



Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

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Perspectives

Downtown managers must quickly master the art of consensus building

By *Jamie Licko*

Downtown managers must become quick studies in how to bring together diverse groups of stakeholders to get things done. Projects, programs, policies... all require balancing the needs of the private and public sectors to be successful.

Increasingly, downtown organizations are using public engagement processes designed to build consensus to strengthen the outcomes of their efforts. It seems the need for strengthened public engagement processes is growing. Whether it's a large master planning process or the development of a small project, downtown organizations are doing more of it.

So why the need for increased public process now? Some downtown and public sector leaders will tell you they've seen a growing distaste for top-down leadership, and a growing interest by constituents in getting involved in how downtowns and communities evolve. To that end, they have had to find ways to change how things are done. Those that have employed public engagement and consensus building strategies have seen strong benefits to the point that they are weaving these processes

into how they undertake all their efforts.

What are those benefits?

- **Bridging differences:** Consensus building processes allow constituents to bridge differences and work together to find mutually acceptable solutions based on common interests.

- **Education:** Consensus building processes can educate stakeholders on the complex nature of problems and issues you are working to solve.

- **Building trust:** Opening up any process your organization undertakes helps build trust and demonstrates your commitment to serving stakeholder needs.

- **Better decisions:** Stakeholders learn about each others' unique views and needs, and develop common ground for action together, creating solutions that better reflect the concerns of other parties as well as their own.

- **Faster implementation:** Constituents are less likely to block implementation if they understand that a plan or policy reflects their input and has been crafted to meet their basic interests. The people involved in consensus

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building often make commitments to participate in the implementation.

- **New resources for implementation:**

Consensus building processes can engage a range of public, private, and community institutions to bring a wider array of resources to bear.

Here are some techniques organizations can employ to build consensus and develop successful community programs and projects.

- **Facilitated focus groups or roundtables:** The first step in a public engagement process designed to build consensus often-times involves pulling together a series of focus group or small roundtable meetings with key stakeholders who may be impacted, whose support might be critical to success, or who may have unique insight into the project. These focus groups are typically very effective for a few reasons. First, they give everyone an opportunity to get their point of view on the table in a setting where they feel comfortable. They can talk about what bothers them, where they have issues, and what might be holding them back from supporting a project. This is critical to helping people move forward — that they have a chance to “get things off their chest.” Until stakeholders have a chance to do this, they are unlikely to ever fully support ideas that emerge. Second, these focus groups typically reveal unique information about a project that you may not have otherwise known about.

- **Community surveys:** Today, online surveying tools make it easy for organizations to extend their reach and gather information. While focus groups and roundtables are generally limited to key stakeholder groups, community surveys can be widely distributed to give more people a sense of input into the project and can provide significant information about respondents’ perceptions of the project or your organization. Surveys should be brief enough that people don’t need to take more than a few minutes to respond. Incentives to take the survey also help drive response. Using online survey tools, you can easily tabulate and cross-tabulate responses (for example, if you wanted to see how down-

town business owners versus downtown property owners respond to questions).

- **Open houses:** Open houses are large forum discussions that invite the community to learn about the process, view progress on the project or program, ask questions and challenge outcomes, and participate in the ongoing development of a plan. Open houses are good tools to create “touch points” with your audience throughout the development of a project.

If you are considering undertaking public process and consensus building strategies, here are a few key tips for success to remember:

- It’s best to engage an objective third party to facilitate the process and discussions. Be sure that individual can effectively guide the discussion, allowing different viewpoints to emerge while working to find common threads that tie everyone together.

- For each and every engagement process you undertake, compiling a summary and report of key findings — issues, opportunities, challenges, key themes — is important as a running record of points of agreement that you can build from, and points of contention you may need to address to meet success.

- The most effective public engagement and consensus building processes don’t just engage stakeholders at the beginning and/or the end, rather they engage stakeholders throughout, bringing everyone along together and addressing pressure points as you move through the process.

The outcome of a successful public engagement and consensus building process is the convergence of your constituents on an alternative that meets the common needs of the group. A successful outcome will ultimately be well supported and will have the momentum needed to push your project or program towards successful implementation.

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