

Building Bridges: A community collaboration for culture change

Enduring Issues

In co-developing this vision, our conversations surfaced enduring difficulties in doing public engagement well. The following list maps some of the tensions present in doing this work.

Working against typical behavior. Our vision requires hard work and uncommon ways of talking together. Human nature may make parts of this vision difficult because it requires recognizing biases and cognitive short-cuts that too often undermine public engagement. Some enduring issues stem from socialization, cultural differences, and bad experiences with public engagement that require work to regain trust.

- **Lack of self-awareness.** Often people don't recognize when their own behavior violates the vision above. We don't see how our own talk excludes others and perpetuates bias. We don't recognize how our socialization shapes how we hear and interpret what others say. This lack of self-awareness means that we need structures other than just personal accountability to accomplish this vision while also recognizing that many of us don't see that we are part of the problem.
- **Not listening.** Too often people talk past each other. People can be overconfident in their understanding of an issue such that they don't slow down to really listen to other perspectives or gloss over what people are actually saying; they solve for their own problem not the agreed upon problem. People may also be primed to speak their positions instead of listen to others. Conversations become a set of serial observations instead of shared focus on a particular issue. Hearing how people engage your actual contribution is often key to being heard and feeling understood.
- **Power balancing hurts.** Making space for underheard voices can threaten those who have typically had more influence and power. People must sit with the discomfort inherent within inviting more people into the conversation without expecting that they behave like me or follow my rules.
- **Disagreeing respectfully.** Respect for others' experiences is necessary for engaging across difference. And yet, if you disagree with them, people often feel disrespected. Focusing on 'being respectful' can foreclose discussion by not digging into the heart of matter, leaving real disagreement unexplored. Or 'being respectful' can be code for particular cultural norms that are used to exclude others. Without constructive disagreement, participants often don't grapple with tensions and trade-offs of issues. Superficial conversation makes it easier to conclude problems are intractable. How do we design processes wherein people feel respected, yet make space for necessary disagreement?
- **Out-group negativity.** People tend to attribute the behavior of others to negative motives or individual failing (e.g., they just don't care) instead of recognizing how social structures favor some groups over others. We must work to see how power and systemic forces impact participation in ways that are not easily visible.

- **Conflict adverse.** Many people fear conflict so they are passive aggressive and avoid disagreement altogether, or they are aggressive passive, starting with bold stances on issues that escalate the issue in an attempt to pre-empt the conflict. How do we develop the capacity to handle the discomfort necessary to engage in disagreement?
- **Echo chambers.** Most participants recognized the value of engaging with people who look, think, and act differently than themselves. Yet they also acknowledged that it can be easier to engage with people who share similar opinions. When people make an effort to engage different others, the interaction may be confusing or unsatisfying, even result in reinforced polarization (e.g., that conversation convinces me I'm right). How can we move beyond our own echo chambers without perpetuating division? How can we get people to broaden their thinking to include the best interests of the community not just their own?
- **Vulnerability and accountability.** Building trusting, strong civic relationships requires accountability, humility, and being open to hearing difficult truths. Robust participation requires a willingness sit with discomfort and to try out (or try on) ideas and consider their implications without fear of judgement. How do we allow people to be vulnerable while also holding people accountable (which often feels like judgement)?
- **Polarized positions** (i.e., proponents and opponents). Cultivating the capacity to sit with discomfort means shifting from thinking in terms of “either/or” (i.e., tendency towards polarized dichotomies) to thinking in terms of “both/and” (i.e., aspects of both proponents and opponents positions are represented in policy action) or “to what degree” (i.e., tendency towards compromise). How do we go about cultivating this capacity?
- **Assuming good intentions.** Assuming good intentions is often considered part of establishing collaborative relationships across different perspectives. And yet, assuming positive intentions is difficult when people hold opposing viewpoints that are quite personal, for example, when someone's position seems like an attack on your personhood.
- **Distrust.** Often building trust takes time and effort to develop rapport between people. Yet trust can be easily damaged, sometimes by a single action or moment. Re-establishing trust is difficult work and it can be hard to even know where to begin. How do we cultivate better tools for building and re-establishing trust while moderating tendencies to lose trust quickly?
- **Facts vs. Opinions.** Distinctions between facts and opinions are a source of tension. On one hand, distinctions are necessary for establishing the legitimacy of arguments. Misinformation and manipulation undermine our ability to make good community decisions—we need a strong evidence base. On the other hand, facts can be used by skillful people to build exclusionary knowledge hierarchies. This can crowd out other community members and dismiss community values, experience, and other ways of knowing. How can we manage tensions around facts and opinions to avoid potential problems?

Style differences. Inclusive public engagement requires designing meetings that fit multiple ways of speaking, learning, and knowing. Sometimes these style differences are grounded in different ideas about what counts as good public participation and cultural differences. Below are important dimensions of difference:

- **Logic vs. Emotion.** When asked to discuss ideal civic conversation, some people want it to be grounded in logic and reason-giving. Yet emotions also matter for understanding the significance of issues as well as individuals' diverse experiences. How do we manage the expression of both?
- **Talk and Action.** Some community members are frustrated that too much time is spent dialoguing and gathering input without ever moving towards action. Yet moving quickly towards action breeds distrust and the perception that decisions are already made, decision-making is top down, and opportunities for collaboration are missed. How can we better manage tensions between talk and action so we avoid distrust and frustration? How do we move deliberately so that processes are faster overall?
- **Stakeholders vs. the General Public.** Some processes try to focus on the needs and concerns of the most impacted individuals--what can be called a stakeholder approach. Yet this can mean that not all members of the public are treated equally. When is disproportionate influence warranted?
- **Open-ended vs. Clear plans.** Some community members seek more opportunities for open-ended meetings where there is chance to explore a range of community issues and set the agenda for conversation. Other participants have called for clarity around the goals, purpose, and outcomes of any engagement process. Most likely, the meetings would appeal to one group and would alienate the other. How can the city manage desires for open-ended engagement and clear, concrete processes?
- **Orderly versus Informal.** Orderly, structured public engagement is necessary to uphold fairness and transparency, create mechanisms for accountability, and ensure deep listening. And yet, structures can formalize conversation in ways that preclude opportunities for co-construction, co-learning, and establishing common ground, as well as making participation more intimidating for the public.
- **Articulate.** Public engagement and governance structures tend to advantage certain ways of being articulate. These standards tend to favor dominant ways of speaking (e.g., deductive argumentation) while discriminating against other cultural forms of expression (e.g., testimony, narrative, greeting). As we seek new structures, the repeated reliance on talk and speaking needs to be remembered. How do we make space for people who are less apt to speak in conventional ways?

Falling short. Democratic ideals like transparency, inclusion, legitimacy, and voice are normative ideals that we strive for but cannot always be reached in practice. How can we communicate about these difficulties? How hard should we work to reach the ideal?

- **Representation fatigue.** As the city attempts to engage under-heard voices, they often turn to the same, established connections and contacts, asking these groups and/or individuals to speak on behalf of a larger community and their interests. How can city officials effectively reach out to under-heard communities without burdening them?
- **Process pushback.** When public engagement falls short of the ideals (and it often does), community members don't always have mechanisms for expressing their frustration. Too often people either shut down and keep their experience private or they leave the process altogether. Either way, the community hears fewer perspectives on an issue while distrust grows. How can we create better ways of understanding how people experience public engagement to reduce alienation and fatigue?
- **Agenda setting.** Sometimes it seems like two or few people control the agenda—what issues get attention and action. Some big thorny issues never get systematic attention while other issues get instant attention. Community mobilization and political attention can favor the same voices.
- **Transparency vs. Accountability:** Community members can be critical of the city for not being transparent in their decision-making processes. Yet in some instances, full transparency is not possible. How do we cultivate a public recognition of the limitations of disclosure while also getting city officials to acknowledge that they are aware of concerns and assure the community that a process is being followed (e.g., we can't share the details, but we are in a process)? How do we maximize transparency when possible?
- **Underheard voices.** As the city tries to convene more inclusive conversations, disproportionate time and effort can be spent trying to reach under-represented groups. What are the limits to how many resources should be spent?
- **Fake public engagement.** Too often the public has reasons to question the legitimacy of public engagement. Maybe public engagement is “fake” and only providing cover for a decision that has already been made. Or endless meetings serve to tire people out so that community members eventually give up. How can legitimacy be established in the face of these fears?