Engaging the Public in a Hyper-Polarized World

SPEAKERS

Aaron Leavy
Program Director, Sustainability and Civic Engagement, National Civic League

Sarah Lipscomb
Program Director, All-America City Award Program and Community Assistance, National Civic League

Jeff Mihelich
Deputy City Manager, City of Fort Collins
Productive Engagement in Divided Times
Overview

• About NCL
• Current context
• What we mean by engagement and why it matters
• Engagement examples and impact from Fort Collins
• Key principles to consider for any engagement effort
National Civic League

Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt and other reformers

Works to create inclusive, thriving communities by inspiring, supporting and recognizing equitable approaches to community decision-making.

www.nationalcivicleague.org/All-America-Conversations
Current Context

• Talk of division and distrust can make it seem like we aren’t able to work together anymore.
• Never been a more important time to stand up for the values that make communities strong
• Need to bridge divide and build community
What do we mean by engagement

Different from educating the public, marketing our solutions or effectively communicating about our programs and efforts.
## Engagement vs. other ways we interact with the public

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communications, and Marketing</th>
<th>Community Engagement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have information that the public wants or needs to know</td>
<td>The public has information that we want or need to know</td>
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<tr>
<td>We speak from a position of authority and expertise</td>
<td>We recognize and learn from the public’s authority and expertise in matters that impact their lives.</td>
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[Link to All-America Conversations](www.nationalcivicleague.org/All-America-Conversations)
When do we need to engage

Engagement is critical when:

• You want/need to understand what people value.
• You are making a decision that requires choices and trade-offs that impact people’s lives
• You are making a decision that may be controversial

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Engagement DOES NOT mean denying your expertise or ignoring constraints.
Relevance for finance officers

- Budgets require decisions to be made about competing priorities and values
- Potential to build trust and public support for budgets because people see that they reflect their concerns and input
- When asked to do more with less, engagement can reveal new opportunities

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Creating a Culture of Engagement
Creating a culture of engagement

- Fort Collins is divided on nearly every issue – we have to engage the public to get anything done
- Importance of early engagement
- Building trust over time. Not a one-shot effort.
- Creativity and innovation are critical
- Use what you learn
- Applies to all departments
Examples from Fort Collins

- Building on Basics
- Keep Fort Collins Great
- West Nile Virus
- Mobile budget booth

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Key Engagement Principles
Key Engagement Principles

1. Take a learning mindset
2. Focus on purpose, don’t just hide behind process
3. Engagement is relational not transactional
4. Set reasonable expectations and deliver
5. Engage and reflect the diversity of the community
6. Make it comfortable for the community, not just yourself
7. Everyone is an expert in their own experience
8. Tension and emotion are signs of success
Take a learning mindset

• What are we trying to learn and whom do we need to engage to learn it?

• Different from trying to gather quotes that prove our programs are great.

• Curiosity is critical
Focus on purpose, don’t just hide behind process

• If you don’t learn what you need to know – don’t hide behind your process, or blame the public – stay focused and try something else.

• Engagement is like looking for your wallet. If you don’t find it, you need to keep looking.
Engagement is relational not transactional

- Building trust takes time, it is an ongoing endeavor
- Don’t just show up when you need something
- Like a relationship, honesty and respect can make or break engagement efforts
Set reasonable expectations and deliver

• Be open and honest about the purpose of the conversation.

• Be clear about how you will use what you learn.

• You have an obligation to follow up with people to let them know what you learned and how you used it.

• Use and share what you’ve learned with other staff.

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Engage and reflect the diversity of the community

- Learning about the community means engaging the full diversity of the community.

- Engaging across racial, religious and ethnic divides is critical to building stronger communities.

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Make it comfortable for the community, not just yourself

• Meet where it’ll be most comfortable for those you’re engaging.

• Consider barriers to engagement like: access to transportation, language skills, timing, availability of childcare, etc.

• Put the comfort of those you’re engaging over your own.
Everyone is an expert in their own experience

- Allow people to speak from their own experience.
- Work to understand people’s experience and perspective.
- People’s expertise will come “packaged” differently from professional expertise.
Tension and emotion are signs of success

- Emotion is a sign that the discussion is relevant.
- Don’t shut down tough discussions because you feel uncomfortable – it’s not about your comfort.
- Emotion and tension often mark areas in need to further exploration or learning.

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Tips for Engaging in Divided Times

- Even more important to set clear expectations from the outset.
- Review ground rules
- Calibrate your comfort with risk
- Start with smaller meetings where you invite individuals to attend
Engagement Resources

Conversatio

n Toolkit
• Support the incredible work already taking place in many local communities.

• All-America Conversations - explore local divides and identify specific actions to bridge those divides.

• Toolkit includes all the resources and tips necessary to begin to engage residents, or to expand existing efforts
All-America Conversations:

Short, flexible conversations easily adapted to local circumstances.

Explore three main questions:

1. How can our community reflect the best of what we see in America?

2. What are the divisions in our community and how do they impact our ability to live in the kind of community we want?

3. How can we bridge these divisions?

www.nationalcivicleague.org/All-America-Conversations
Resources in the Toolkit

- Determining what you want to learn
- Whom to engage and tips for reaching underrepresented groups
- Picking an engagement approach
- Recruiting tips and an invitation template
- Where to hold conversations
- Facilitator and Note Taker resources
- Setting up a conversation and what to ask
- Making sense of what you heard and using it to take action.
Additional Engagement Support from NCL

- NCL works with communities to develop and facilitate resident-led community visioning or strategic planning efforts.

- NCL works with communities and others to develop engagement plans and strategies.

- NCL leads local engagement trainings
For more information

• Aaron Leavy – aaronl@ncl.org
• Sarah Lipscomb – sarahl@ncl.org

Download the Toolkit:
www.nationalcivicleague.org/All-America-Conversations

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