Transform Your Practice

A community engagement card deck

How to use the cards

These cards were made by practitioners, for practitioners, to support community engagement that nurtures trust, expands participation and promotes advocacy. Here are a few ways to use them:

1 **Add tools to your toolkit.** The cards share powerful new strategies for thoughtful, effective community engagement.

2 **Assess your current practices.** What's working well? What needs improvement? Refer to the cards often to adjust your approach and discover new ideas.

3 **Share with colleagues and leaders**. Share the cards with your professional community to support impactful outreach beyond your organization.

4 **Document lessons learned.** Take notes on the cards to keep track of what you tried, what you learned and what you'd do differently next time.

Want to see the ideas in action?
Explore the case studies at
civiccommons.us/ce-case-studies

Myth:

The "community" turns up

Practitioners assume a representative group of people will participate in the engagement process, but research shows that people that attend public meetings are much more likely to be unhappy or distrusting.

Notes:

Myth: The "community" turns up

Go where the people are

Go to the places where the people you want to engage are most comfortable. Don't expect them to come to you.

Experiencing this?

☐ Meeting in an uninviting, institutional or hard-to-reach setting?

☐ Picking location and styles of engagement for convenience of organizers and practitioners and not the people you want to engage?

☐ Having the same people show up at every meeting with many other voices unheard?

Changing practice:

☐ Reach a diverse range of people by going where people congregate—e.g. porches, recreation areas, coffee shops or existing local gatherings.

☐ Ask the people you want to connect with where and when they want to meet that is most convenient to them. And feed people!

☐ Locate practitioners in the neighborhood for direct local connection on a regular basis—e.g. set up a storefront with daily or weekly hours.

Add your own ideas here:

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"Community" is not singular

People with similar characteristics or in a shared geographic area may have very different interests and needs, based on their lived experience.

Experiencing this?

- ☐ Only reaching one audience? A few dominant voices control the room?
- ☐ People claim to "be the community" or reject that others "represent the community"?
- ☐ Evaluation based solely on the number of participants engaged regardless of the diversity of their experience?
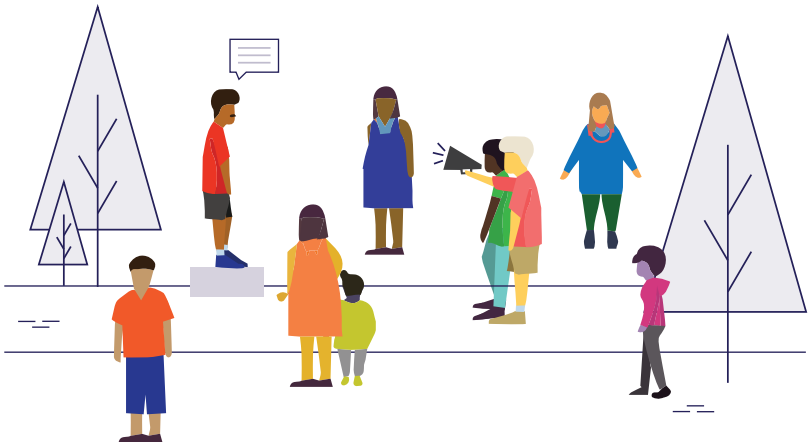
Changing practice:

- ☐ Partner with a diverse range of affinity groups and local organizations to encourage a variety of voices.
- ☐ Collect data on meeting attendees and compare to local demographics to identify who is missing.
- ☐ Create a tailored outreach approach to connect with specific missing voices. It's not about quantity, but diversity!

Add your own ideas here:

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Amplify the silent or quiet voices

Prioritize styles of engagement that bring forth underrepresented (and often supportive) voices. Relying on one method may result in people being unheard.

Experiencing this?

☐ Only hearing from naysayers without a path forward?

☐ Know there are supporters of change, but they're not in the room?

☐ Doubting that public meetings are the best source for understanding public sentiment?

Changing practice:

☐ Identify supporters in advance and assist them in amplifying their message both during meetings and through other channels such as op-eds and media interviews.

☐ Ask about memories of and experiences in the place to build rapport, common ground and lower barriers to entry to the conversation.

☐ Use action-oriented engagement practices such as space observation, intercept surveys and interviews to better understand sentiments.

Add your own ideas here:

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Myth:


Everyone comes into the process in the same way

People's personal life experiences, values and needs will produce a range of responses and involvement in the engagement process. An openness to new ideas, willingness to be flexible and adjust the approach is critical to bridging those differences.

Notes:

Center people in the process

Nurturing a sense of belonging and ownership fosters pride in place, participation in engagement, a collaborative process and long-term stewardship.
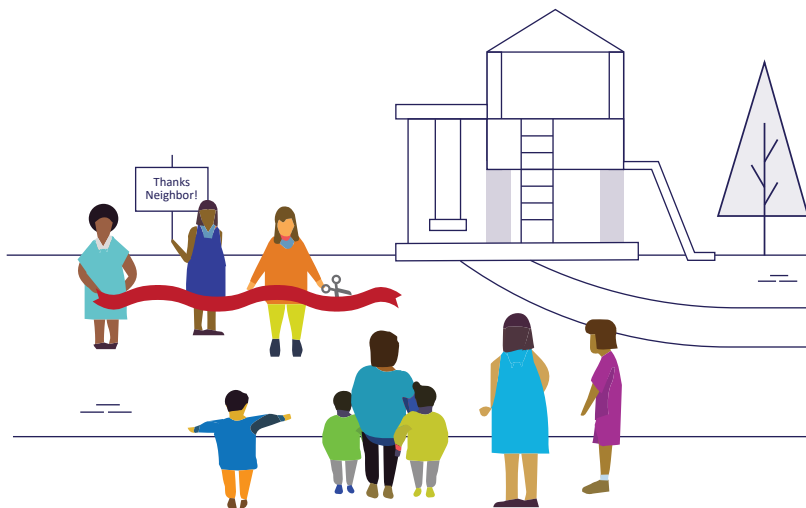
Experiencing this?

☐ People don't know how to be involved or participate in the work?

☐ People are not participating, so it feels like they don't care?

☐ Interest waning from previously engaged participants?

Changing practice:

☐ Hire local or engaged individuals to be part of the work (e.g. for surveying or data collection).

☐ Create opportunities for community members to be in decision-making or stewardship roles, such as on steering committees or leading ambassador programs.

☐ Celebrate individuals' involvement through recognition dinners, placards at the project site and communications about the project.

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Meet people where they are

Learning about and respecting different life circumstances, values and needs is the basis for fostering effective and meaningful connection.
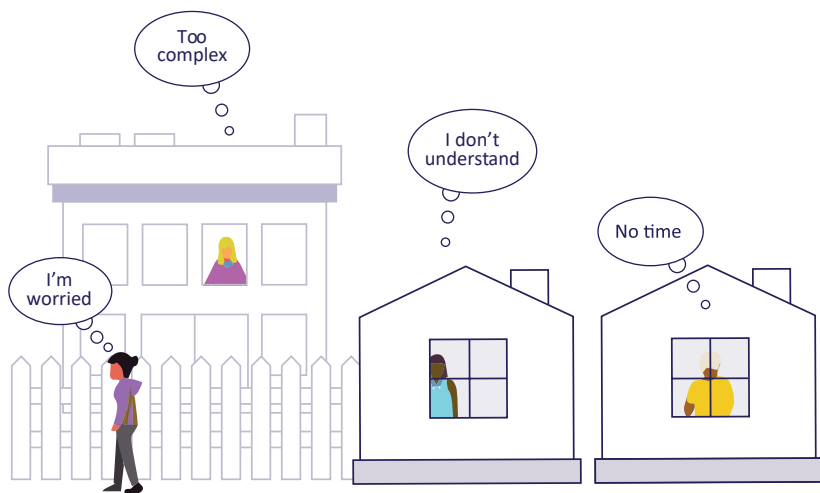
Experiencing this?

☐ Encountering misunderstandings around project scope?

☐ People aren't able to get involved due to other commitments?

☐ Distrust of the process based on past history?

Changing practice:

☐ Value different types of knowledge from life experience. Work together to articulate the direct value and benefit for the people and the place.

☐ Create a menu of options with a variety of engagement options and time commitments. Offer services like childcare or transportation to support participation.

☐ Lead with the intent to build trust. As a first step, set clear expectations and outcomes for your engagement process.

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Focus on empathy before advocacy

Approach community engagement with openness and a willingness to learn, versus asserting power and authority.
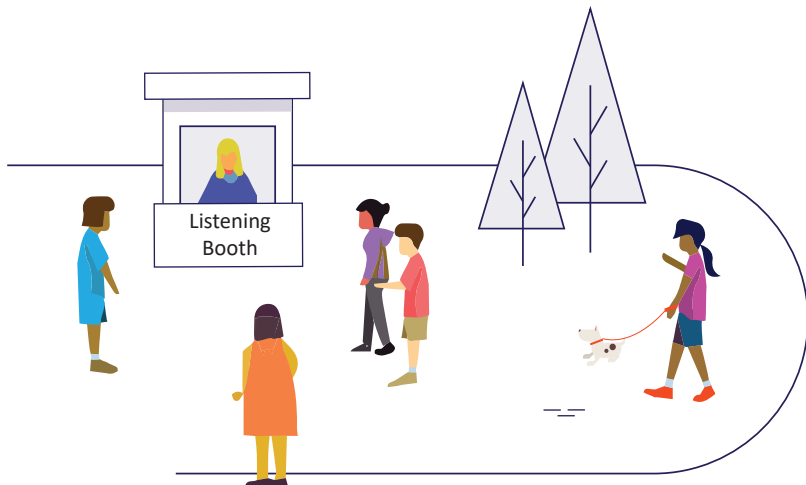
Experiencing this?

☐ Your idea doesn't connect or receive the feedback you expect?

☐ Values are misaligned or differ among people?

☐ Good for some doesn't automatically mean good for all?

Changing practice:

☐ Focus on demystifying concepts. To reach people of all ages, communicate and plan activities for different interests and abilities.

☐ Check your ego at the door. Identify and be accountable to your own perspective, privilege and biases.

☐ Listen for understanding and encourage engagement by asking "why" questions.

Add your own ideas here:

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Myth:

There will be a golden moment of harmony

No community is homogeneous, so perfect consensus should never be the goal of engagement. Focus on building relationships, trust and accountability with a diverse range of people.

Notes:

Tension can reveal a better solution

Skepticism, disagreement and negative experiences may contribute to misgivings about a project or process—but they can also reveal new and better approaches to the work.

Experiencing this?

☐ Individual needs or misgivings overpower potential community-wide benefits?

☐ Inability to have a frank and honest conversation?

☐ Complaints without solutions or alternatives?

Changing practice:

☐ Gather in small groups focused around a mutual activity or task to orient collective energy and dampen individual agendas.

☐ Avoid open microphone sessions. Prioritize one-on-one conversations that allow space for more productive disagreement and discussion.

☐ If a conversation gets heated, take a time out so everyone can calm down. Before regrouping, consider what is at the core of the concern and how you might address it directly or broaden the perspective.

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Elevate compromise over consensus

People who feel listened to are more willing to compromise and embrace a plan that meets their needs, even if they don't get every want.
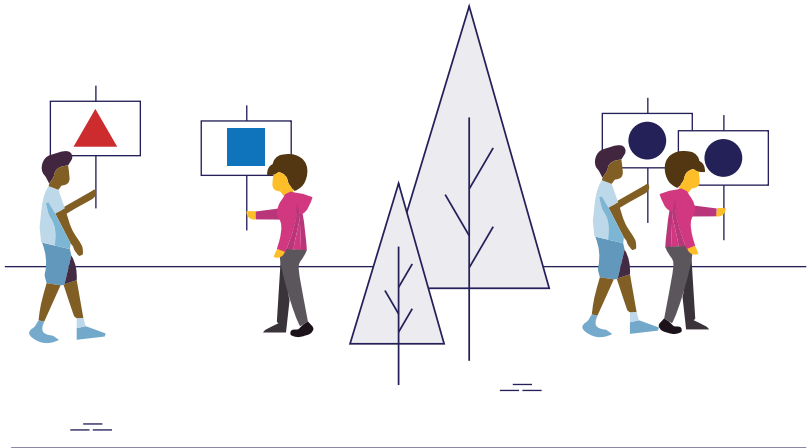
Experiencing this?

☐ People think a solution only exists when everyone agrees?

☐ Majority rules or mathematical formulas are advocated as the only "fair" decision-making process?

☐ People feel unheard and unacknowledged in the process?

Changing practice:

☐ Don't let perfect be the enemy of great. Explain why every "want" may not be able to be incorporated.

☐ Show people their input matters. Test their ideas at events or include them in prototypes, pop-up installations and final project designs.

☐ Express appreciation for people's time and contributions. Provide gifts for active participation, such as swag or gift cards.

Add your own ideas here:

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Focus on values rather than opinions

Focusing on values centers connection and common ground as well as a system of accountability.

Experiencing this?

☐ People entrenched in fixed – and sometimes conflicting – opinions?

☐ Having difficulty making your plan or proposal reflect people's ideas and contributions?

☐ Finding it hard to say no to some ideas?

Changing practice:

☐ Establish shared values early and assess new ideas for how well they align with the established values.

☐ Create opportunities for people to build relationships with one another, such as over meals or other shared experiences.

☐ Focus on finding the context or beliefs behind an opinion or statement to bring it back to the values.

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Myth:

Traditional community engagement is effective

Typical community engagement strategies often lacks thoughtful intentionality, potentially causing further harm and division. A cookie-cutter approach that isn't committed to the long-term will make community collaboration more difficult.

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Prioritize relationships over product

Focusing first on relationships is critical to build trust and can deliver a more successful and reflective outcome for current and future projects.

Experiencing this?

☐ Relationship are short-term and transactional?

☐ Lacking connection to people and place?

☐ Process, format and deadlines constraining relationship building?

Changing practice:

☐ Get to know people outside of specific project needs to build longstanding rapport.

☐ Be present in the place by taking time to pause, listen and build relationships through walk and talks, a weekly presence in the neighborhood, front yard gatherings or potlucks.

☐ Welcome people into the process by showing an interest in their perspective. Start with questions like, "How might we... ?"

Add your own ideas here:

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Avoid a "checking the box" approach

Expand your focus beyond prescriptive requirements. Instead engage people with the goal of understanding and deep connection, not validation.

Experiencing this?

- ☐ Meeting just to meet?
- ☐ Using the same form of engagement regardless of the people or project?
- ☐ Unable to convey the value of getting involved?

Changing practice:

- ☐ Clearly communicate how people are being asked to contribute to avoid frustration. A brainstorming session will allow for feedback and ideas whereas a project update will likely not.
- ☐ Quality is more important than quantity. Measure success based on who participates and how they participate, not the number of meetings held. Adjust outreach to reach any missing voices.
- ☐ Commit to an iterative process and be open to new ideas. For example, partner with existing local activities to reach more people.

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Show up consistently

Trust building requires constant cultivation and may move on a different timeline than project schedules and funding deadlines.
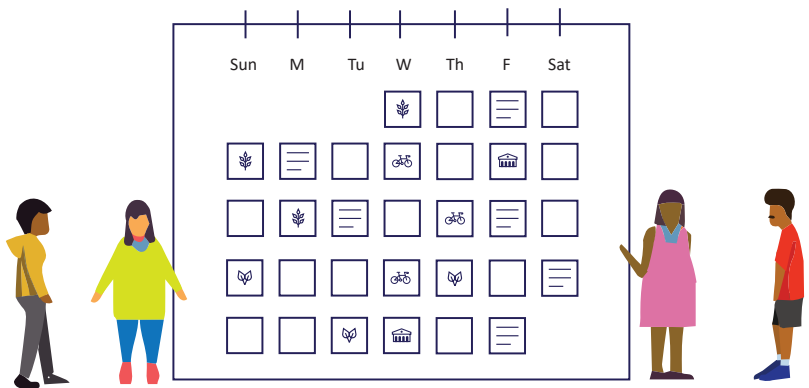
Experiencing this?

- ☐ People wary and disillusioned?
- ☐ Projects being managed as a series of transactions on a strict timeline?
- ☐ The timeline for a project is too long for people to see meaningful progress and impact in the short term?

Changing practice:

- ☐ Engage with the intention to build trust. Recognize the project as part of a long-term commitment to the people and the place.
- ☐ Do what you say you will do and in the promised timeframe. If you don't, explain why the project has changed or will be delayed.
- ☐ Use flexible, alternative engagement strategies like mini-grants to nurture people's ideas, show progress and provide opportunities for involvement on a regular basis.

Add your own ideas here:

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Myth:

Getting "input" from residents should be the focus

When the goal is to collect input, the result is often a transactional process and a missed opportunity to more deeply understand or address people's needs. To co-create a solution with the community, shift to an action-oriented approach.

Notes:

Flip the power dynamic

Step outside of established hierarchies and norms. Elevate leadership within a community and focus efforts towards building their capacity.

Experiencing this?

☐ People uncomfortable advocating, even if they are supporters?

☐ Lack of knowledge and interest hindering your ability to build community support?

☐ One person hoarding power and decision-making?

Changing practice:

☐ Identify potential project champions, support and empower them with training and information, and identify opportunities for them to become advocates for the work.

☐ Explain how to influence projects outside the community engagement process, such as by advocating for regulatory changes or funding.

☐ Be open to delegating responsibility or adapting your process to be more effective in response to community feedback.

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Make the process transparent & honest

Set clear expectations and explain what is achievable and what is not within the scope of a process or project

Experiencing this?

☐ Rehashing already agreed upon decisions?

☐ Questions about why funding is supporting "this" and not "that"?

☐ Confusion reigns and misunderstanding abounds?

Changing practice:

☐ Be clear about what has already been decided and why. Identify key decision points in a project stage and opportunities for co-creation.

☐ Share the funding source, project objective, organizations involved and timeline. When details change, communicate clearly about what is different, why there is a switch, and how it impacts the project.

☐ Utilize clear and recognizable terminology. No jargon!

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Co-create the plan and process

Commit to a way of working that shifts the typical power dynamics and prioritizes collaboration and trust building.
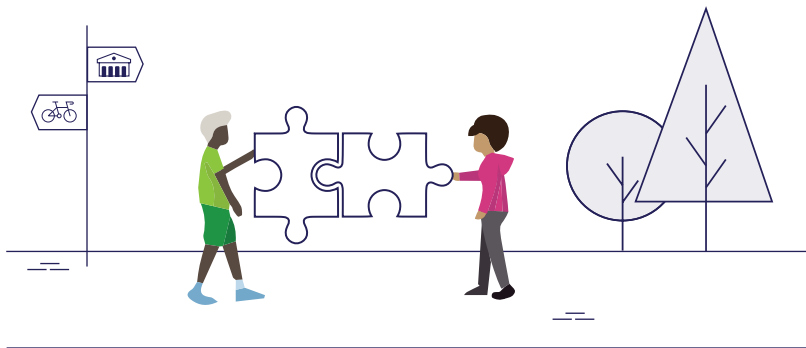
Experiencing this?

☐ Your approach is contributing to distrust?

☐ Community members are skeptical of the project, unconvinced by the value or feeling a lack of authenticity?

☐ The project feels pre-determined without a way to envision the plan together?

Changing practice:

☐ Assemble a team of varying backgrounds and expertise that all have different stakes in the project. Prioritize cross-silo work.

☐ Plan while doing – pilot something tangible together to test ideas and foster trust.

☐ Plan a site visit to another city to build team cohesion, see a diversity of outcomes and experiences in a different context, and learn how other communities have addressed similar challenges.

Add your own ideas here:

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Contact Us
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