The Dos and Don'ts of Community Engagement

<u>Do</u>…

- ***…work to understand the community.***
  - *Conduct windshield tours or walking tours with community leadership.*
  - *Have informal conversations with community members.* Give and take. Over time, share aspects of your life on an appropriate level. Show sincere interest in their lives without being invasive. Embrace the value of every community member through these conversations.
  - *Listen more than talk.* Be clear on what the needs and goals of the community members are; maintain a focus on their needs and goals rather than your own.
  - *Value and build on existing knowledge.* Know what the community members know. Know THAT they know. Do this before taking a position of 'educator'. Do not underestimate knowledge because the 'knower' is not formally educated.
  - *Identify key stakeholders.* Which individuals or groups would feel they have something to gain or lose if the issue were addressed? Know the potential for <u>both</u> support for and resistance to your work. Listen to understand relationships in the community and how they may foster or hinder change.
  - *Learn which strategies have been attempted in addressing similar issues.* What has worked? What hasn't? Why?

- ***…engage community members in every aspect of the advocacy work.***
  - *Seek insight.* Talk to as many people in the community as possible regarding what you perceive as the issue. What you have defined as the issue may not match that of community members.
  - *Foster collaborative change.* Work with and agree with community members on defining the issue and developing a strategy to address it.
  - *Meaningfully involve young people, early and often.* Tap into their excitement for change and insight, which can be just as, or even more valuable than, that of adults.
  - *Leverage existing leadership in the community where possible.* Which community leaders want to be involved in addressing the issue? What role might they best fulfill?
  - *Empower members of the community who are not established leaders.* Tap into potential. Embrace that community members can have roles outside of visible leadership.

- ***…involve community members in every step of research.***
  - If community members are to be surveyed on an issue, seek guidance on how to phrase questions.
  - Circle back to the community to help you understand research findings (ask, *what does this really mean?),* to understand gaps in research (no research is perfect), and to determine next steps.

- ***…celebrate accomplishments, big and small.*** Advocacy work can create weariness. Seek opportunities to rejoice, reinvigorate and renew with the community.

- ***...make changes in your own organization in order to resist internal traditional power structures. Acknowledge any need to do anti-oppression work within your own organization.***
  - Focus staff development on building capacity within traditionally marginalized communities (e.g., people of color, LGBTQ groups, women, youth, immigrants, poor and working class communities, etc.) ; rather than have the staff take the lead on work within the community, have them support community members in developing strategies, directing resources and executing plans for community change.
  - Examine policies, protocols and communication patterns to determine if decision-making is grounded in the perspectives of all staff, volunteers and key supporting stakeholders regardless of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion, country of origin or identity.
  - Insist on transparency among staff, volunteers and key supporting stakeholders; continuously invite feedback during various stages of project development.
  - When possible, invite and act on ideas 'outside the box'; encourage the innovation that stems from working within a diverse group.

Don't…

- ***…allow your voice to overpower that of the community.*** As much as possible, give the microphone to a community member, encourage community members to write op-ed pieces and to deliver their own comments at public hearings or town hall meetings. When you engage with the media, ensure that you are reflecting the perspective of the community, and be firm with media outlets that they present community voice to the public as well. When credit should be taken for work, emphasize the work of the community.

- ***…give in to the urge to have the community do work that satisfies only your interests.*** Early on, work to align your organization's resources with the needs and goals of the community.

- ***…give in to the urge to break healthy boundaries (e.g., lending your personal money).*** Seek the guidance of your organization's leader and community leaders if there is a situation that you think should be addressed. Remember the goal is to empower rather than to give charitably.

- ***…leave the community without closure.*** Understand if the community feels the issue was appropriately addressed. Is there an opportunity for you to continue to work with the community of next steps for this or another issue? Can you help connect the members with other resources for addressing other issues?

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