

## Investigating Civic Engagement

While the presence of certain principles have been demonstrated to lead to greater equity and inclusion in community engagement, it can often be difficult to determine if those principles are at work within community dialogues. There are times when principles may be at work in some aspects of community engagement and not others. Furthermore, these principles may not play as important a role as community members believe.

In order to help communities understand the role of these principles in their communities, we have created a series of questions designed to help community members think deeply about how these principles are or are not present within their community engagement activities. While answering these questions yourself can provide some powerful insights, it is our hope that these questions and answers are shared with a wide variety of community members in order to gain a deeper insight into how community engagement works within your community. Knowing whom to ask these questions, the best way to ask them, and the best forum for sharing the results with the community at large are as important to the investigative process as the questions themselves.

In this exercise, rather than answering the questions directly, we will attempt to create a strategy that will help provide the most authentic and meaningful answers in order to help community members recognize where these principles are present and where they are lacking.

For each question, consider:

- A. Which community member(s) would be able to provide the most meaningful answer to this question? Who do we need to ask that has not been asked?
- B. How can we frame this question so that community members feel comfortable enough to give their most authentic answer? Are there considerations (setting, context, time of day etc.) that would make it more or less difficult for them to answer as thoughtfully as possible?
- C. How can community resources be utilized to make it as easy as possible for community members to answer these difficult questions?
- D. What is the best way to communicate and evaluate the answers in order to foster positive change?

### ***Sharing Diverse Gifts***

1. Think about your community. What would you most like to show a friend who was visiting for the first time? Who would you want them to meet? What activities would you be most anxious to show off? What aspect of the community would you say defines it?
2. Who are informal leaders in your community? Who are some important people? Elders? Characters? Friendly people? Think about how these characteristics can be used to provide leadership in the community?
3. Communities are often home to many activities, ranging from zoning meetings to book clubs, all of which provide the opportunity for people to demonstrate their gifts. Can you name some

informal/formal activities that happen in the community within a given year? Whom in your community could tell you more?

### ***Recognizing Power and Difference***

1. What were the experiences of people in your community during the Civil Rights era or during school desegregation? Can anyone speak to how the community was before then, what happened, and what is the community like now? How relevant are these stories to the story that people tell about your community?
2. What does 'civic power' look like in your community? What are its characteristics and how do you know when someone has it and when someone doesn't?

### ***Hospitality: Invitation and Listening***

1. Think about activities in your community where you can see people gathered as community members. Anything from community or neighborhood meetings to community gardens, book clubs, PTA meetings, churches and community festivals. Then think of your community at large, or if possible, look at some quick demographic stats. Now think about who is represented at these events and who isn't? Are some people more represented than others? Who interacts with whom? How do people interact with these activities? How are these interactions the same and how are they different from one another?
2. Look at the list of community members that are not often represented at community activities. What do you think would draw them into more community events in the future? Next, find some of these community members and ask them the same question. Compare and contrast your list. Which items are the same, and which items are different? Were there any other surprising results?
3. Reflect on the dialogue and decision-making activities surrounding some recent development decisions in your community. What were some of the claims made for and against those decisions? How did those claims resonate with various people in the community? Is there a message about the development that could have been more inclusive? Why or why not? Try to create one with what you've learned in this section.

### ***Trust and Commitment***

1. Ask people about some of their most positive and most negative stories from their history within the community. How did those experiences effect the trustworthiness of other community members and the community at large?
2. Who is most likely to feel supported or unsupported in your community? Ask community members from various walks of life to tell a story about their experiences. How did those experiences color their relationship with the community?

### ***Honoring Opposition and Embracing Protest***

1. What are the characteristics of a contentious or 'hot-button' issue in your community or in your experience? How have issues such as these played out in your community activities and conversations?
2. Think about some protest actions (i.e., picketing, demonstrating) that you felt was misguided or inappropriate. Leaving aside the protesters stance on the issue(s), what about the protests you feel that way? Can you think of an aspect of these protests that strike you as valid? How do other community members from different walks of life feel about these protests?
3. Think about activities or people who you may have labelled as 'disruptive' at community meetings or events? What made you feel this way? Can you imagine a community forum or event where they could express themselves and be recognized within the community?

### ***Adapting to Community Change***

1. Look back over the answers that you've collected in the previous *A Closer Look* sections. What changes would you make to your community engagement environment given the answers to those responses? Who and what would have to change for the environment to be different? How would those changes affect community members? What do you see as the changes (i.e., structural/institutional/emotional/cognitive, etc.) changes that would have to occur in your community to make those changes a reality? What are some ways to support those who would make those changes?