

Community Questions

Engaging Citizens to Address Community Concerns

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Community Questions is a product of the Kettering Foundation's *Citizens at Work* Project. The working group for the project includes representatives from the Auburn University Economic & Community Development Institute (Joe Summers), Esquel Group (Ramon Dabon), International Institute for Sustained Dialogue (Hal Saunders), Kettering Foundation (Randy Nielsen), National Civic League (Derik Okubo), New Mexico First (Heather Balas and Charlotte Pollard), Southern Growth Policies Board (Linda Hoke), University of Tennessee-Chattanooga (Jim Tucker and Elenor Cooper), and West Virginia Center for Civic Life (Betty Knighton).

Community Questions

Engaging Citizens to Address Community Concerns

Community Questions is designed to help community leaders take steps to create spaces where citizens can tackle pressing community concerns. The strategy is to bring citizens into a deliberative process to identify the heart of community problems, identify options for addressing the problems, weigh costs, benefits, and tradeoffs associated with each choice, choose and design a possible course of action, and engage others in working toward a solution. The guide should not be seen as just an exercise to deal with specific issues. It is an instrument meant to promote a shared discovery among citizens about their power to effectively deal with public issues. Of course, every community is different, and every moderator is different. Feel free to adapt this instrument to your own strengths and situation.

Preparing to Convene

1. Think about the pressing issues facing the community. What issues are citizens already talking about? What topics would motivate them to get involved? What issues are community leaders struggling with? What makes it difficult for leaders or institutions in the community to solve these issues on their own? What issues facing the community would most benefit from citizen involvement?
2. After you determine the broad topic to be addressed (e.g., education, economic development, health care, etc.), you need to decide who should be invited to deliberate. Think about the people or organizations in the community that may be interested in, or affected by, this issue. Where are people talking about this issue? Who is already working on this issue? Who has been involved in the past? Who hasn't been involved, but has a voice we need to hear?
3. Identify a core group of 15-20 people whose experience cuts across the whole community, who listen and talk thoughtfully, and who have others' respect. Think about including a variety of perspectives relevant to the topic, such as business, government, and non-profit representatives as well as diversity in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity and income. If this is an issue that could benefit from regional action, you might think about including some participants from adjoining communities as well.

4. Talk to those on the list to make sure they will commit to participating in a series of meetings (every couple of weeks for 2-3 hours). Once you have a core group committed to working on the issue, if space and resources allow, widely publicize the meetings in order to open them to anyone interested in the issue.
 5. The number of meetings may vary, but you should plan for at least three sessions: one meeting to identify the key issue (What is the problem?), a second session to identify and discuss possible solutions (If that is the problem, what are the ways to deal with it?), and a third meeting to identify action steps (How can we take action to address the problem?). After the third session (or before if you think the time is right), have the group reflect upon the deliberative process they have experienced using “Reflections about *Community Questions*.” Ideally, the group will choose to continue to meet to work together around this issue – and to address other community concerns.
 6. Prepare in advance for any tensions that might exist between groups involved in the issue. Look for opportunities to ease these tensions and build communication between the groups. Do any of the individuals or groups that are interested in or working on this issue already work together? Do they regularly communicate? Are there any known conflicts between those interested in working on the issue? What is the nature of these tensions or conflicts?
 7. Choose a moderator and someone to take notes. The moderator should be trusted and impartial, but need not be a part of the community. In the longer run, however, credible facilitators must emerge from within the community if this type of community decision-making is to be sustainable.
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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

Towards More Effective Citizen Engagement

The Kettering Foundation working group offers the following seven insights based on the group's collective experiences in engaging citizens. As you plan, organize and conduct community forums using *Community Questions*, think about these insights and suggested actions. Do they resonate with your own experience? Perhaps you can add your own insights. These insights might be especially useful as you help citizens reflect on the process at the conclusion of *Community Questions*.

Insights and Instructions

- 1. Citizens must be engaged if communities are to solve some of their most difficult problems.** Such problems (e.g., youth gangs, poverty, racial conflict, crime) have multiple causes and cannot be solved with a technical fix (unlike repairing streets and bridges). Effectively addressing these problems requires citizens to act—and keep on acting. So . . . *engage citizens to address community problems.*
- 2. Citizens often think about problems differently than institutions or professionals.** Not only do people feel more empowered when they are encouraged to identify and frame the issues related to a problem or opportunity, but they often uncover different solutions than institutions or professionals who are looking at the problem from the lens of their own particular expertise. So . . . *recognize the limits of professional expertise.*
- 3. People become engaged only around issues or problems that are of particular interest or concern to them.** It's not realistic to assume that all citizens will be engaged in all issues. The definition of "community" is therefore dynamic and ever changing, with groups of people—who may or may not be connected by geographic borders—coming together to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity. So . . . *start with what people care about.*
- 4. Citizen engagement—and governance—is a skill learned only by practice.** It's important to create mechanisms that allow for sustained citizen engagement rather than just one-time events. As citizens gain experience and see that they can make a difference, they may be drawn into issues beyond their initial areas of interest—particularly as they begin to see how many community issues are interrelated. So . . . *establish structures that sustain engagement.*

5. **It's often most effective to engage citizens within the organizations and networks they are already a part of; we don't have to start from scratch.** It's likely that they are already talking about a particular issue in these networks and may have the capacity and connections to implement solutions. So . . . *engage existing networks.*
 6. **Networks and connections between organizations can multiply the power of civic initiatives and make them truly community-wide, or "public."** Yet, these connections typically don't happen by themselves—active intervention is often needed to connect groups that might, at first glance, seem to have very different interests. Even groups working on similar issues often have weak connections. Conveners can help communities re-define their relations, re-shape their networks, and restructure their capacity to act. So . . . *connect existing networks and stakeholders.*
 7. **When a group of people comes together for a community conversation, there will be tensions between goals, ideas, and values.** What may at first seem to be tensions between groups may, with further examination, be seen as common values that everyone shares—such as a desire for freedom or security. Tensions and conflicts do not have to necessarily be resolved as long as everyone shows respect for diverse positions. We can agree to disagree. It's important to recognize tensions from the beginning of a community conversation. So . . . *recognize and value tensions.*
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“We are the ones we've been waiting for.”

June Jordan

“Poem to South African Women”

Community Questions

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1) What is the Problem?

Moderator Tips

- *Keep asking questions.*
- *Keep in mind that what you originally define as “the” problem may just be a symptom of a deeper problem.*
- *A key task is to get participants to listen carefully to others. The process cannot be completed in one meeting. So don’t rush. While participants will want to move quickly to solutions, they must first listen and understand viewpoints different than their own.*

More Questions

- What concerns you most about the state of our community?
- How does this affect you / your family / your neighbors?
- What are you hearing in others' statements that differs significantly from your perspective? Can you begin to understand why they feel the way that they do?
- What are you hearing in others' stories that resonates with your experience?
- Do you see themes recurring in many comments?
- What are you beginning to see as the real causes of this problem? How would you begin to name the problem behind the problem?
- When people in the community talk about this issue, what do they say?

- Would anyone like to venture a view of the problem that might capture what we've been saying? What do we really need to zero in on? What IS the problem?
- What are the potential consequences of NOT addressing the problem? If this problem were solved, how would the community be different?

2) If THAT is the problem, what are the ways to deal with it?

Moderator Tips

- *Try to help the participants group ideas into a manageable number of directions or approaches.*
- *Help group areas of overlap in approaches.*
- *Help the group to discover underlying values (e.g., freedom, security, fairness) associated with each approach.*
- *Don't let the group get bogged down with the past (e.g. "We've already done that and it didn't work."). Instead of closing out a past approach, encourage participants to think about what they would do differently, knowing what they know now.*

More Questions

- What are your thoughts about possible approaches to tackling this problem?
- As we look at the list, what seems valuable that each approach is trying to protect? Do other approaches seem designed to protect the same or similar interests held valuable? Can these perhaps be combined?
- Can we bring these approaches down to three or four that seem to have priority?

- Talking about the approaches one by one:
 - Do you think the approach is feasible?
 - Who might support it? What would be their reasons for doing so?
 - Who might oppose it? Why?
 - What might be the consequences, both positive and negative, should this approach be fully realized?
 - What might we have to give up in order to realize this approach? Are we prepared to accept the trade-offs necessary to realize this approach?
- Is there one approach that might be tried first?

3) How can WE take action to address the problem?

Moderator Tips

- *Discourage the urge to advocate for more outside resources before exhausting an inventory of the community's own resources.*
- *Make sure that for each action, a responsible party is identified.*
- *Make sure that the group creates a timetable and monitoring schedule.*
- *The purpose is to design a range of steps by a widening group of actors that will interact in a way that gradually engages significant parts of the community.*
- *The important result of this stage is that they will have "conspired" with each other by learning: if I do this, I will help you to do what I need you to do. The moderator should try to reinforce this learning.*

More Questions

- Who is not at the table that we need? What persons or groups should we approach to share our ideas?

- What resources do we have to address the problem? What resources do we need?
- How can we build on the work of organizations that are already involved in this issue in the community? How can we build connections and encourage ongoing communication between these organizations?
- What benefits, if any, do you think the community could gain from working on this issue with neighboring communities? What assets or resources might we combine? What barriers or challenges might have to be overcome?
- What are the obstacles to moving in the direction we want to pursue? What steps can overcome the obstacles? Who can take those steps? Who will do what?
- How can we sequence those steps so they support each other?
- What is a realistic timeline for action? How will we monitor progress?
- What is one step that we could take in the next 60 days to take action on this issue in the community? What is one step that you are willing to take personally?
- What role will this group play in the process? How often should we meet?

Reflections about *Community Questions*

After the group has had met several times and made preliminary plans, have them take some time to reflect on what they've learned and how this might apply to future community endeavors.

1. As a result of this process, are you thinking differently about:
 - The ability of citizens to make a difference in this community?
 - The ways that political leaders, leaders of community institutions, and professionals view community problems versus how other citizens see these problems?
 - The way that political and other institutional leaders involve (or don't involve) citizens in the decisions they make?
 - The point of view of those with whom you disagree?
 - New ways in which collective decision-making like this might be used in the community (city government, schools, churches, etc)?
 - Opportunities to connect organizations in the community who may not be working together currently?
2. How do you plan to share what you've learned with groups in which you are involved? Do you see new ways for these groups to become more involved in community life?
3. What would our community look like if more people were productively engaged in public issues and public life?
4. What questions are you leaving with?