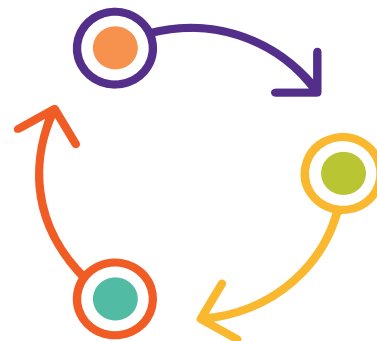# Trying to Engage Effectively with Community? Recommendations for a Large Organization

By Janice Barbee, Founder & Director of Healing Roots, Member of Nexus Community Engagement Institute Advisory Committee

Nexus Community Engagement Institute (NCEI) advances and strengthens communities through equity-based community engagement, both locally and nationally.

We Believe all community members, especially those who have been historically oppressed and ignored, should be engaged in and have authorship of their lives and future.

For more information and tools on community engagement, see https://www.nexuscp.org/resources/

www.nexuscp.org
info@nexuscp.org
(651) 289-7038

More and more organizations are realizing the benefits of engaging with the people they serve. They're becoming interested in what authentic engagement can achieve, beyond surveys, focus groups, and advisory committees. Such methods are typically used to get responses to what an organization is doing or plans to do, but do not do a good job of discovering what is on the minds of community members. Organizations miss out on a tremendous amount of information, creativity, resources, and problem solving when they limit the flow of information between the organization and the communities around them. This flow of information is powered by the quality of the relationships between people in the organization and the community.

Small community organizations are typically best equipped to engage with community members, but large organizations can also reap tremendous benefits by engaging with diverse communities. Nexus Community Partners worked with a local hospital system over a one-year period to support the organization to engage more effectively with the communities it serves. This partnership yielded new knowledge, understanding, and ideas about what is needed for any large organization to better understand community engagement and integrate it into their work.

Leadership Training

For this learning series, a cohort of about 12 senior executives and managers from many different areas of the organization, from Medical Director to Vice President of Marketing, were invited to participate. They met every month for a two-hour session for 10 months to learn about community engagement and how to implement it in their organization. The organizers of the trainings were strong leaders within the hospital concerned with diversity and inclusion and they had worked hard before the training to make the case for engagement. The result was that the participants were eager to learn more about it. They all had some sense that deepening relationships with the diverse communities they serve would help them to better achieve the hospital's goals.

At the conclusion of the series of trainings, the participants were committed to community engagement as a valuable approach towards achieving their mission. They agreed that it is crucial for leadership to understand community engagement in order to spread the practice and its principles throughout the organization. The leaders were in a position to support each other, through membership on committees and workgroups, and to apply their understanding in their own work and the hospital's policies and priorities. The participants concluded that training leaders is a good place to start.

Recommendations:

- Start at the top with the leaders who have the power to implement engagement practices and respond to community input with changes in organizational culture and policy.

- Training organizers should meet with potential participants beforehand to make the case for community engagement and should choose those who are interested in learning. Don't require someone to attend who is not receptive.

- Implement a long-term training program that engages the participants, ties in to the issues they are addressing, and includes practical ways to implement what they learn.

- Do not put community engagement in the hands of one department or a few staff, where they often do not have the support to spread this approach to other departments or to inform practice and policy as a result of what has been learned from the community.

Everyone on the Same Page:
"Authentic" Community Engagement

The participants expressed frustration that staff throughout the organization does not share a common understanding of what is engagement. Some had witnessed outreach, where information flows only in one direction, being called community engagement. They realized that their organization needed a common language. Some participants talked about discovering how different departments were working on projects in the same community without knowing it, and how this had led to confusion and resentment.

Recommendations:

- Develop a common understanding of authentic community engagement at the beginning of the training, and spread that throughout the organization.

- Clarify the language for interactions with community, so "outreach" and "community engagement" are understood as both having value according to their purpose, but are not the same process.

- Commit to multiple trainings of more and more staff until everyone in the organization is on the same page.

- Create structures in the organization for people to share their experiences and learning, process difficult situations, resolve conflict, brainstorm strategies, and develop new procedures and policies together.

Engagement Leads to Equity

One of the most transformative sessions of the series with the executives was the session focused on equity. Several in attendance were not aware of the practice of redlining (which denied mortgages to people of color), an example of institutionalized racism and a major contributor to the inequities of today. This session helped people see the connection between equity and engagement, and to realize that staff needs training in equity alongside or even before learning about community engagement. These leaders learned how cultural communities have been historically excluded, not just from opportunities, but also from the processes for solving the problems that affect them most intensely. They learned how community

> More information: Jim Crow of the North reveals the history and impact of racist real estate covenants & redlining. https://www.tpt.org/minnesota-experience/video/jim-crow-of-the-north-stijws

engagement is not just a way to achieve their organization's goals, but how it can also be a healing process. These sessions on equity also shone a light on the organization's internal equity practices and supported the hiring of more people of color.

Recommendations:

- Include at least one or two sessions on equity in your trainings. Include the history of racism in your neighborhood and the history of the relationship between your institution and communities of color. Interacting with community members without this context can blindside staff when community members bring up past injustices.

- Make the connection explicit between the need for equity and the need and benefits of community engagement.

- Allow for both personal and professional exploration of this topic. These discussions can challenge people's identity and understanding of their own history and can bring up strong emotions. Use experienced facilitators that can create safe spaces where people can reflect, express and understand their emotions, revise their understanding, and integrate their new learning.

Setting Priorities and Expectations

Several of the members of the cohort expressed frustration during and after the trainings on the difficulty of implementing the principles of community engagement. They saw staff trying to do as much as they could and getting discouraged that they weren't seeing a lot of positive change. They realized that top leadership needed to set priorities, to create a coordinated effort to make change in a focused way. Participants also told stories of engagement efforts that had backfired because the community members wanted things that the organization couldn't provide. Their reflection revealed disconnections, inefficiencies, and weak links within the organization that need to be addressed.

Recommendations:

- Set priorities for your staff for community engagement efforts.

- Support staff to communicate with each other and to make sure that what is learned from the community makes a difference in the organization.

- Make sure staff is trained to be explicit with the community about what they can and cannot do.

Time

The shortage of time, tight timelines, and over-stuffed schedules were a constant theme throughout the trainings. Members of the cohort expressed frustration that they don't have the time to build relationships in the community and maintain them. Too often, they said, one staff member has established relationships with a community only to leave within a couple of years. The next person has to start from scratch. The leaders also talked about the limitations of their advisory committee, where representation of the community was extremely limited, and the meeting process did not afford the opportunity for creative input from community members.

Recommendations:

- Do not expect a one-time training to be sufficient. As with any training that seeks to produce a shift in culture and understanding, this is a long-term process. Build in multiple trainings over several months with time for debriefing and follow-up.

- Allow time for several staff members to build relationships in the various communities your organization serves. Don't let all the responsibility rest on one person's shoulders.

- Not every meeting with community members needs to have a task to complete; the goal is to build relationships and trust.

- Develop many ways to build relationships between multiple staff and community members, from one-to-ones, to personal interviews, to listening circles, to community dinners, meetings, and other events.

Changing "Old" Thinking

Many times during the trainings, the members were confronted with examples of old, entrenched ways of thinking getting in the way of learning and applying new knowledge. They realized that many of these ways of thinking are deeply engrained into the organization's culture, are extremely difficult to change, and need to be constantly challenged.

The participants in the cohort named several examples of "old" thinking that get in the way of integrating community engagement into the organization:

- Lack of awareness of one's culture: People operate from a "default" way of thinking, which assumes that their culture and ways of doing things are "just the way things are." They need more awareness of the assumptions and beliefs of their own culture.

- The expert /professional model in our society teaches that the staff should be the ones to solve the problems. Staff may feel a tension between what is expected of them as professionals, community members' perception of them, and their ability to act as a resource and liaison for the community.

- Being professional often means one needs to be "objective" and detached and it can be considered inappropriate to express emotion in one's workplace. One of the most memorable sessions in the hospital cohort was when the participants were asked to share an experience of being in community when they were growing up. Many stated that this was the first time that they had shared personal stories with each other in the many years they had worked with each other, and it bonded them together in ways they never had before.

Recommendations:

- Include trainings on cultural awareness and cultural identity. Trainings that challenge attitudes and perceptions require both personal and professional work. In our individualistic society, people often don't realize how much their culture is the "water" through which they understand the world.

- Allow for people to express emotion, to tell personal stories, and to bring their full selves into the discussions. Giving space for this can transform attitudes and practices more effectively than words can. Strictly professional relationships don't build trust and transparency.

Don't Stop the Conversation

The participants in these trainings are very committed individuals who want to do what they can to lead their organization to do a better job at improving health and preventing illness. They took a lot of time over 10 months to learn about the power, principles, and potential of community engagement. The hope for the trainings was that, because they

are leaders in the organization, they were in the best position to apply this learning and spread it throughout the organization. They are doing this to the best of their ability, but they also realize that this requires a cultural shift. It takes challenging some entrenched ways of doing things; it requires a re-alignment of values and incentives. Just as community engagement takes time, so learning about it and how to integrate it will take time. Trainings on engagement and equity are investments in a future where everyone has a voice and the opportunity to make positive change for the common good.

Recommendations:

- Create structures for senior leadership to regularly re-evaluate procedures, incentives, practices, and policies in the light of both what staff are learning from the process of engagement and from community members.

- Regularly ask your staff what they need to better understand in order to serve the different communities and accomplish your organization's mission. Continue to offer trainings and workshops accordingly.

- Keep asking questions such as:

  - What is not working, according to community members?

  - Who else do we need to hear from?

  - What does the community want us to do that we're not doing?

  - How could we support community members to strengthen their community?

Janice Barbee is the director and founder of Healing Roots, and has the honor of being named an Elder in our European American community. She is currently a consultant in community engagement and an adjunct instructor at the University of Minnesota, teaching on culture and health. She designs and conducts workshops for organizations who want to better understand culture and respectfully and productively engage with people of different cultures.

Learn more about Healing Roots here: https://healingrootscommunity.com/about/contact-us