audiences you hope to engage. These representatives will provide excellent insight into the most accessible venue for the event, what presentations or materials participants will need to participate in a meaningful way, what set-up will best engage participants and much more. Involving them in the planning will also likely make them highly motivated to turn out their networks for the event.

## ✓ **DESIGN TO PROMOTE PROBLEM SOLVING RATHER THAN POSITION DEMANDING**

When we give each person at a public meeting three minutes at the microphone, we have inadvertently asked them to state their demands. We have not asked them to consider multiple perspectives and competing needs and we have not given them time to do so. At the end of such a meeting, the

government host often ends up with a long list of everyone's demands, many of which are incompatible. The host also ends up with a frustrated and disappointed crowd. Instead there are number of meeting designs that foster problem solving instead of position demanding. These designs usually put people in small groups with a table facilitator and ask them not just what they want, but to share their concerns and ideas and most importantly to ask them to consider the concerns and ideas of the others in the small group as they put forth ideas for a path forward that could address many, if not all, of those concerns and ideas.

## ✓ FOLLOW UP

It is essential that participants know how you used their input. Often it is not easy to get this information to participants. So, utilize more than one method:

- Share updates on your website and newsletter
- Send emails to all participants
- Ask members of your planning team to share updates
- Use community partners to disseminate updates

## ✓ REMEMBER THE '4 C'S OF TRUST': COMPETENCE, CARING, CONSISTENCY, COMMUNICATION

**Trust** is critical to creating the dialogue needed to work together on tough issues. As an exercise the government host could identify at least one way they are demonstrating each 'C'. For example:

- **Competence** – by providing accessible background information on the topic or having governmental presenters who can share the information in plain language
- **Caring** – by providing food, childcare, and translation
- **Consistency** – by developing and maintaining relationships with participants
- **Communication** – by sharing meeting summaries and how the input was used

## ✓ SET HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Human beings tend to rise to high expectations and sink to low ones. High expectations include that participants will listen to learn rather than to plan a rebuttal, presume positive intent of everyone present, and be open to changing their minds. Consider creating a list of expectations ahead of time or do it with the group. Remember to share the expectations multiple times before and during the event – post them on the wall, review them at the beginning of the meeting and again later in the meeting, put them on table tents, etc.

## ✓ CREATE SPACE AND TIME TO ACKNOWLEDGE MISSTEPS, ANGER, FEAR, DIFFERENCE

Given that it is challenging to productively acknowledge missteps, anger, fear and difference, government tends to try to avoid doing so. However, in the long run avoiding these issues is *harder* as they will manifest as unwillingness to work together on a path forward and activism against decisions made by the unit of government. View anger as a passionate commitment to the issue and conflicting points of view as a resource for good decision making. For tips on working through particularly a divisive issue and with strong emotions see the [OCDR website](#) or the [Community Mediation Minnesota website](#) or consider using a [professional facilitator](#) with experience with high conflict situations.