COMMUNITY-WIDE CONSENSUS?
IT CAN HAPPEN

YOU CAN REACH COMMUNITY–WIDE CONSENSUS BY FOLLOWING THE STEPS OUTLINED HERE.

One of our biggest problems today is our inability to share a community vision. We tend to see our differences rather than the commonalities. Too often, we use confrontation as our chief way of interacting with others.

But we can overcome these barriers. In communities across America, people of disparate backgrounds and interests are learning to understand one another by getting past stereotypes, setting aside adversarial posturing, and being candid about their interests. Once they do so, they inevitably find that they have shared goals: No one wants their kids shot in the street, everyone wants decent schools, and so forth. Obviously they don't agree on everything, and it takes patience, goodwill, and mutual trust to arrive at shared objectives—the things all groups want but can achieve only by collaborating.

One way to collaborate as a community is through a process called "community visioning." This process brings together all sectors—nonprofits, government, businesses, and citizens—to improve their community. This "community" can be as small as a neighborhood or as large as a county; it is whatever participants define it to be.

Yes, community–wide consensus is possible. Here are the ingredients and steps used successfully by the National Civic League in hundreds of communities across America.

Let's say to everyone who will listen: "Lend a hand—out of concern for your community, out of love for your country, out of the depths of whatever faith you hold. Lend a hand."

INGREDIENTS
NEEDED FOR SUCCESS

In reviewing successful collaborative efforts around the country, we have found that all possess the following ingredients:

- People with varied interests and perspectives participate throughout the process and contribute to the results.
- Traditional "power brokers" empower participants and treat them as peers.
- Individual agendas and baggage are set aside so that the focus remains on common issues and goals.
- Strong leadership comes from all sectors and interests.
- All participants take personal responsibility for the process and its outcomes.
- The group produces detailed recommendations that specify responsible parties, timelines, and costs.
- Individuals break down racial, economic, and sectoral barriers and develop effective working relationships based on trust, understanding, and respect.
- Participants remain committed during times of frustration.
- Projects are well timed. They are launched when other options to achieve the objective don't exist or aren't working.
- The group uses consensus to reach desired outcomes.

These ingredients make up the essence of collaboration itself. True collaboration brings together many organizations and individuals to define problems, create options, develop strategies, and reach solutions. Collaboration helps organizations rethink how they work, how they relate to the rest of the community, and what role they can play in effecting a common strategy. Many times it becomes clear that no single organization has the resources or mandate to confront a particular problem alone. A group effort can mobilize the necessary resources and community will.

Effective collaboration requires that decisions be made by consensus. In *A World Waiting to Happen*, M. Scott Peck describes consensus as:

a group decision (which some members may not feel is the best decision, but which they can all live with, support, and commit themselves not to undermine), arrived at without voting, through a process whereby the issues are fully aired, all members feel they have been adequately heard, in which everyone has equal power and responsibility, and different degrees of influence by virtue of individual stubbornness or charisma are avoided so that all are satisfied with the process.

Though consensus–based decision–making takes longer, it can save time during the implementation phase of a visioning project, where blocking ordinarily occurs. If citizens have a forum in which their ideas are heard, seriously considered, and perhaps integrated into the action plan, they will be less inclined to resist or ignore new initiatives.

TWO SUCCESSES AND TWO FAILURES

- In Denver, Colorado, in 1989, at the deepest point in a regional economic recession, civic, neighborhood, business, and government leaders worked together to pass the largest bond issue in its history.
- In Los Angeles, a year after the civic disturbances sparked by the Rodney King trial, the failure to rebuild was the result of a total lack of agreement about what should be done, how it should be done, and who should do it.
- When the first Rodney King verdict was announced in 1992, Newark, New Jersey, did not explode. Conversations occurred on the streets between people who already had been working together, resulting in reduced potential for violence.
- In southern Florida, failure to respond effectively to the devastation of Hurricane Andrew, ongoing fragmentation of Metro Dade County, and continued racial and ethnic tension threaten economic stability and prosperity.

What accounts for the different experiences of these four communities in addressing problems? In each case, success or failure was determined by the strength or weakness of the civic infrastructure, the invisible structures and processes through which the social contract is written and rewritten in communities.

Successful communities honor and nurture their civic infrastructures. They recognize the interdependence of business, government, nonprofit organizations, and individual citizens. They carry on an ongoing struggle through formal and informal processes to identify common goals and meet individual and community needs and aspirations.

Collaborative problem–solving should be used in the following situations:

- The issues are complex or can be negotiated.
- Resources to address the issues are limited.
- There are a number of interests involved.
- Individual and community actions are required to address the issue effectively.
- People are interested in participating because of the issue's importance.
- No single entity has jurisdiction over the problem or implementation of the solutions.

While collaborative problem–solving is not appropriate for every situation, it is an absolute necessity for a community visioning project.

HOW TO DO IT

Successful community visioning includes 10 concrete steps:

1. Provide the Groundwork.

Start with a committee of project champions, or "initiators," to lay the foundation for the community visioning effort. This group of 10 to 15 individuals representing the broader community will focus on the logistics—not the content—of the visioning project. Their participation on this "initiating committee" gives the project credibility, because diverse interests and perspectives are represented from the beginning.

2. Decide Who Must Be at the Table.

Identify a group of 60 to 80 individuals to serve as the core planning group. This stakeholder group must be as diverse as possible and represent every major interest and perspective in the community.

Avoid forming a "blue ribbon panel" of the same leaders who always take part in community efforts. This project must tap into populations and people that are traditionally excluded from community processes—people who have a stake in the future of the community but little political or financial power.

Include both "yes" and "no" people in the stakeholder group. It is easy to pick positive people who have the power to get things done. It is harder, but no less important, to choose people who have the power to stop or delay a project.

A "community" is whatever participants define it to be.

3. Kick Off the Project.

After stakeholders have agreed to participate, hold a kickoff event for them and the community as a whole. This event will introduce your project to the media. It will also give stakeholders a chance to get acquainted.

As you and other stakeholders work through the following steps, you'll find it helpful to break into small groups to encourage discussion. One technique is to divide stakeholders into eight to 10 tables, with eight people—representing a cross–section of different views—at each table. Once the small groups have discussed each issue, have them report to the larger group, exploring priority areas in greater detail.

4. Create a Vision Statement.

Begin your project by working with other stakeholders to create a vision statement for your community. This statement should describe where you would like the community to be in key quality–

"Let's tell people there is hope. Let's tell them there is a role for everyone."

of–life areas 10, 20, or 30 years into the future. This statement will guide you for the rest of the visioning process. With a firm grasp on the desired future of the community, you can focus your planning by identifying key performance areas. If these areas are addressed effectively, they will "bend the trend" toward the desired future.

5. Look at Realities and Trends.

Next, identify external forces, pressures, and trends affecting your community from the global, national, and state levels. You needn't reach true consensus on these observations, but you all should recognize how your community relates to the world and how broader issues affect local choices. You might begin this discussion with the question, "What are our greatest strengths and most significant weaknesses?"

Key issues may include:
- the influence of population growth and age
- the effect of migration
- new technologies, their costs, and the impact on jobs
- changes in government funding
- global trends regarding trade, labor, and the environment.

Community visioning brings together all sectors to improve the community.

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6. Profile Your Community.

Evaluate the future your community is likely to face if no significant intervention occurs. Weighing this scenario against your desired future will help you define key areas for change.

To identify areas needing improvement, ask yourselves the following questions:
- What is the "likely future" of the community?
- Which elements of that direction are good? Which are bad?
- Which aspects of it do we wish to maintain? Which should be altered?
- What are our most important opportunities and most dangerous threats?

7. Assess Your Community's Resources.

Next, measure your community's planning and problem–solving capacity. Ask yourselves questions such as these:
- Do people participate actively in the community?
- Does the community have long–term goals?
- Does the community promote communication among diverse populations?
- Do all groups have the skills to become involved in the community?
- Does the community deal well with ethnic and racial diversity?
- Do groups cooperate in resolving disputes?
- Do we have the mechanisms for sharing information and educating the public on major issues?
- Do all three sectors work together to set common goals?
- Do leaders reach collective decisions and carry them out?
- Is there a shared sense of a desired future?
- Does the community have a positive self–image?
- Does the community deal with problems before they become crises?

Once you and other stakeholders have agreed on available resources in your community, you can consider ways to enhance those resources. Ask yourselves what skills, processes, and relationships are needed to address your community's unique concerns.

8. Develop Action Plans.

Now that you and other participants have a shared understanding of your community's current reality and ways to shape it, you are ready to put those ideas into action. It's time to integrate your work and develop a strategy for implementation, monitoring, and follow–up.

Prioritize your vision into five key performance areas—areas for which you will develop actions to direct your community's future. Don't try to focus on more than five areas. Since you can't do everything at once, you must make choices.

For each key result area, form a task force, which will meet in the months and years to come. (Implementation is likely to take at least two years and may take decades.) Each task force should perform the following steps:

- Outline 12 actions to address your key performance area.
- Set a timeline for each action.
- Identify who will be responsible for ensuring that the action is carried out by the agreed–on date.
- Decide what resources will be required and where you will find sources of support to keep the project rolling.

9. Celebrate.

Conclude your visioning project with a community–wide celebration. At this event, acknowledge the planning work of the stakeholders and other contributors, and announce the plan to the community. Use this celebration to kick off the most important part of the project—the action phase.

10. Shift from Planning to Action.

The transition from planning to performance is crucial. The actions you identified in Step 8 provide a "game plan" of specific projects and policy recommendations, and the lead initiators must build on these commitments and begin their work immediately. Responsible parties should capitalize on the momentum surrounding the celebration.

Form a committee to oversee and support the implementation process. This committee, often made up of participants in the planning phase and other key players, ensures that plans remain on track, helps responsible parties with the action steps

when necessary, and troubleshoots when unforeseen barriers arise.

IF NOT NOW—WHEN?

We have it in us to create communities committed to deeply held values, shared purposes, economic viability, self–renewal, and the release of human possibilities—communities that have mastered within their own boundaries the secret of wholeness, incorporating diversity and helping others accommodate it as well.

Let's tell people there is hope. Let's tell them there's a role for everyone. Let's say to everyone who will listen:

"Lend a hand—out of concern for your community, out of love for your country, out of the depths of whatever faith you hold. Lend a hand."

As a people we are capable of laxity and self–indulgence. We are also capable of greatness. We have tremendous resources of strength and spirit—but we need to strike a spark to release that spirit. The time has come. ■

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