

# Standards of Excellence in Civic Engagement

*How Public Agencies Can Learn from the Community,  
Use What They Learn, and Demonstrate  
that Public Knowledge Matters*

PREPARED BY THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC INNOVATION WITH THE  
SUPPORT OF THE WILLIAM AND FLORA HEWLETT FOUNDATION

## **About The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation**

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation helps people imagine and act for the public good. We seek nothing less than to spark fundamental change in American public life – to inspire, engage, and connect people to tap their own potential for action and to give their efforts voice and power in society. In its 17<sup>th</sup> year, The Harwood Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works within a long tradition of small, catalytic, and public-spirited organizations in American history that have sought to improve public life and politics.

### **Writing:**

Michael R. Wood

### **Foreword:**

Richard C. Harwood

### **Research and Editing:**

John Creighton

Salin Geevarghese



The **Harwood** Institute

### **The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation**

4915 St. Elmo Avenue

Suite 402

Bethesda, MD 20814

Tel: 301-656-3669

Fax: 301-656-0533

[thi@theharwoodinstitute.org](mailto:thi@theharwoodinstitute.org)

[www.theharwoodinstitute.org](http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org)

# Standards of Excellence in Civic Engagement

---

## Table of Contents

Foreword .....	2
Introduction .....	4
<b>Standard 1: Collect Public Knowledge</b> .....	6
<b>Standard 2: Use Public Knowledge</b> .....	8
<b>Standard 3: Communicate</b> .....	10
<b>Standard 4: Culture, Norms, Reflexes, and Habits</b> .....	12
Appendix A: Standards of Excellence At-A-Glance .....	14
Appendix B: Reference Guide .....	16

## Standards of Excellence

## Foreword

Public agencies across the nation are under increasing pressure to engage the public. Some agencies feel this pressure because they have failed to meet the public's expectations, or they are seen as disconnected from the public and must regain its trust. Others are trying to figure out how best to allocate scarce public resources or make tough decisions.

Whatever the reason, it is important to ask: What does it really mean to engage the public? What rewards and risks await those who pursue this path? How can civic engagement be more than attempts at good public relations, or another invitation for people simply to make demands on limited public resources?

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation asked The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to develop a strategic action tool for public agencies to figure out when to do civic engagement, whether it has made a difference, and to gauge their own readiness even to undertake this work. Our goal is to provide a resource that lays out clear standards that must be met to make civic engagement truly meaningful for both public agencies and the people they serve.

### Making a Cultural Change

At its essence, civic engagement is important so that public agency leaders and staff can lead and serve their communities with genuine authority, authenticity and accountability.



The 3 A's of Public Life

Genuine **authority** (the type derived from community credibility not statute or title) is earned through one's knowledge of the community and infusing that knowledge through one's work. **Authenticity** is one's ability to reflect the reality of people's lives in word and deed. Genuine **accountability** is measured by whether a public agency pursues actions that are truly meaningful to the community.

At The Harwood Institute we call these the "3 A's of Public Life." Meaningful civic engagement is a prerequisite for having authority, authenticity, and accountability. The 3 A's are only possible when a public agency genuinely listens to the community and acts on what it learns.

The 3 A's can only become embedded in an agency when civic engagement becomes part of that agency's very culture. Agency leaders and staff must come to understand and value learning from the public, even challenging people to think beyond their initial views. Processes must exist to feed newfound knowledge into the daily operations of the agency – from how discussions are framed and take place to how decisions are made.

Eventually new organizational practices and reflexes will develop that strengthen the agency's ability to fulfill its core mission. But agencies that successfully engage the public must commit organizational resources – especially time and focus – to ensure engagement can be done well.

### **Making Engagement Count**

Meaningful civic engagement requires discipline – to be clear about one's real intentions, mindful of whom you have engaged and who is missing from the conversation, and thoughtful about the questions you ask. It means listening in a way that enables you to make new discoveries and paying attention to work practices to ensure that civic engagement informs your day-to-day work.

Those who successfully embrace our standards of excellence in civic engagement have the potential to infuse their agency with a renewed public spirit – a spirit that originally drew many public servants to their work in the first place. It is my hope that as you work through this tool, it will spark within you a newfound sense of possibility for helping your agency move forward with its important public work.



Richard C. Harwood  
President and Founder  
The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

## Standards of Excellence

## Introduction

### What is civic engagement – *really*?

As a public agency practitioner that works with members of your community, you are – or certainly should be – in the business of *civic engagement*. But what does that mean?

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to consider what civic engagement is *not*. People tend to group any and all interactions with the public under the umbrella of civic engagement when in fact, not all situations we confront call for this very specific kind of interaction.

For instance, sometimes different notions of “public relations” are included under the umbrella of civic engagement. This confusion can lead to misplaced expectations and unaccomplished goals – by all those involved. Consider when a public agency might want the community to have a better understanding of what it does and why. In this case, basic communications are in order. At other times, elected officials might want to rally the community behind a sales tax increase (or decrease) or a mill levy to raise resources to fulfill their responsibilities. These circumstances clearly call for advocacy.

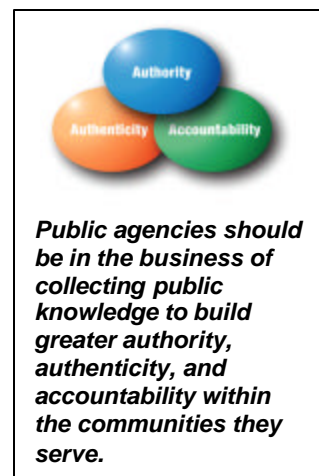
Civic engagement is appropriate when an agency is seeking to learn from the public. But learning is more than simply soliciting input, adding up the responses, and using that data to make a decision that is allegedly supported by citizens. It is about gaining and using *public knowledge*.

Public knowledge is a full and deep understanding of your community. It is a collection of values that people in the community hold – not their attitudes about various policy choices. It is also about how they rank these values, and what trade-offs they are willing to make when the values seem to be in conflict. This kind of knowledge can only be gained through meaningful civic engagement.

### What will this tool do for me?

*Standards of Excellence in Civic Engagement* is roadmap for you as a public agency practitioner to know that you are on the right path – that your agency is truly in the business of civic engagement. That means that your agency is collecting public knowledge to build greater authority, authenticity, and accountability within the community you serve. The Harwood Institute calls these the 3 A's of Public Life because they are the essential characteristics everyone and every institution in public life should aspire to exhibit. The 3 A's are detailed in the foreword.

Other tools that we have produced focus on the “how to's” of civic engagement such as deciding what issues to talk about and who to listen to; how to design and lead effective conversations; figuring out what you heard in engagement conversations; and how to follow up after you've engaged the public. This tool, however, won't answer those



questions. Instead, it provides the four key standards every agency must meet to achieve excellence in civic engagement; benchmarks for how you will know that you're meeting these standards; and pay-offs for why it is worth achieving them. The Harwood Institute can certainly help with the how-to's; there is a reference guide at the end of the tool that will direct you to some materials that may interest you. There are also a host of organizations around the country that specialize in helping organizations set up and manage civic engagement processes.

This tool is important for making certain, first and foremost, that you're in the right game. As you organize and develop civic engagement processes, it will help you answer key questions such as:

- Have we properly prepared staff for what they might learn through civic engagement, and are they prepared to deal with the implications?
- Have we framed the appropriate conversations given where we are in the policy process?
- Have we set realistic public expectations given the capacities we have to take action?
- Do we have the necessary voices around the table to gain useful knowledge and make discoveries?
- Have we figured out how to use what we learn and make sure people know their voices are useful?

As you work through these and other questions, you will begin to find the path of civic engagement that will best serve your agency and community.

## What are the standards?

Public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement:

1. Are in the business of **collecting public knowledge**.
2. **Use public knowledge** internally over time.
3. **Communicate back to the public** how public knowledge has influenced the agency and how staff and managers are using that knowledge.
4. **Cultivate the culture, norms, reflexes, and habits** that will make civic engagement a central part of how the agency conducts its business.

Civic engagement will yield the best results when a public agency strives to hit each of these standards. Like an ecosystem, each of the standards supports and reinforces the others. The interconnectedness of each of these standards for civic engagement excellence is why it is important for public agencies to strive to reach each standard.

If you use this tool on a regular basis, if you take a good hard look in the mirror and ask, "What are we doing really well, and what can we do better?" and if you take your own answers to heart, you will discover ways to make civic engagement much more meaningful for your agency and your community. Striving for excellence requires this kind of examination.

The most effective way to work through the tool is to go through the materials for each standard in the order they are presented. The activities and questions build on one another and are designed to help you assess your own agency as candidly and effectively as possible. However, whether you tackle each standard in order or skip around is entirely up to you.

## Standard 1

---

### Collect Public Knowledge

The key purpose of any civic engagement activity should always be to learn from and about the people you are engaging. Real learning, however, doesn't lead to a collection of information. Instead, it leads to public knowledge. As previously mentioned, public knowledge is more than people's preferences about various policy choices. It's about the common values people hold, as well as the trade-offs they are willing to make when those values are in conflict (and with tough public issues, they usually are).

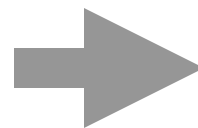
***Public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement are in the business of collecting public knowledge.***

### Benchmarks

How do you know you're making progress toward reaching this standard?

- Your agency adopts learning objectives for the knowledge staff are seeking.** You will want to have measures set in place so that you know when you have the knowledge you need. For example, are you trying to uncover people's values around education, or the environment in your community, or if you already have a sense of their values, do you need to learn what trade-offs they are willing to make? People might value having choices in health care, for example, but they might also value access for everyone at all income levels. These values might be hard to reconcile, so the question is: what are people willing to give up?
- Your agency implements a strategy for collecting public knowledge on an ongoing basis.** This means that you don't simply engage the public to find solutions to problems, but you have some kind of regularly occurring civic engagement with the public that allows you to continually learn and build on your public knowledge.
- Your agency uses engagement processes that lead to gaining public knowledge.** You will want to set up your public conversations in a way that allows people to engage one another so that they can share common values and wrestle with tough issues where values may be in conflict. The "stand up for two minutes at the mic" approach to traditional public meetings will not lead to public knowledge.

***See Appendix B: Reference Guide for tools that will help you reach these benchmarks.***

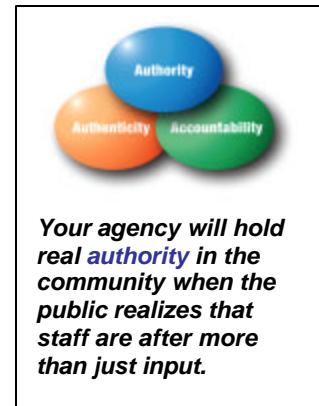




## Pay-Offs

Why is it worth trying to achieve this standard?

- Real public knowledge will lead to better, more widely accepted decisions.
- There will be more public confidence in your agency's decision-making.
- Your agency will build a deep knowledge of the community that doesn't go away when staff leave.



## Reflection Questions

1. What are some things we are doing to work toward meeting this standard?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Of the benchmarks listed, which ones are we meeting?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. How can we work on meeting the benchmarks we are deficient in?

.....

.....

.....

.....

## Standard 2

---

### Use Public Knowledge

Public agencies have a responsibility to build public knowledge over time, but they must also be willing to allow that knowledge to influence their work – even if that sometimes means changing course. It is not enough to simply engage citizens to build a repository of their hopes and aspirations for the community.

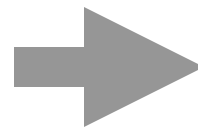
***Public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement use public knowledge internally over time.***

### Benchmarks

How do you know you're making progress toward reaching this standard?

- Your agency implements processes and procedures for sharing public knowledge internally and in a timely way.** This is important because for public knowledge to truly influence the agency's work, staff throughout the agency must be equipped with the same knowledge and be "working from the same playbook" in a sense.
- Your agency makes certain that public knowledge is considered and applied in internal decision-making.** It is not enough to figure out ways to make the public feel like their voice is important. Your agency needs to have a method for seriously considering public knowledge in all major decisions that affect the public – not just the ones where it might be convenient or has been mandated by higher-ups.
- Your agency uses established protocols for tracking how public knowledge has influenced the agency's decision-making.** It is important to make sure you know where public knowledge is impacting your work. It will lead to more learning but will also allow you to communicate more effectively with the public about why you are seeking to engage them.


***See Appendix B: Reference Guide for tools that will help you reach these benchmarks.***



## Pay-Offs

Why is it worth trying to achieve this standard?

- Using public knowledge will help you make tough decisions that people will be able to live with, even if they don't agree.
- Civic engagement will drive your work and won't just be another activity staff has to check off of their "to-do" list.



*Your agency will be demonstrating **authenticity**, and staff will be exercising **accountability** among one another, if you use public knowledge internally over time.*

## Reflection Questions

1. What are some things we are doing to work toward meeting this standard?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Of the benchmarks listed, which ones are we meeting?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. How can we work on meeting the benchmarks we are deficient in?

.....

.....

.....

.....

## Standard 3

---

# Communicate

Collecting public knowledge, building the internal norms and habits for civic engagement, and using public knowledge in your work will go a long way in helping your agency build genuine authority and authenticity. But in order to be truly accountable to the public, it is important to make communicating with them a priority as well, so that they know their voice is valued – and useful – in the policy process.

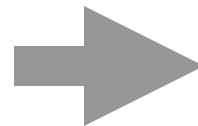
***Public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement communicate back to the public how public knowledge has influenced the agency and how staff and managers are using that knowledge.***

### Benchmarks

How do you know you're making progress toward reaching this standard?

- Your agency understands what public knowledge to share with citizens and shares it in a timely way.** Meeting minutes aren't helpful to anyone, so it's important for agency staff to have procedures for compiling the essence of what they learned in the meetings – the real public knowledge – and develop procedures to share that with the public.
- Your agency regularly shares with the public how their voice is impacting the agency's work.** In addition to simply sharing knowledge, public agencies should always tie that knowledge back to how it has impacted the agency's decision-making process. That should include the whole story – where the agency has had to struggle with knowledge and how to use it, the tensions that agency staff face, and how they work through those tensions to find the best ways to incorporate public knowledge into their work.
- Your agency uses methods for measuring how well the public understands where their voice has impacted the agency's work.** Agencies that achieve this standard will be able to gauge whether the public knows that public knowledge is influencing the agency's work. This way, the agency can make corrections if there is a disconnect between the agency's work and where the public sees itself fitting into that work.

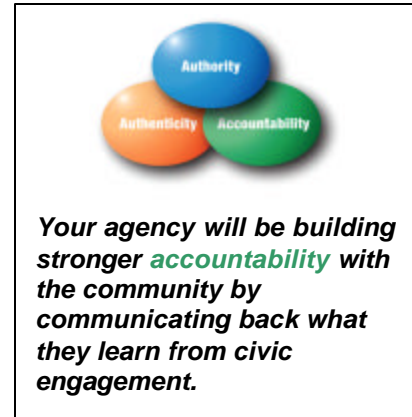
***See Appendix B: Reference Guide for tools that will help you reach these benchmarks.***



## Pay-Offs

Why is it worth trying to achieve this standard?

- The public will become more involved in civic engagement when they see that it is making a difference.
- Support for engagement among elected officials and decision-makers will increase over time.
- People will be more likely to step forward and help solve public problems, instead of expecting the agency to do it all.



## Reflection Questions

1. What are some things we are doing to work toward meeting this standard?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Of the benchmarks listed, which ones are we meeting?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. How can we work on meeting the benchmarks we are deficient in?

.....

.....

.....

.....

## Standard 4

# Culture, Norms, Reflexes, and Habits

Being in the business of collecting public knowledge is more than just creating engagement processes. It takes a new way of thinking and acting both within your agency and with the public you serve. To achieve excellence in civic engagement, engaging the public has to be an integral part of how you do your work. Within the agency there must exist what we call a culture of learning – an environment where people are always trying to increase their public knowledge. To build that culture of learning, staff and managers have to adopt new norms for how they think about the public and their value to the agency’s work; new reflexes, so that they are always in the mode of asking the kinds of questions that lead to public knowledge; and habits that make seeking out public knowledge and using that knowledge instinctive.

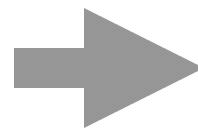
***Public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement cultivate the culture, norms, reflexes, and habits that will make civic engagement a central part of how the agency conducts its business.***

## Benchmarks

How do you know you’re making progress toward reaching this standard?

- Your agency applies internal measures to gauge how effectively staff are using civic engagement to collect public knowledge.** When staff and managers adopt the appropriate norms for engagement, they will be in the mode of seeking out public knowledge at every opportunity – through informal conversations, as well as scheduled civic engagement conversations. An agency that makes engagement a central part of the way it conducts business will be able to assess how often – and how effectively – this is occurring.
- Your agency uses protocols for when, where, and how to engage the public.** A public agency with a culture of learning will have its own systems for engaging the public so that it is a regular part of the agency’s business – not just a “necessary evil” when elected officials or other higher-ups mandate it.
- Your agency implements processes for seeking out and understanding the range of voices to build public knowledge.** An agency that makes civic engagement a central part of how it does its business will have a system in place – and use that system – to make sure that all appropriate voices are heard during civic engagement so that real public knowledge is developed. This means more than seeking out the traditional kinds of “stakeholders” that are often considered to be the key audiences for civic engagement.

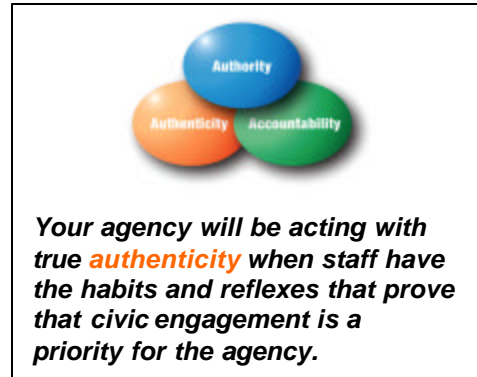
***See Appendix B: Reference Guide for tools that will help you reach these benchmarks.***



## Pay-Offs

Why is it worth trying to achieve this standard?

- Your work will reflect the whole voice of the community instead of just a collection of certain neighborhoods or groups of people.
- The public will recognize that your agency is genuine in its pursuit of their knowledge – that you're not just engaging them to make them feel good.



## Reflection Questions

1. What are some things we are doing to work toward meeting this standard?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Of the benchmarks listed, which ones are we meeting?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. How can we work on meeting the benchmarks we are deficient in?

.....

.....

.....

.....

## Appendix A

---

# Standards At-A-Glance

We hope that completing this tool has helped you gain a better sense of where you are on the roadmap to meeting standards of excellence in civic engagement. The chart on the following page summarizes the four standards, as well as the benchmarks and pay-offs for each. We encourage you to refer to it before, during, and after any civic engagement process; display it prominently in your office; or share it with other staff.



## The Harwood Institute's Standards of Excellence in Civic Engagement At-A-Glance

<b>Standards</b> Public agencies that achieve excellence in civic engagement:	<b>Benchmarks</b> How do we know we're making progress toward the standard?	<b>Pay-Offs</b> Why is it worth trying to meet this standard?
<b>Are in the business of collecting public knowledge.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency adopts learning objectives for the knowledge staff are seeking.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency implements a strategy for collecting public knowledge on an ongoing basis.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency uses engagement processes that lead to gaining public knowledge.</li> </ul>	Your agency will hold real <b>authority</b> in the community when the public realizes that staff are after more than just input. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Real public knowledge will lead to better, more widely accepted decisions.</li> <li>▪ There will be more public confidence in your agency's decision-making.</li> <li>▪ Your agency will build a deep knowledge of the community that doesn't go away when staff leave.</li> </ul>
<b>Use public knowledge</b> internally over time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency implements processes and procedures for sharing public knowledge internally and in a timely way.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency makes certain that public knowledge is considered and applied in internal decision-making.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency uses established protocols for tracking how public knowledge has influenced the agency's decision-making.</li> </ul>	Your agency will be demonstrating <b>authenticity</b> , and staff will be exercising <b>accountability</b> among one another, if you use public knowledge internally over time. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Using public knowledge will help you make tough decisions that people will be able to live with, even if they don't agree.</li> <li>▪ Civic engagement will drive your work and won't just be another activity staff has to check off of their "to-do" list.</li> </ul>
<b>Communicate back to the public</b> what the agency has learned, and how staff and managers are using that knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency understands what public knowledge to share with citizens and shares it in a timely way.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency regularly shares with the public how their voice is impacting the agency's work.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency uses methods for measuring how well the public understands where their voice has impacted the agency's work.</li> </ul>	Your agency will be building stronger <b>accountability</b> with the community by communicating back what they learn from civic engagement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The public will become more involved in civic engagement when they see that it is making a difference.</li> <li>▪ Support for engagement among elected officials and decision-makers will increase over time.</li> <li>▪ People will be more likely to step forward and help solve public problems, instead of expecting the agency to do it all.</li> </ul>
<b>Develop the culture, norms, reflexes, and habits</b> that will make civic engagement a central part of how the agency conducts its business.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency applies internal measures to gauge how effectively staff are using civic engagement to collect public knowledge.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency uses protocols for when, where, and how to engage the public.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Your agency implements processes for seeking out and understanding the range of voices to build public knowledge.</li> </ul>	Your agency will be acting with true <b>authenticity</b> when staff have the habits and reflexes that prove that civic engagement is a priority for the agency. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Your work will reflect the whole voice of the community instead of just a collection of certain neighborhoods or groups of people.</li> <li>▪ The public will recognize that your agency is genuine in its pursuit of their knowledge – that you're not just engaging them to make them feel good.</li> </ul>

## Appendix B

## Reference Guide

Having worked through the standards of excellence and assessed your agency, you are undoubtedly thinking to yourself, “What can I do to achieve these standards?” Over the years, The Harwood Institute has developed a number of practical tools and frameworks that can help you in thinking through how to do just that. As public leaders, it is up to you to decide where you need to improve, how to improve, and to step forward and seek out the knowledge that will help you do that. Feel free to contact us for any of the materials presented below, and best of luck in your pursuit of excellence!

- The following guides will help you in designing and conducting regular civic engagement conversations to collect public knowledge. These can be found in The Harwood Institute’s publication ***Tapping Civic Life***.
  - Tips to Make Civic Conversations Work
  - Community Conversation Ground Rules
  - A Guide for Setting Up Community Conversations
  - Making Sense of What You Have Heard
  - Types of Community Leaders
  - The Layers of Civic Life
- The Harwood Institute’s Meaningful Chaos Factors will help you in understanding how people think about their communities, come to form their views on public concerns, and use words and phrases to describe their views. They can be found in The Harwood Institute’s framework, ***Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships With Public Concerns***.
- ***Will Any Kind of Talk Do? Moving from Personal Concerns to Public Life***, will help you in better understanding how people in communities begin to make connections between what is going on in their own home or close-knit circle of family and friends and the larger community around them. Included in this Harwood framework is a profile of the six kinds of “everyday talkers,” which represent the different roles people play in everyday talk about their concerns.
- If you are struggling with how to make civic engagement a regular part of the way your agency does business, consider picking up ***Making It Real: How to Make Civic Engagement a Public Sensibility***. This tool provides seven concrete actions your agency can take that will help build the culture, norms, reflexes, and habits necessary to achieve excellence in civic engagement.
- For more information on the 3 A’s of Public Life, and how you can build them in your own agency, contact us for a copy of Richard Harwood’s ***series on the 3 A’s that appeared in Philanthropy News Digest***.



***Imagine and Act for the Public Good***



The **Harwood** Institute