Building Citizen Involvement

Strategies for Local Government

Mary L. Walsh
Manager, Education and Training
NLC Leadership Training Institute

NLC
LEADERSHIP
TRAINING
INSTITUTE

ICMA UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

International
City/County
ICMA
Management
Association

Contents

Introduction 1
  About this book 2
  How to use this workbook 3

Chapter 1: Democracy, Community, and Citizen Participation 5
  Conditions for an effective democracy 5
  The need for new forms of citizen participation 7
  Factors influencing citizen participation 9
  The definition of citizen participation 11
  The benefits of citizen participation 12
  A sense of community 13
  New roles for local officials 14

Chapter 2: Dealing with Change 17
  Change and the causes of stress 17
  Becoming an effective change agent 18

Chapter 3: Building a Collaborative Community 25
  Open and shared leadership 26
  Support for active citizens 29
  Trust in the judgment of nonexperts 31
  Motivated local government employee teams 33
  Rules for civil engagement 34
  Methods and forums for citizen involvement 36

Chapter 4: Ten Steps for Connecting Citizens to Governance 49
  Step 1: Identify the issue 49
  Step 2: Identify the stakeholders 51
  Step 3: Identify the values and beliefs held by the stakeholders . . . 53
  Step 4: Identify the outcomes you want 54
  Step 5: Identify and balance the concerns of experts, special interests, and the media 55
  Step 6: Identify the ethical aspects of the issue 60
  Step 7: Identify obstacles to resolution 61
  Step 8: Select the most effective method/forum 63
  Step 9: Decide what role you will play 63
  Step 10: Develop an action plan 66

Chapter 5: Tools for Collaboration: Interpersonal Skills 69
Building your interpersonal skills 69
Skill #1: Empathy 72
Skill #2: Active listening 76
Skill #3: Intercultural communication 82

Chapter 6: Tools for Collaboration: Process Skills 87
Skill #1: Problem solving 87
Skill #2: Consensus decision making 93

Chapter 7: Looking Ahead 107
The need for forecasting 107
The role of cyberspace 112
Maintaining a sense of community 114

For More Information 117
Selected readings 117
Support organizations 121
Additional resources 123

Introduction

"Citizen democracy" [is] the creative and positive interaction of business, government, community groups, and individual citizens. . . . Governance is us, *not* it *. . . all of us together as a polity.*

Henry Cisneros

Today, many Americans feel angry toward their government institutions and alienated from governance and policy making. The signs of this major lack of connection between citizens and their government are clear: fewer citizens are voting in elections at all levels of government; public debate is often uncivil, derogatory, and confrontational as a "we-they" mentality sets the tone for city council meetings, public hearings, and other open forums; and public opinion polls indicate that more than 75 percent of Americans have little or no confidence in their local government to resolve problems, with even larger percentages having no confidence in their state or the federal government to resolve those issues that affect their lives.

A study conducted for the Kettering Foundation by the Harwood Group, a public issues research firm, concluded that Americans are not apathetic about political and economic decisions; they just do not feel in control of the decision-making process.[1] In *Coming to Public Judgment*, public opinion pollster Daniel Yankelovich writes, "Most Americans do not think they *can* contribute ('I don't know enough about the issue'); and even if they could, they do not think that their contributions are wanted."[2] According to the Harwood Group study, Americans feel their right to self-governance has been taken over by special interest groups, political and corporate collusion, and the media.

In short, citizens want to feel in control of those processes and institutions that help govern how they live with one another. According to Richard Harwood, director of the Harwood Group, "People are searching for a new social compact. It revolves around our relationship to public institutions ..., and also it involves the way we go about solving our problems. That's the interesting twist of the movement. It's not that people just want to get involved. They're trying to strike a new deal, a new compact."[3]

But if citizens are to bring their good judgment and experience to bear on issues that directly affect their daily lives, they need to be empowered to do so. Elected and appointed officials can play a major role in facilitating this sense of civic responsibility by helping their citizens analyze issues and develop solutions through democratic dialogue. The purpose of this workbook is to help elected and appointed officials become more effective in this regard as it reviews the core competencies that these individuals require to promote community problem solving and civic engagement.

According to the 1996 National League of Cities (NLC) Futures Report, *Connecting Citizens and Their Government*: "What is at stake for local officials in working to kindle a spirit of civility and responsibility among citizens can be summed up in one word: effectiveness. 'As municipal leaders, we have an immediate and urgent interest in creating a climate of active involvement and mutual trust,' said NLC Advisory Council Chair Anthony Capizzi, City Commissioner from Dayton, Ohio. 'With public involvement comes public support for solutions to the problems facing our communities.'"[4]

Government by and for the people is the hallmark of American democracy. From the time that Thomas Jefferson clearly articulated the vision of self-governance, Americans have struggled with the processes and techniques for making public decisions. As socioeconomic structures and societal values and behaviors have changed over time, so too have the style and degree of public engagement in governance. Now, 200 years later, there is a call to create a new democracy that adapts the traditional concept of self-governance to the complexities and challenges of today's society.

According to Yankelovich, most Americans, as members of the world's oldest and foremost democracy, still feel that the United States has a mission in the world. Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Soviet Russia look to the United States as a model of democracy. Thus, at the same time that Americans search for more effective processes for self-governance, they can play a leadership role in modeling a democracy that is viable and suited to the end of the twentieth century.

About this book

Mark Schwartz, first vice president of the NLC and Oklahoma City councilmember, observes:

> A major challenge as we approach the new millennium is connecting citizens and government in a democratic framework of civility and responsibility. This is a critical issue that gets at the heart of what democracy is all about. . . . To the extent that people don't trust government or just don't care, that has a real impact on what we as elected officials can accomplish.[5]

Accordingly, the NLC and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) have collaborated on the development and publication of this workbook for our respective members—elected local officials and appointed local government administrators. Behind this undertaking is the assumption that you, as public officials, will be putting various processes in place to work successfully with your citizens within a framework of shared values and goals. To that end, this workbook is designed to review those skills that will help you as leaders in your ongoing quest for greater and more effective self-governance. It presents the latest definitions of collaboration, and provides examples of new techniques and programs that local governments are using successfully to connect citizens with government in positive and effective ways.

The workbook is divided into seven chapters, each of which has been designed as a discreet learning unit that can be used either for self-study or for larger groups in training workshops and seminars.

Chapter 1 discusses the nature of self-governance and the role of the civil society, the importance of rekindling the democratic spirit, the philosophical underpinnings of participative democracy, and the definition and benefits of citizen participation. It introduces the concept of "community" and the challenges for local officials in facilitating new processes of self-governance. You will explore the changing dynamics in governance and the benefits of developing a new perspective on power and public decision making.

Chapter 2 explores the changing roles of elected and appointed officials and the mind-set that is necessary to adapt to the new models of participative democracy. You will grapple with what it means to be a change agent in the context of your roles as public officials, and you will discover ways to understand and embrace these new and evolving roles. Designed to be sympathetic to the tension and stress caused by change, this chapter will help you explore your personal inner conflicts with regard to your changing environment.

Chapter 3 outlines the primary building blocks for a collaborative environment within both city government and the community at large. Basically this chapter describes how to make such an environment a reality.

Chapter 4 shows how and when to engage citizens, how to identify the major stakeholders in an issue, and how to deal with potential critics and special interest groups. You will also explore the role of the media as stakeholder.

Chapters 5 and 6 present specific tools for community building and collaboration. These tools are considered to be the core competencies that officials need to help citizens develop as leaders. Chapter 5 reviews three critical interpersonal skills: empathy, active listening, and intercultural communication; and Chapter 6 reviews two process skills: problem solving and consensus decision making.

Chapter 7 discusses tools for forecasting future trends and examines the role that cyberspace will play in building a sense of community in the years to come. It also describes ways in which local officials can maintain their efforts to lead collaboratively, empower citizens, and build community. Finally, the chapter stresses that, in addition to their management skills and technical expertise, local leaders must develop the type of leadership that focuses on the human element and that inspires people with a sense of their own capacity.

Throughout the workbook, sidebars provide real-life case studies from local government that highlight specific examples related to the learning objectives set out at the beginning of each chapter. In addition, there are figures that illustrate or summarize key points in the text; exercises that will enable you to practice the skills you have learned; and check-up sections that serve as self-assessments to help you relate the issues specifically to yourselves, your community, and your local government organizations.

The final pages of the book offer a selected annotated bibliography, which includes a wide variety of readings on citizen involvement and the new civic democracy, and the names and addresses of various support organizations, each described in brief.

How to use this workbook

To get the most from this workbook, set aside some time for yourself—preferably at the same time each day and in the same place—to read the material presented. Be prepared to roll up your sleeves and engage in the exercises and self-assessments. From time to time, you might want to involve one or two of your colleagues in the exercises. This can serve as a good study aid and also give you an opportunity to practice the collaborative skills you are learning. And local government administrators may find a number of the exercises and self-assessments valuable for their entire management staff to do together.

Before you begin, you may find it helpful to familiarize yourself with the following definitions of several terms as they are used in this workbook.

Citizen participation: process by which citizens take a leadership role along with their local government administrators and elected officials in making decisions and developing policies that directly affect their daily lives.

Civil sector: the part of society that comprises nonprofit organizations, associations, and volunteer groups; sometimes referred to as "the third sector," or the third part of a market economy that also includes the public or government sector and the private sector (e.g., for-profit corporations).

Collaboration: the act of working together with another person or organization to accomplish an agreed-upon end or goal. A public or community collaboration might involve a partnership between a government organization or agency, a nonprofit organization, and a private corporation aimed at achieving a goal or producing a product or program for the public good.

Community: a group of people living or working together who share common core values and a concern for the public good.

Community building: the effort to create a community.

Consensus: an agreement reached between two or more parties in which all parties accede to the agreement based on its merit, even if it is not everyone's first choice.

Democracy: a form of government practiced by a number of countries around the world in which public decisions are made by the people either directly or indirectly through their representatives. For a democracy to be effective, there needs to be an informed citizenry that actively participates in governance, with implicit trust in the judgment of the public.

Governance: the act and practice of governing.

Shared leadership: the process of providing citizens the opportunity to work directly with elected and appointed officials in policy making and decision making.

Values: those principles by which individuals and societies make decisions and develop rules for living together.

---

[1] Richard Harwood, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1991).

[2] Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 244.

[3] "The We Decade: Rebirth of Community," *Dallas Morning News*, March 9, 1995, p. 9C.

[4] National League of Cities, *Connecting Citizens and Their Government*, Futures Report (Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities, 1996), 2.

[5] Ibid., 2.

Chapter 4: Ten Steps for Connecting Citizens to Governance

When you have completed this chapter you will be able to

- ☐ List the ten steps to connect citizens to governance
- ☐ Describe the influence of experts, special interests, and the media
- ☐ Develop a checklist for selecting a particular forum for involvement
- ☐ Develop your own action plan

The path to resolving public policy issues in a collaborative environment is not an easy one. Because your mission as a local government official is to empower citizens to govern themselves, you need to develop methods and processes through which you and your citizens can work together to resolve issues of importance to the community—in other words, processes for connecting citizens to governance.

Accordingly, as you start work on resolving an issue, you need to ask a number of questions about the issue and consider a number of strategies for dealing with it. Each policy issue is different and needs to be considered and dealt with separately. You will find that you do not use the same process, skills, or methods for every public policy issue.

Chapter 3 discusses various methods and forums for involving citizens in governance. However, selecting the most effective method or forum for citizen involvement is just one of the steps you must take to provide a framework in which local government officials and citizens can successfully work together to resolve community issues. The rest of this chapter, as outlined in the sidebar, describes the other essential steps for connecting citizens to governance in the resolution of public policy issues.

Step 1: Identify the issue

This step requires you to take the broadest possible view of the issue. It is up to the stakeholders ultimately to clarify the problem and agree on a definition of the issue. By too narrowly defining the issue at the outset, you may in fact leave out essential stakeholders.

There are many issues facing communities today. Some of these issues may be obvious, such as cleanup after a hurricane or other natural disaster; others may be less clear, such as the impact of computer technology on democracy. Both can be very important, but one—the devastation in the after-

Ten steps for connecting citizens to governance

1. Identify the issue: define it in its broadest terms
2. Identify the stakeholders: who stands to win or lose
3. Identify the values and beliefs held by the stakeholders
4. Identify the outcomes you want
5. Identify and balance the concerns of experts, special interests, and the media
6. Identify the ethical aspects of the issue
7. Identify obstacles to resolution
8. Select the most effective method/forum
9. Decide what role you will play—actor or observer
10. Develop an action plan: time frames, budget

math of a hurricane—is clearly of an emergency nature and thus will attract the community's attention with little prompting from you. Because the changes brought about by computer technology do not seem nearly so evident or immediate, they need to be brought to people's attention over a period of time. Similarly, issues of growth and land use, the environment, service delivery, the state of the economy, and changes in demographics also do not seem to require immediate attention but may in fact require planning for the long term. Part of your job as a local official is to raise the consciousness of your community about the potential impacts of certain issues and the need for the public to address these issues early on, before they get out of hand. Such issues are likely to be

- Not immediately life-threatening
- Not of an emergency nature
- Very complex
- Value laden
- In need of expert input
- Without immediately obvious effects or impacts.

To raise the consciousness of the community about issues that are critical to its well-being, you need to take four basic steps:

1. Research the issue and forecast possible scenarios that may result. For example, "If this occurs, then this will happen"; or "If we take action now, we can resolve this issue less expensively or prevent a larger or related problem from occurring."
2. Be able to explain the issue in nonexpert terms. Most people do not understand technical jargon in areas other than their own field of expertise. Use of complicated, technical language can make citizens feel that the issue is too far over their heads and will turn them off.

3. Put the issue in the context of how relevant it is to people's daily lives or to the lives of future generations. (If it isn't relevant, perhaps it is not an issue to be concerned about.)
4. Identify ways to inform the public so they are able to see all sides of the issue and its potential impact on the whole community. Citizens need your help to see beyond their own personal interests or viewpoints and take into consideration the needs and perspectives of others.

RULE OF THUMB: Concern yourself with only those issues that actually have or will have an impact on people's daily lives.

Step 2: Identify the stakeholders

The next step in connecting citizens to governance is to identify who the winners and losers may be in a given issue. Who will be affected by the service you are considering cutting or the zoning policy you want to amend? You want to ensure that everyone who may be affected by the decision is included in the decision-making process.

There are three basic steps you can take to identify the stakeholders:

1. Create a list of the obvious members of the community (external) and your local government personnel (internal) who have a stake in the issue.
2. Now make a list of who else will be affected. To do this, it helps to bring together a small group to brainstorm with you. This might include colleagues on your council or your senior management team—those who are familiar with the issue. Using a flipchart, write across the top, "Who else will be affected by the issue?" and then record the various answers. Remember that in brainstorming, anything goes; all answers are seriously considered and recorded.

   As part of this step, you may also want to consider your field personnel, public information office, and any other neighborhood outreach service as resources for identifying customers.
3. Identify the individual steps that need to be taken to implement the decision. To do this, take your small group through another exercise. Again using a flipchart, have them define the issue and identify the inputs, processes, and outputs, as illustrated in Figure 4-1. This enables you to verify who the internal and external stakeholders might be.

In the example in Figure 4-1, the stakeholders turned out to be the supervisor, the sweeper/driver, neighborhood citizens and business owners, dump site management, and the maintenance mechanic. Clearly, there may be several stakeholders that you may not have identified at first. Thus, looking closely at an issue and breaking it down into its basic processes is a helpful method for identifying stakeholders.

Figure 4-1. Inputs, processes, and outputs of privatizing street sweeping

Issue

The city manager has suggested that street sweeping, which the city currently performs, be contracted out to a private firm. Because the cost/benefit figures show the fiscal advantages of such a move, the issue is simply whether to privatize the operation. Identifying the major stakeholders in the decision is a vital first step in making the decision. Outlining the basic processes of providing the service and listing the inputs and outputs to produce the service may help you uncover some not-so-obvious stakeholders.

Inputs	Processes	Outputs
Vehicle assignment	Supervisor assigns vehicle	Sweeper key is procured
Route assignment	Supervisor assigns route	Route coverage is guaranteed
Safety check	Driver checks sweeper	Condition of vehicle is verified
Expectations of residential neighborhoods and businesses	Route is swept	Streets are cleaner, health and aesthetics of community are improved
Hydrant water supply	Sweeper is filled	Street is flushed with water
Dump site operations management	Sweeper is emptied	Vehicle is prepared for another run
Water supply	Sweeper is washed	Vehicle appearance is improved
Preventive maintenance	Maintenance mechanic services sweeper	Breakdown, downtime, repair costs are averted
End-of-day paperwork	Driver fills out forms	Accurate data for budget, planning are maintained

Check up

- ☐ Select an issue of relevance to your community.
- ☐ Identify stakeholders by following the three-step process outlined above.

RULE OF THUMB: Connecting citizens to governance requires the inclusion of everyone. No one who would be affected by an issue should be left out of the process.

Step 3: Identify the values and beliefs held by the stakeholders

Different values can contribute to different perceptions and expectations. By first identifying the values you are likely to encounter, you will be better able to choose the most appropriate forum for involving stakeholders in the decision-making process.

For example, a problem that is charged with emotion, such as the opening of a halfway house for recovering alcoholics in a residential neighborhood, can lead to highly charged and hostile confrontations if it is not handled carefully. It is likely that some residents may value the quiet, residential quality of their neighborhood; others may place a high value on feeling secure and safe in their neighborhood; and still others may place a high value on helping others and may welcome the opportunity to do so. In this case, it may be wise to start by holding small coffee klatches in the homes of those residents who will be most directly involved—say, those neighbors immediately next door to or in the same block as the proposed halfway house. The purpose of these informal gatherings would be to discuss the purpose of halfway house and solicit from the neighbors their perceptions of and expectations about the issue.

While your citizens may hold a wide variety of values as individuals, there are certain core cultural values that are held by a majority of citizens as members of American society. Pollster Daniel Yankelovich has researched these core values and found that some, such as patriotism, freedom, and democracy, remain strong while others, such as optimism for the future, neighborliness and community, and civic responsibility, are no longer universally held.[1] For a number of reasons, including (as discussed in Chapter 1) the widening gap between rich and poor, and the economic trend of downsizing and the concomitant loss of job security, Americans have lost their optimism and are worried about the future for both themselves and their children. Further, Americans have replaced the values of neighborliness and community with the value of feeling safe and free from crime. It is apparent that before Americans can feel comfortable extending themselves to one another for the common good, they must first feel a sense of order and safety. And the concept of civic responsibility has diminished in importance, at least since the 1950s, as emphasis on the value of the individual and individual rights in the United States has steadily grown.

Harvard professor Robert Putnam has also observed this trend on the part of U.S. citizens toward disengagement from civic society and offers several reasons for why it may be occurring. These reasons include mobility, demographic changes, the movement of women into the workforce, and the influence of technology—and of television in particular—on leisure time activities. Each of these changes has affected the ability and inclination of Americans to spend time and energy in those institutions that make up civic life—that is, family, politics, church, community, and civic organizations and associations (e.g., the PTA, Red Cross, Girl/Boy Scouts). Putnam concludes that “high on America’s agenda should be the question of how to reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust.”[2]

This change in core values is worth noting. It can help you assess with greater accuracy why your citizens may react in certain ways to certain issues. It also alerts you to the difficulties you may face in promoting a sense of community, both in the United States and increasingly in many other Western democracies. (Intercultural communication skills are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.)

Check up

☐ What have you perceived to be the country's major core values?

☐ What are the core values of your local government, including your city/county?

☐ How do you think these core values play a role in decisions your city has made?

☐ Apart from the values of optimism, neighborliness and community, and civic responsibility, can you identify other values that have changed over time?

☐ How have the values shared by your community changed over time?

☐ How do you think the rights of the individual can be balanced with civic responsibility?

RULE OF THUMB: Be comfortable with ambiguity. Changing values means there will be times when there are no clear or absolute ways to connect citizens to governance.

Step 4: Identify the outcomes you want

By determining the sort of resolution you want to achieve, you can identify your own filters and perspectives. You can then assess your values and beliefs, determine how ethical your intended outcomes are, and see how open you are to other points of view.

Nine times out of ten you will want to let go of the solution you personally hoped to achieve. Since your major role as a local official is to facilitate public discourse and set in motion processes for deliberation, you will not be able to serve effectively as a bridge to the public's diverse views and ideas if you hang on too tightly to your own solutions. Identify the needs your solution addresses and include them in the public discussion. There may be many other stakeholders who have the same needs; there may also be many different solutions that address them.

The tricky part is weighing your own moral judgment against that of the community. As an elected official you have an obligation to be true to the principles you voiced during your election campaigns—principles for which you were presumably elected. So you will need to bring those principles to bear on any issues that come before the community and to articulate them for the community to consider.

Your personal values as an appointed official should always be in harmony with your local government organization's moral culture. If they are not, you obviously need to take stock of the situation. Since you represent the organization, it is not fair to you or the organization to ignore fundamental differences in principle. The quality and integrity of your work will be compromised, and you will be sending mixed messages to your community. Thus, you need to analyze how and why your standards of conduct are different and decide what and if you can change to conform to the organization's norms and beliefs. Obviously you can choose to work within your organization to change it, or you can decide to leave. In any case, you need to identify the principles of the local government organization you represent before you participate in problem solving and decision making.

RULE OF THUMB: To your own self be true.

Step 5: Identify and balance the concerns of experts, special interests, and the media

The experts

Experts are an important part of the process as effective decision making necessitates information that is correct and adequate. For too long, however, we have relied only on the experts as both sources of information and determiners of public policy. Studying issues from only their frames of reference severely limits the creative input that might come from members of the community and thus may overlook critical aspects of the issue and its proposed solution.

Your role, then, is to balance the public's viewpoint with that of the experts and not to lose sight of how the public, at least initially, is viewing an issue. This can help you to frame the issue in such a way that it can be more easily studied and discussed by your citizens. It can also help you to determine to what extent you are relying on the input of experts to achieve the outcomes you want.

Check up

☐ Whose opinion do you rely on?

☐ Do the experts define the problem?

☐ Are citizen definitions of the problem included?

☐ At what point do you seek expert information?

☐ How much information do experts provide? Are they the sole source?

☐ Are experts part of an interdisciplinary team that includes non–subject-matter experts?

☐ How capable are your experts? What is their track record?

☐ How do experts obtain their information? What or who are their sources?

☐ What are your experts' criteria for measuring success?

☐ How do you balance conflicting citizen and expert perspectives?

For example, let's say that your health department wants the licensing of vendors for your city's farmers' market to be more strictly enforced because of the recent outbreaks of the *E. coli* virus. The health department director insists on restricting the sale of certain fruits and vegetables and presents a detailed, scientific explanation of the various known strains of the virus, the type of hosts that enable the virus to spread, and the antibodies that are available as cures. Your city council public safety and health committee is impressed with the many charts and graphs the director presents as evidence of the need to drastically curtail the market's activities. However, the city manager points out to the committee that in a recent citizens' survey conducted by the city, the majority of citizens listed the farmer's market as the favorite family activity in the community. "Citizens tell us that they highly value the market as a place for neighbors to get together and for families to share in an activity that holds interest for all age groups. We need to consider how our citizens see the role of the market in their daily lives: it means more to them than just a place to buy fruits and vegetables."

Check up

☐ How would you react to the city manager's statement as well as to the health department's report?

☐ How does the expert's view differ from the citizen's view?

☐ Why is it helpful to know both perspectives?

RULE OF THUMB: See an issue from the perspective of the public along with the experts and accept both perspectives as valid.

Special interests

One of the major causes of disaffection and anger among citizens toward their government representatives is their perception of the power and influence of special interest groups. Americans feel their role in public policy making has been co-opted by powerful lobbies representing a small group of powerful individuals. Recent public opinion surveys reflect the belief that corporations paying huge sums of money to ensure the passage of certain legislation interferes with citizens' ability to affect public policy decisions.

However, special interests, while a critical part of our society, need not be the only voices that are heard. As public officials, you are caretakers of the public trust and therefore need to carefully assess the role, if any, that special interests should play in the policy decisions you make or oversee.

The media

The media play a huge role in framing issues for public consideration. However, local government officials as well as citizens are often disappointed with the information they receive through television, radio, and the press. To many Americans, the news media fall short of providing in-depth and sustained coverage of stories that are relevant to their daily lives.

There are five characteristics of media coverage of public issues and current affairs that do not contribute to the in-depth consideration of issues:

- *Conflict.* Often the angle taken on a news story is from the standpoint of conflict or disagreement.
- *Confrontation.* Coverage will often show confrontational situations and will far less often report on those occasions of peaceful and deliberative resolution of issues.
- *Sensationalism.* The stories that seem most newsworthy are those that involve some sensational aspect—often some human tragedy, crime, or sex scandal.

Charlotte's *Observer* takes the lead in citizen involvement

By mid-1994, when Charlotte, North Carolina's crime rate rose to eighteenth in the nation, the *Observer* had already pioneered more techniques of public journalism than any other single newspaper. Editors quite naturally turned their creativity to the hot topic of the day. "Virtually every poll in America puts crimes at the top of citizens' concerns," wrote executive editor Jennie Buckner. Yet news coverage got them nowhere, tending to "frighten and depress readers, pulling them away from neighborhood life and leaving them pessimistic about their community's future."

Residents of high-crime areas struggled by themselves against worsening odds while residents of safer areas read about it anxiously in the *Observer.* But what if the paper could get the whole city mobilized on behalf of the most troubled neighborhoods? "We would invite readers to help these neighborhoods help themselves. There would be no question but that we were all in this together, working to understand what we could do about a problem." Armed with that idea and with some grant money from the Pew Center for Civic Journalism and from a few media and charitable partners, the paper launched "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods," a one-and-a-half-year project that would focus all of Charlotte's attention on ten target areas, each for six weeks at a time.

The June 5 kickoff explored the city's crime problem in general terms, drawing on an unusual, intensive poll of high-crime-area residents themselves. The first specific target was Seversville, a section in the northwest. Reporters held a long, candid meeting at midmonth with an advisory panel of neighborhood leaders, who detailed problems including crack cocaine, high unemployment, and vastly overwhelmed parents; this shaped all the coverage that was to follow. On

- *Brevity.* Final outcomes are rarely followed up on unless they are of a sensational nature. However, public issues are seldom, if ever, resolved in a short period of time. Resolutions often take years to achieve.
- *Fragmented presentation.* Current issues are presented in isolation from each other. There is little analysis of cause and effect, and the public rarely receives any help in seeing the common threads among issues.

An alternate style of journalism is now evolving that attempts to address these problems. "Civic journalism" or "public journalism" is a philosophy that is dedicated to providing in-depth, sustained coverage of public issues. Public journalists strive to present news from the perspective not solely of experts and local officials but also of citizens. Facts and statistics are given in a format that is analytic and comprehensive, the complexities of community problems are recognized, and the overlapping of issues is noted. In their efforts to provide the full and broad picture, reporters and writers adhere to and enhance traditional journalism's standards of objectivity.

June 26 the *Observer* began an investigative series on the links between crack houses and absentee landlords on nearby Cummings Avenue, and two days later it held a massive community meeting in a Seversville church. At a United Way resource fair immediately after the meeting, scores of residents signed up for previously understaffed neighborhood crime watches, Big Brothers programs, and the like.

The project's real test came on July 17, when the paper and its radio and TV partners launched a daylong media blitz to introduce the entire city to Seversville, its problems, and its struggles. The coverage included an itemized list of needs in the neighborhood. By September, more than two hundred organizations, individuals, and agencies—from private law firms to the YMCA—had offered their support, answering virtually every need on the list. A special *Observer* liaison officer helped coordinate these efforts with those of local residents, while still more Charlotteans phoned a voice-mail line offering tips to Seversville leaders on other ways to solve their problems. The mayor and police stepped up city programs to complement the private activity.

By then the *Observer* had turned to its next target, Commonwealth-Morningside, and showed the city that each unhappy neighborhood is unhappy in its own way. The culprit here wasn't poverty so much as busy arterial avenues cutting off one section from another, allowing burglars easy escape and defeating any sense of community. Response from outside was strong for this neighborhood, too, but it came from entirely different civic groups in response to the entirely different problems the neighborhood was facing.

Source: Reprinted with minor editing from Arthur Charity, "What Is Public Journalism: Five Communities, Five Examples," *National Civic Review* 85 (Winter/Spring 1996): 16–17. Reprinted with permission from the *National Civic Review.* Copyright 1996 National Civic League Press. All rights reserved.

According to Davis Merritt Jr., editor and senior vice president of the *Wichita Eagle,* "The public journalist's newspaper is doing what the conscientious citizen would do given the time and resources to do it: establishing the facts; assaying the problem; sharing thoughts and ideas with other conscientious citizens; resolving underlying issues, core values; learning more from successes than from failures; aggressively fostering necessarily noisy but civil discussion leading to democratic consensus."[3]

Newspapers that practice public journalism may turn out to be a genuine tool for connecting citizens to governance. For now, however, the number of newspapers and electronic media practicing this philosophy is relatively small. As local leaders you need to deal with your local paper and the problems it may present. The ICMA workbook *Media Relations for Local Governments* (1996) and the NLC's guidebook *Dealing Effectively with the Media* (1993) offer guidelines you can follow to work more effectively with the media in your community.

Step 6: Identify the ethical aspects of the issue

As you prepare your community for dialogue about a particular issue, it is important to identify any ethical considerations—issues of fairness, justice, and honesty—that might affect how an issue is discussed and resolved. The context of gauging ethical behavior depends on the values and guiding principles of a society. In the United States, to behave ethically as a local official means to be honest and forthright in all matters of public business, adhering to rules of fairness and civility in public discourse and providing equality of opportunity and justice for all in public policy making.

For example, let's look at a community where there is a growing shortage of affordable housing. Growth pressures have meant that prices for existing housing stock have skyrocketed and the cost of new housing is well beyond the reach of most residents. Renters are forced to move because of drastically increased rents, and young families cannot afford to live in town or to buy a house to accommodate their growing needs.

Behaving ethically in this case would mean formulating an affordable housing policy for your community. It would also mean involving all citizens who are most likely to be affected in framing the policy. This would include those who have not been able to find housing in town, have had difficulty affording the housing they have, or have inadequate housing. Many of these stakeholders, such as people of color, those with disabilities, and the poor, may have marginal power within the community. Behaving ethically in this case would further mean choosing a forum that is inclusive and takes into consideration the special needs of some of the stakeholders, such as convenient public transportation, easy access to the meeting room, and avaliable child care. Deliberately choosing a site that would not be easily accessible in order to exclude certain members of the community would clearly not be acting in an ethical manner. Nor would waiving site plan review for a developer of affordable housing who believes that he is already doing the city a favor by planning to construct lower-cost housing units. Nor would ignoring the issue altogether because several local realtors have contributed to your election campaigns or because a local developer has promised you the use of his vacation home for a shortcut approval of his site plan.

Check up

- ☐ Identify an ethical dilemma you have faced. What were the conflicting demands?

- ☐ How did you handle them?

- ☐ How did they affect your policy or decision making?

RULE OF THUMB: Be mindful of behaving ethically when you decide who the major stakeholders are, how you select the forums for dialogue and problem solving, and even what issues to identify for discussion.

Step 7: Identify obstacles to resolution

There are a number of reasons why it may be difficult to attain a smooth or quick resolution to the issue(s) confronting your community.

Complexity of the issue: Most of the challenges facing cities today are multifaceted and interwoven. That is, the answer to one issue may require work on two or three others. This complexity, as well as the seriousness of many public issues, can make people feel overwhelmed. When problems seem too daunting to deal with, citizens may prefer to avoid them altogether.

Inconsistent values and beliefs: Opposing values can lead to conflict, confrontation, and disengagement.

Special interest groups: Often, special interest groups can block community dialogue through tactics that are confrontational or can prevent issues from being brought forward at all.

Lack of good information: Without an adequate and comprehensive presentation of issues, it is difficult to raise the public's consciousness about issues or to assist citizens in weighing the various options for resolution.

Lack of understanding of the issue(s): If citizens lack accurate or complete information or do not educate themselves about an issue, they will not be prepared to participate in resolving that issue in an informed way.

Institutional obstructions: If your local government does not provide easy and open access to information or forums for resolution, or if your council or city personnel are not trained in how to facilitate open discussion, citizens will perceive there to be too many obstacles from city hall.

Overreliance on experts: Citizens can feel inadequate and ill prepared in the face of experts. An expert who has used so much professional jargon that the audience is lost, bored, or both will often be met with silence. While not intending to do so, the expert can have the effect of disempowering the average citizen.

Lack of interest: If an issue is not thought to be relevant to the daily lives of citizens, the citizens will not likely be interested in it. They may appear to be apathetic and disengaged because they do not see how the issue affects them, their families, or their community.

Lack of trust: This goes both ways. Citizens are often cynical about the processes of government or about the ability of those working in government to solve problems effectively. At the same time, local officials do not always trust the judgment of citizens and question the sincerity of the public in wanting to resolve issues for the common good. For many local officials, the NIMBY (not in my backyard) mentality personifies the narrow approach many citizens take to public issues.

Mixed signals sent by those in power: Often we read how the campaign promises of elected officials or the expressions of intent by appointed officials go unfulfilled or are ignored in favor of other measures that appear self-aggrandizing. Citizens are told that one course of action will be taken while, in actuality, other steps are followed. When local officials do not, in effect, practice what they preach, citizens become confused and cynical.

Diverse points of view: Different perspectives can slow down the resolution of an issue since confusion can arise over misinterpretations of comments made, definitions used, and feelings expressed.

Lack of effective processes and leadership: Resolution depends on leadership that welcomes collaboration and initiates processes that enable all stakeholders to work together effectively.

To combat these obstacles, Yankelovich offers leaders the following ten rules for resolution:

1. Assuming that the public and the experts will be coming at any given issue from different angles, learn what the public's starting point is and how to address it.
2. Do not depend on experts to present issues.
3. Learn what the public's pet preoccupation is and address it before discussing any other facet of the issue.
4. Give the public the incentive of knowing that someone is listening—and cares.
5. Limit the number of issues to which people must attend at any one time to two or three at most.
6. Give people choices to consider.
7. Take the initiative in highlighting the value component of choices.

8. Help the public move beyond the “say-yes-to-everything” form of procrastination.
9. When two conflicting values are both important to the public, seek resolution by tinkering to preserve some element of each.
10. Use the time factor as a key part of the communication strategy; that is, allow a generous amount of time for the public to work through an issue—and then quadruple it![4]

RULE OF THUMB: Your patience and perseverance will be needed to overcome the obstacles you are likely to encounter when working through an issue.

Step 8: Select the most effective method/forum

The various types of forums that are being used effectively by a wide variety of local governments around the country (e.g., study circles, search conferences, citizen surveys) have been discussed in detail in Chapter 3. It is important that you take this step seriously and remain flexible. If one type of forum does not work, you can try another; in fact, you will more than likely *want* to use different methods, depending on where the group is in its decision making (see sidebar).

What you need to ensure is that for each method you select, you provide citizens with the opportunity to

- Speak out
- Interact with local officials and other citizens
- Be involved in the formation of policy
- Be part of the action plan or solution.

RULE OF THUMB: The forum you select should maximize the amount and quality of dialogue among the stakeholders and increase the understanding of various stakeholder perspectives.

Step 9: Decide what role you will play

The role you play as a local official will vary with the issue involved and the type of forum selected for dialogue with your citizens. On one level, you will always play an active role as a chief supporter of citizens working together to resolve issues. However, there will be times when you want to offer that support in a more indirect or neutral role as a facilitator rather than an active participant. In helping citizens become problem solvers, you will no longer always be the sole source of the solutions. Kurt Bressner, village manager of Downers Grove, Illinois, explains this role of facilitative leader as “a fundamental shift in the way we do business, which cannot be ignored. In essence, the dinner table is larger, and more people are involved. Cities and counties are no longer the sole source of solutions, but they are in fact the convenors for stakeholders to solve problems that in

Checklist for selecting a citizen participation forum

1. What is the time frame for making a decision or resolving a problem?
2. What are your resources—budget, administrative staff, citizen leaders?
3. Who are the stakeholders?
4. How many stakeholders are there?
5. How informed are citizens about the nature of the issue?
6. What are the expectations of the stakeholders?
7. How willing will citizens and government workers be to engage in a particular forum?
8. How effective and efficient will the forum be in producing the desired outcome?
9. Will the forum take into account all the values and perceptions of the stakeholders?
10. What resources are necessary to conduct the forum?
11. Who will facilitate the forum?

many cases extend beyond the corporate limits or core responsibilities of the community."

An example of a direct role you might take in resolving an issue can be found in the case of an emergency such as a fire or a natural disaster such as a flood or tornado. Here, you would have to take direct charge and initiate action with little or no outside input. An example of an indirect role you might take in resolving an issue is to convene a group of citizens to study the issue of homelessness in your community. In this case, you could use your authority to bring citizens together to problem solve, but you would not be directly involved in the problem-solving process. Rather, you would play a neutral role in the deliberations, thereby empowering your citizens to take ownership of the issue and develop solutions. You may, in fact, take a direct role once the solutions are brought forward for consideration by the administration and/or council. In the case of the homeless problem, for example, if the solution calls for the construction of a community-sponsored homeless shelter, your role might be a more direct one as you allocate budget dollars for the city's contribution.

To take another example, let's say there is a residential neighborhood in your community where there have been a number of automobile accidents at a certain intersection. For months the neighborhood association has contacted various city departments requesting installation of a four-way stop sign. The residents have been told nothing except that the city has promised to look into the matter. One morning the neighborhood association president arrives at your office, angrily presents you with a petition signed by a majority of the residents, and demands that a stop sign be installed that afternoon—or else she will go to the newspaper.

Check up

- ☐ How would you see your role in this situation?

- ☐ Would you play a direct role or an indirect role in resolving this issue?

Let's look at yet a third example: A small group of Russian immigrants has moved into a neighborhood in your town. Coincident with their arrival is a rash of daytime burglaries and an increase in vandalism. Members of the neighborhood association contact your office to complain about the situation. They are extremely upset and insinuate that the Russian families are in some way to blame. They insist you do something immediately.

Check up

- ☐ How would you handle this situation?

- ☐ Would you play a direct or an indirect role in resolving the issue?

- ☐ As an exercise, use the exercise chart on the next page for guidance, think of specific issues that might arise in your community, and decide what kind of role you would play in each.

Exercise: Identify your role

		My role	
Type of issue	**Example**	**Direct**	**Indirect**
Emergency or disaster			
Administrative/ procedural			
Public safety			
Health			
Public services and maintenance			
Community development			
Economic development			
Other			

Step 10: Develop an action plan

An action plan for resolving community issues can provide a clear road map for what needs to be accomplished to effectively connect your citizens to governance. The sample plan in Figure 4-2 lists a few first steps to take. You can complete the plan on the basis of your specific community needs.

Figure 4-2. Connecting citizens to governance action plan

Action item	Person(s) responsible	Estimated completion date
1. Identify the issue		
2. Identify major stakeholders		
3. Identify the perspectives		
4. Identify expectations		
5. Select forum(s)		
6. Describe my role		
7. Allocate resources • Budget		
• Personnel		
8. Locate forum site		
9. Develop time frame		
10. Develop public announcement		
11. Contact media		

Summary

- ☐ You cannot apply the same process, skills, or methods to every public policy issue. Each issue is different and needs to be dealt with separately. Thus, to effectively connect citizens to governance, you need to consider a number of strategies for each issue on a case-by-case basis.
- ☐ Developing your own action plan will be useful for connecting citizens with governance and empowering them as leaders.

---

1 Daniel Yankelovich, "Three Destructive Trends: Can They Be Reversed?" Paper presented to the National League of Cities 100th National Conference on Governance, November 11, 1994.

2 Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995): 78.

3 Davis Merritt Jr., "Public Journalism: What It Means, How It Works," in *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice,* by Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt, Jr. (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1994), 27.

4 Excerpted with minor editing from Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 160–174.