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Community Engagement: A Lofty Euphemism or A Call to Action?

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One ongoing challenge for cultural institutions is the general internal focus and discussions that occur without appropriate engagement of a broad group of stakeholders. Many organizations make major strategic decisions and undertake significant capital campaign initiatives based on anecdotal information, the needs of a single person or small group, and/or pressure from funders or government agencies that want them to be "all things to all people."

But issues today in the arts and culture sector require examination from a cross-functional and synergistic perspective, touching on every aspect of how internal and external stakeholders are involved in an institution's stability, growth, and community service. It's become quite easy for cultural organizations to use the right words when they speak of "community engagement" when approaching prospective funders, but does that term translate into active participation? How can they embrace a proactive process rather than espousing a simple euphemistic term used in publications and grant applications?

Why Is Community Engagement Important?

The provocative issue of "community engagement" is crucial to many culture professionals, trustees and their communities for various reasons. Whether related to programmatic initiatives, institutional accreditation, educational growth, facility expansion/renovation, capital campaign efforts, artistic/executive succession, strategic planning, or any number of key initiatives, many institutions are now beginning to understand the crucial role that true community engagement can play.

Much in the same way that government agencies evolve policies over time through discussion and consensus building, so do cultural institutions. Most major projects that any institution wants to undertake require three important elements: people, time and money. In other words, how the institution best balances a community's commitment, connection and capacity to support any project or program will play a key role in how successful it becomes in achieving its mission and goals. For better or worse, it typically takes a significant amount of time to cultivate the right people and for them to commit their money to your vision. But an effective community engagement process can build that support.

Goals of an Effective Community Engagement Process

The most successful organizations have discovered that a Community Engagement Process focused on stakeholder participation can also demonstrate how your organization plays a central role in the cultural, educational, social, and economic development of your community. Engaging stakeholders can generate a groundswell of support or inform you that course correction is needed to build that support. This forum of ideas is based on including public discussion, volunteer leadership, networking, collaborative partnerships, and mutual understanding of stakeholders' needs, desires, and perceptions of the institution.

Depending on the specific strategic initiative that an institution is about to undertake, there could be any number of goals associated with an organization's Community Engagement Process (CEP). Some of these could include tools that seek to:

- 1) Engage the broader community in helping to shape and implement the future vision and programs for organization, thus creating their "ownership" of the institution's mission,
- 2) Create a public discussion about the organization and its existing brand image throughout the region,
- 3) Identify grassroots views of the future cultural needs, desires, and expectations of the area,

- 4) Conduct specific primary research focusing on perceptions and reasons for participation and/or non-participation in an institution's programs,
- 5) Focus on such issues as programming selections, pricing, amenities, donor benefits, educational offerings, geographic barriers, and other factors impacting participation decisions. These typically include both those that currently attend and those that have not recently attended an organization's exhibits, programs, events, or educational activities,
- 6) Educate the region on the current offerings of the organization while testing opportunities for new strategic initiatives being considered,
- 7) Inform the organization objectively on the data-driven demographics of its community, population trends, cultural participation, economic impact, and market perceptions,
- 8) Cultivate prospective individual funders by seeking advice in advance of a later request for financial support of new and existing programmatic & educational initiatives, and
- 9) Gather general contact information on current and future audience members.

Preparing to Engage Your Community

One common mistake that organizations make is not involving enough people in the preparation for a CEP. It may or may not be easy to convince Board and staff that the process is important, but how about those others whose assistance you'll need to make the CEP a reality? What's in it for them? And please remember, your organization is all about them! Your stakeholders. Your supporters. Your detractors. Your strategic partners. Your political and educational leaders. Your future audiences.

As Jim Collins said in his book *Good to Great*, you've got to get the right people on the bus and in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, before you can take it someplace great. In other words, you can have the greatest artistic vision and strategic plans in the world, but if you don't have the people and resources well positioned, that vision won't necessarily be advanced. Ultimately, an effective CEP means gathering a group of well-respected people who have a vested interest in the success of your entire community and an understanding of the role your organization plays.

Strategic planning, capital campaigns, facility feasibility, executive searches, program advancement, and many other major transitional efforts will likely be best served with advice from a group of internal and external stakeholders. Depending on the project at hand, existing Board and staff members could be supplemented by any number of external regional leaders, including, but not necessarily limited to:

- 1) Business executives involved in community economic development, advocacy and promotion, real estate, the arts, and other key interests,
- 2) Municipal and other government officials responsible for long-range city and county planning, economic development, and recreation, particularly those engaged in cultural development and master planning,
- 3) Educational leaders, including those from public school districts, private schools, universities, and other higher education institutions,
- 4) Leaders of civic organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, as well as Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, or other professional clubs,
- 5) Other small business associations, such as legal, accounting, hospitality, realty, or other professional service organizations,
- 6) Print and electronic media leaders,
- 7) Major donors and long-time ticket buyers, and
- 8) Other major stakeholders whose advice, guidance and active participation would be beneficial to the resulting Community Engagement Process.

Ultimately, the goal of involving these people is to get *their* stakeholders to also participate in the CEP. Otherwise, your organization is simply speaking with its existing active participants in your programs and

maybe a few who may already be close to the organization. But what about the rest of the community that they represent who could be your future audiences? How will you otherwise reach them?

Seek First to Understand

Objectivity is a key to any successful CEP. A certain amount of analysis and assessment can indeed happen internally. But when it comes to listening to the outside world about our cultural institutions, even the most professional leadership can sometimes be swayed by too rosy a picture, or adopt a defensive posture if our stakeholders have a positive or negative view. It is natural for internal stakeholders to sometimes have an emotional view of the institution. Many times, however, an outside and impartial guide may be a way to bridge the gap between institution and community.

Various tools are available in gathering information prior to pursuing a specific decision. A CEP that includes objective data gathering, subjective focus group discussions, market research, and ongoing participation from the advisory committee all can help build consensus around whatever project or program your institution seeks to undertake. And as Stephen Covey illustrates in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, it is important to seek first to understand before being understood.

Embrace the Outcomes

How do you use the data and information the CEP delivers? CEP questions can provide illuminating, sometimes surprising, answers. Properly analyzed, responses can be "sliced and diced" in dozens of useful ways. As one organization recently asked, "Who wants to see more dance? Is it the 22 to 35-year-olds or those over 65? And will people in certain ZIP codes on the other end of the county drive more than 30 minutes to attend?" Direct responses to such questions can inform marketing decisions on where to invest organizational resources.

A group of stakeholders that participates in a Community Engagement Process will anticipate, and even expect, action from the organization that conducts the effort. The CEP not only collects information on participants, but it also disseminates certain parts of it, even to those who don't participate but have become aware of the issues being tested. This can be done through the media, email, or myriad other communications. Ultimately, your organization needs to gather all the information together and turn back to your community letting them know "we have heard you!"

A CEP can set up public expectations that the organization can build upon: to launch major initiatives, enact broad institutional changes, or move in new directions. Whether the CEP confirms or overturns an organization's long-standing assumptions, the results can create a mandate. Even if the organization chooses to report the CEP findings and conclusions only to the participants, or more generally publicizes all or part of the results, it's up to the leadership to seize the opportunity by carefully analyzing, debating, and acting on the results. The moment for mobilizing your constituencies is when you have their attention, so it is too important to simply let it pass by.

Overall, arts and cultural organization need to believe and trust the CEP results. When hundreds, even thousands, of community members take time to give their opinions, insights, and, yes, complaints to a local not-for-profit organization, the institution owes it to the public to take the outcome seriously. It's obliged to take these responses into account before making the most informed decisions about its future. After all, "community engagement" can lead to a long-term relationship - with ticket buyers, subscribers, donors, political leaders, educational institutions, and even with people who've had no prior connection to your organization. In the end, "community engagement" means asking the very people your institution is in business to serve how you can better do so, and then letting them know that you care about them, respect their input, and will provide whatever you can for them with their ongoing support.

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ACHIEVE AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS,
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