

Avoiding Common Pitfalls In Community Engagement

Equitable budgetary decision-making should aspire to include diverse city residents in the process. The right style of engagement will depend on the nature of the decision: Your city might release a survey to gather data in order to determine budget priorities, or you might decide to partner with a local organization to learn how to improve the operation of an existing program.

Once you have defined your goals and selected the community engagement approach, watch out for common pitfalls that can turn a well-intentioned strategy into one that fails to produce the needed results, or worse, harms your city’s relationship with the community. For each of the three community engagement approaches below, check the potential pitfalls and consider the tactics suggested in order to be more inclusive, gather better data, build trust, and make superior decisions. Learn more about community engagement [here](#).

Goal	Pitfall	Solution	Example
<p>Gather Data to Build a Clear Mandate</p> <p><i>Use surveys, focus groups, interviews, meetings, and other tactics to identify problems, set priorities, and grasp public sentiment.</i></p>	<p>Your engagement generates useless or irrelevant data</p>	<p>Preview your engagement activities and questions with engagement specialists at the city, community members or groups, and the teams that will analyze the data.</p>	<p>Using Community Engagement to Build a Clear Mandate</p> <p>Miami-Dade County Launches Thrive 305 Survey and Workshops Process to Inform County Budget</p> <p><i>In Miami-Dade County, for example, Mayor Daniella Levine Cava wanted to spark civic engagement and align her administration’s agenda with constituents’ priorities after taking office late last year. Her staff launched a countywide survey that could quickly reach a broad range of residents. In February 2021, more than 25,000 people completed the survey. One clear theme that emerged from the results was a concern about public safety. Specifically, many respondents expressed a desire to increase their sense of safety by improving lighting and maintenance in parks and other public spaces.</i></p> <p><i>With clear data to point to, Mayor Cava proposed increased funding in this area in her administration’s first budget. To help turn survey results into a community-driven policy framework, Mayor Cava’s team also held a series of workshop events with county leadership and staff, nonprofits, community leaders and policy experts. (Adapted from 2021 Medium post)</i></p>
	<p>Your engagement does not achieve sufficient or representative turnout</p>	<p>Use online and accessible in-person forums. Partner with community organizations to increase turnout. Spur participation with non-monetary and monetary incentives.</p>	
	<p>Your engagement feels extractive or condescending to participants</p>	<p>Tell people how you will use their input. Do not oversimplify core concepts for your audience.</p>	
	<p>You leave marginalized communities feeling unheard or excluded</p>	<p>Eliminate barriers related to language, technology, physical ability, work schedules and childcare responsibilities.</p>	
	<p>Your engagement activities feel performative or pointless to participants</p>	<p>Make sure engagement is necessary for your specific goals and will support decisions.</p>	

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<p>Effective Program Design</p>	<p>Your advisory board fails to make an impact despite its long-term efforts</p>	<p>Identify and remove the silos between the board, city departments, and relevant non-city community organizations that prevent big-picture thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving.</p>	<p>Using Community Engagement to Design Programs Effectively</p>
<p>Organize boards and commissions to formalize community influence over specific strategies and investments.</p>	<p>Multiplying task forces and commissions lack focus or duplicate each others' efforts</p>	<p>Carefully define the term limits, scope, timeline, and ultimate goals of each group operating under city oversight; revisit these terms on a periodic basis. Communicate this information transparently to the public to keep task forces accountable.</p>	<p>The City of Minneapolis Partners with Community Intermediary to Run Twin Cities Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute</p> <p>To increase the accessibility of boards and commissions positions for City of Minneapolis residents of color, the City's Neighborhood and Community Relations department partnered with Nexus Community Partners—a community-building intermediary—to build a pipeline and facilitate onboarding for diverse participants. The program identifies, trains, and supports onboarding of residents of color into publicly appointed boards and commissions.</p>
	<p>An influential commission does not represent the community it intends to serve</p>	<p>Give community members and community organizations a role in nominating and evaluating potential commission members. Formalize pipelines and inclusive onboarding processes for new members of under-represented origins. Consider compensating participants for their time to broaden access to those otherwise unable to afford participation, transportation, or associated costs.</p>	<p>City of Santa Monica Streamlines Boards and Commissions to Increase Efficacy and Reduce Overlap</p> <p>The City of Santa Monica is streamlining its boards, commissions, and task forces to increase their efficacy, diversity, and alignment with City departmental efforts. Relying on the recommendations of a community-based working group, the City recently decided to improve onboarding of new members, consolidate board budgets under associated departmental budgets, require annual workplans and progress reporting from boards, subject all advisory bodies to review every five years, improve community awareness of boards and commissions to broaden participation among more diverse community members, and share training resources on meeting management, appropriate participation, implicit bias, and parliamentary procedure. Further recommendations will advise in the future on reducing duplication of effort among the city's existing boards.</p>

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<p>Collaborate to Support Implementation</p>	<p>City investments duplicate or fail to connect with community organization programs and supports</p>	<p>Map the functions, relationships, and populations served by a given “system”—for example: business development, workforce development. Strategize with known institutions and community organizations to streamline efforts and plug in gaps.</p>	<p>Using Community Engagement to Support Implementation</p>
<p><i>Collaborate and ally with institutions and community organizations to strengthen city efforts and build local capacity.</i></p>	<p>Certain community organizations supporting a system are unreliable or lack credibility</p>	<p>Learn from community partners about “weak links” in a system, figure out what those organizations need, and determine whether public resources can fill the gaps.</p>	<p>City Plants LA Urban Forest Project <i>The City of LA relies on a public-private partnership between the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the non-profit organization City Plants, and seven other community-based organizations that work in concert with residents and businesses to coordinate tree planting and care throughout Los Angeles.</i></p>
	<p>Community organizations and networks are skeptical of city support or intentions</p>	<p>Be transparent about city plans, acknowledge the lived experience of participants, and respectfully leverage the expertise of local community organizations.</p>	
	<p>Collaboration stumbles due to a lack of capacity in the ecosystem of community organizations</p>	<p>Understand the roles of less formal networks—e.g., mutual aid, faith-based institutions. Invest in a pipeline of community organizations in a given system: help existing organizations expand programs, or catalyze the growth in promising organizations.</p>	

ABOUT THE CBER PROGRAM

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