

## Making Community Governance Work

The 2000s saw an explosion of new technologies for online participation and collaboration. But the same individuals joining Facebook groups in droves are rejecting invitations for civic participation. How can organizations seeking meaningful community governance create effective engagement *offline*? I have studied three regional partnerships in which citizens, local organizations, government officials, and businesses collaborated on tough environmental planning issues. Their experiences yielded these suggestions for successful community collaborations on complex, multi-stakeholder problems:

- **Know your issue and your community.** Not every topic is right for a participatory approach—and a method that works on youth development may not work on climate change. Lots of organizations, such as Everyday Democracy and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation at [www.thataway.org](http://www.thataway.org), have resources that can help you decide which method is right for engaging your community in dialogues that lead to change.
- **Get a few committed people from different backgrounds and groups together on a regular basis, in person.** Keep it small when starting out. If this initial team doesn't work well together, nothing will get accomplished. How the group is organized doesn't matter as much as trust among the members that each voice will be respected.
- **Don't forget lunch!** Taking the time to get to know each other helps participants see potential opponents in the round. Eat a real meal together, and save the agenda for after everyone has eaten. The private conversations that happen before getting started and afterward in the parking lot are the most critical to friendships and follow-up calls that get the ball rolling.
- **Celebrate your successes with those who want to be involved.** Get some early points on the board and share the news with others—but don't spend all your time on publicity. The most successful partnerships are often the least high profile, since they deflect glory to others. Politicians and funders love it when diverse stakeholders have come to consensus about an issue.
- **Don't assume everyone needs to be at the table to participate meaningfully.** If a skeptic isn't interested in stakeholder meetings, he or she might be willing to talk one-on-one over coffee—you won't know if you don't ask. Success means keeping communication lines open with people who aren't the "usual suspects."
- **Wear multiple hats.** Use team members' existing personal networks, club memberships, and volunteer affiliations to meet hard to reach stakeholders where they already are. If a local municipality or organization doesn't have the resources or staff time to focus on your issue, perhaps a team member can join a committee or get involved as a volunteer.

- **Keep pushing beyond the comfort zone, and avoid collaboration for its own sake.** After some collaborative momentum, successful teams have a tendency to stick with what feels good, becoming insular and duplicating earlier efforts with less satisfying results. Keep things dynamic, flexible, and informal. If another issue seems more pressing, or stakeholders want to cycle out, that's fine. The relationships you have built will make it easy to keep former participants in the loop, and their new connections can expand your networks.

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