



# Making It Real

**How to Make  
Civic Engagement  
A Public Sensibility**



The **Harwood** Institute







# What does it take to make something we do an embedded practice in our daily lives?

It is a challenge so many of us struggle with each day – in terms of how to permanently change our diet or exercise regimen, fundamentally alter how we interact with others, genuinely learn an instrument, or practice deeply our religious faith.

It takes a special devotion to make something real. Simply going through the motions or engaging halfway does not cut it. Adopting a new language, only to engage in the same old practices, also misses the point. Relegating our actions to only isolated situations may provide a good start, but ultimately that, too, falls short.

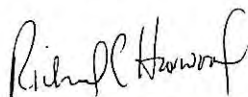
*Making It Real: How to Make Civic Engagement a Public Sensibility* offers seven ways to infuse civic engagement practices throughout our public work. The hope is to make these practices real in our daily lives, **rather than to pull them out only in special moments.** In *Making It Real* we can see opportunities for civic engagement practices to become part of everything we do. And it offers practical approaches to make this happen.

**This is an important endeavor.** There is much unfinished work to be done in our communities and the nation. For many of us, we see a clear need within our society for a set of new practices to engage one another, to determine how we will move forward, and to set a meaningful path for action. The common enterprise in which we are all engaged, in this common land we call the United States, at times begs for these different practices.

By making this move we will cultivate within ourselves an important public sensibility of engagement. This sensibility has the power to open up new possibilities in how we see and think about the public realm in which we live and guide how we do our public work. It is when we cultivate a new sensibility that we are able to truly change what we do.

No doubt, you will generate your own ideas as you do pursue this path, and as you do we hope you will share them with us. We want to learn from you and tell others of your good work.

If you have picked up **Making It Real**, you are more than likely already engaged in the unfinished work of our communities and nation. Making civic engagement real can help us all accelerate our progress in understanding and reaching for our common aspirations. There is work to do.



Richard C. Harwood



A pair of hands is shown from the bottom, holding a large white paper airplane. The background is a textured green with faint, mirrored text from the reverse side of the paper. The title 'Making It Real' is printed in a large, white, serif font at the top.


# Making It Real

## About This Report

This report is based on The Harwood Institute's over fifteen years of on-the-ground experience and research around how organizations can best work in the public realm. John Creighton, principal of Conocer, contributed significantly to its writing. Cole Campbell provided editorial expertise.



# Introduction



If you and your organization touch people's lives through your work, you probably want to connect in meaningful ways with the people you serve.

Community work is more effective and rewarding – for you and for the community – when you know people's hopes and fears, understand their circumstances, hear their ideas, listen to their insights.

And everybody benefits if people get to know – and trust – you.

That's why organizations search for meaningful ways to reach out to people in neighborhoods and communities. The effort to connect organizations and people is often referred to as civic engagement. True civic engagement is more than “a process for involving people.” True civic engagement is a vibrant approach to public life.

As the stories in this workbook make clear, some approaches to public life fall short of our expectations, while others produce strong, productive relationships.

Making It Real: How to Make Civic Engagement A Public Sensibility outlines **concrete** ways that you and your organization can integrate effective civic-engagement practices into all you do:

**Get People Talking**

**Get Organizations to Discover Common Ground**

**Plan from a New Perspective**

**Go Beyond Hard Facts**

**Set Better Ground Rules**

**Ask New Questions**

**Remember Why You Do What You Do**

These seven ideas represent lessons learned and discoveries made as community groups have used civic-engagement tools developed by The Harwood Institute. The groups who have made these tools part of their daily routines say they can transform what you do, how you do it and the results you produce by doing it.



# Get People Talking



For anyone who takes on a community leadership role, this story may strike some familiar chords.

A woman from Flint, Michigan assumes the role of president of her neighborhood association with high hopes. The association has been sleepy, at best, for quite a while. It serves more as a social gathering than as a group of action. The association posts announcements about its meetings around the neighborhood, but it is rare for a new person to attend.

# Talking





The new president is determined to turn things around. She wants to bring new people into the association. The current members are long-time veterans. These long-timers have chosen her as president because they agree that new energy is needed and she's the one to make it happen.

In her first meeting as president, she asks, **“Who do we know that has the talent and skills to help us?”**

The group can name only one or two people in the neighborhood who aren't already sitting at the table. The president realizes the association needs to try something different to find people with the passion, energy, talents and skills to contribute to making the area a better place to live. The association needs to get people talking about what kind of place they want to live in and what they can contribute to make the neighborhood that kind of place.

So the group goes door-to-door in the neighborhood. Group members ask people for a few minutes of their time to talk about the community. Not everyone is willing to talk, but a lot of folks are. Association members ask them: What kind of community do you want to live in? What are some of the things that need to happen? What are small steps you can take to help create this kind of place?

Association members close the conversations saying,

**“We would love to have you join our association and we can work on these steps together.”**

The experience breathes new life into the neighborhood association. In conversation after conversation, people in the neighborhood discover that they have something to contribute – and that their neighbors want them to contribute. One new association member expresses the sentiments of many when she says, “I didn't know for sure what I could do or who else in the neighborhood cares. Now I do.”

Veteran association members make discoveries, too. “We didn't realize how many ideas people have to make our neighborhood better,” the new president reports. “The people who have been in the association for a long time are excited again.”

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

Imagine all the people in your community who have the potential to contribute their skills and talents. Imagine what is possible if they had the chance to discover their own capacities.

The story of the neighborhood association affirms something most of us know – but often forget to act on. People learn about their own capacities when they have the chance to talk about what they can do. They learn about their civic capacities when they talk about what needs to be done to improve community life and what they are ready to contribute.

The challenge is to create opportunities for people to have this conversation. Typically it requires going to people – just like the neighborhood group went door-to-door – rather than waiting for people to come to us.

How would you go about creating opportunities for people to talk? What would you do if many more people began to discover what they can do to make the community a better place to live?



# Questions for Action

1. Who are the people in your community whose talents have not been tapped?
2. How can you get out in your community to discover the wisdom, skills and energy these people have to contribute?
3. What might make it challenging to find and talk with these people and groups?  
How can you overcome these challenges?
4. Who do you need to work with to make all this happen?

## Potential Pay-Offs

**Marshal resources.** As the experience of the neighborhood association suggests, talented people with a desire to contribute often surround us and we don't even know it. We can enlist these resources in efforts to improve our community – if only we talk with people.

**Unleash individual action.** Sometimes the simple experience of being asked, “What wisdom or skills do you have to contribute to the community?” inspires people to discover their civic capacities to act. People may not realize that they have talents the community values until they think about it – and they may not think about it unless they are asked.

**Tap the can-do attitude.** What is the most effective way to tap the can-do attitude that lies within us all? Orders and demands don't often do the trick – not for long anyway. Questions and self-discovery do much more to energize people to get things done. Asking people to consider what skills and energies they have to contribute often sparks their can-do attitude.

**Keep veterans energized.** It is difficult to carry the responsibility to make things happen for a long period of time. We all need reinforcement and rejuvenation. Calling on others to join our efforts, learning their ideas, and finding talents previously untapped can give a boost to those with experience and long service.



# Draw A Map: **Untapped Potential in Your Community**

Consider the following questions. Then sketch a map that shows untapped potential resources in your neighborhood or community.

**Who** are groups of people in our community whose talents have not been tapped?

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**Where** do these people gather already – if anywhere?

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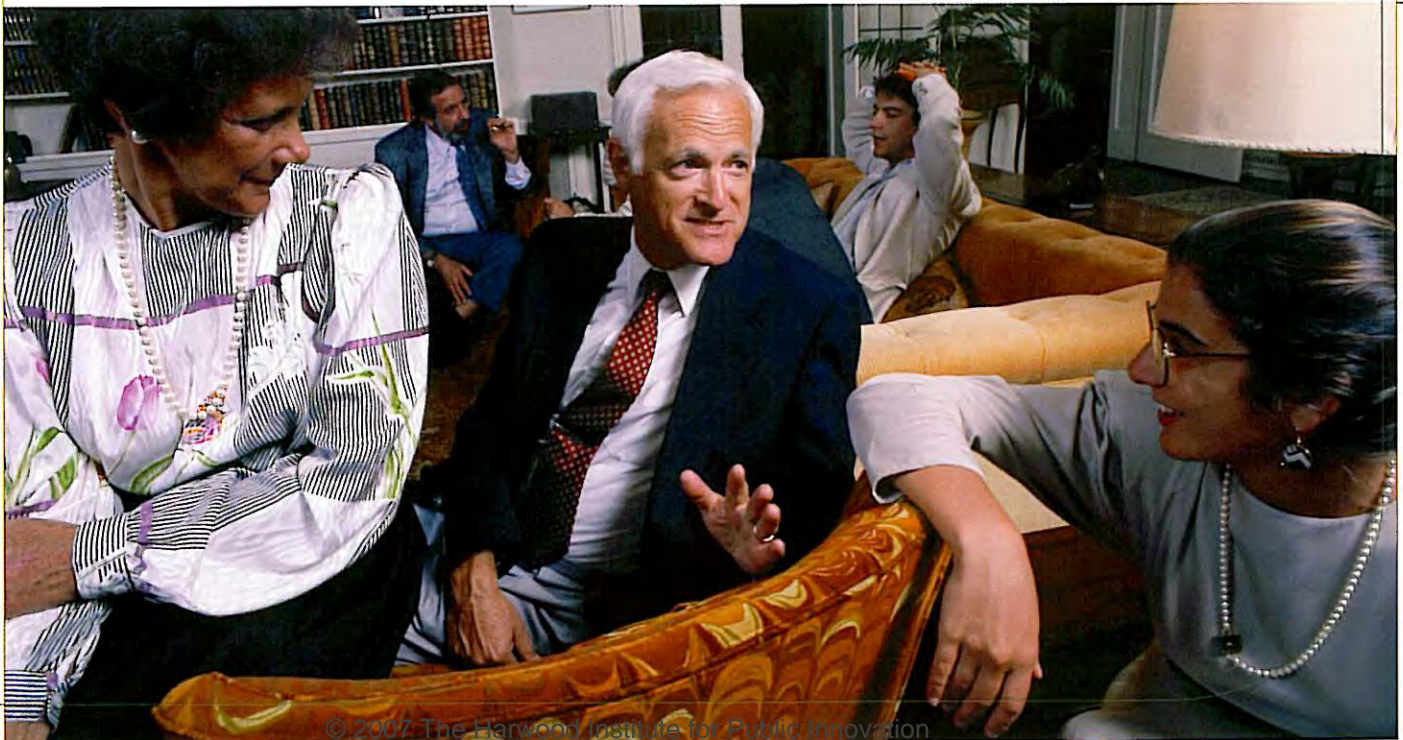
**When** are times that we can have conversations with people in these places?

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# Get Organizations to Discover

# Common Ground



**How often do we hear the leaders of community groups say to one another,**

“We should figure out a way to work together better”?

A group of health care leaders in New Hampshire found a way. Leaders from eight health-care organizations were at a seminar when a casual did-you-know type of conversation led to an unexpected place. One leader was telling the others that her organization was planning to ask people in three communities how they wanted to improve health care.

Common  
Ground





She was explaining some of the questions to be asked, which prompted another leader to say, “I wonder how people in my organization would respond to those questions.” This off-handed comment triggered a flurry of brainstorming within the group. Six months later, staff from the eight organizations came together for civic-engagement meetings – for themselves.

When the leaders first announced plans for the inter-organization meetings, staff members were dubious. “We already know what such-and-such organization is doing,” some said. Other common comments:

**“They won’t work with us.”**

“Their agenda is completely different than ours.”

The leaders stuck to their plan to hold the meetings despite staff skepticism. Yet many would admit later that they had low expectations, too.

The meetings started with a large group conversation about what kind of state everyone there wanted New Hampshire to be and how health care fit in. Participants then split up into smaller conversational groups along areas for action; each conversational group included staff members from every organization. The meetings ended with the smaller groups reporting on ways they thought the organizations could work together or at least complement one another.

Staff members and leaders left with new perspectives. Beginning the process by thinking together about “What kind of New Hampshire do we want?” set a tone different from that of past encounters between the groups.

“Typically, we just tell each other about our projects – it’s boring,” a participant said afterward. **“When we had the chance to talk about what we’re trying to create, new ideas started popping up all over the place.”**

Another participant said, “I thought we were much more on the same page with these other organizations than we really are. We all talk about ‘access to health care,’ but it means something different to all of us. Now I see some issues we need to spend more time working out.”

The meetings led to a handful of joint projects and several long-term relationships among specific participants. The eight groups still do not work together as much as they think they should. But the leaders will tell you that their civic-engagement meetings were well worth the time. “We understand each other so much better now,” one said. “That makes it a lot easier to work together when we need to.”

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

Many leaders who have organized or observed civic-engagement meetings with community members are thrilled to learn about people’s aspirations for the community and what they are willing to do.

But how often have we considered holding similar conversations with other organizations – or even within our own organizations? Or do we think of civic-engagement conversations as worthwhile just for general community members and not for ourselves? Do you know how people in your organization and in other groups would respond when asked what kind of community they want and what they can do to create it?

Suppose you do understand these aspirations and how various organizations’ activities fit with the aspirations. How might that understanding help you find common ground with the other groups? How might it help you work in complementary ways together?



# Questions for Action

1.

What groups do you need to work with to find common ground?  
(Think about groups you know well and groups that you don't know.)

2.

How might you engage these groups in conversations about what you and others want for the community and about what each group can contribute to making things happen?

3.

What will it take to get this kind of conversation organized?  
What will you do to get things started?

4.

How might you use conversations between groups to discover common ground?

5.

How can the results of these conversations inform your work?



## Potential Pay-Offs

**Develop shared context.** These conversations create room for people to talk about their aspirations for community life and what each person (or group) can contribute to create that type of place. When organizations engage in this process, it lets them see how each organization views the world and helps them establish a shared context. When groups better understand each other's world view, it is easier to see possibilities for working together and the challenges that need to be resolved.

**Figure out agendas.** When two groups meet to explore ways to work together, it is not uncommon for both groups to talk about their activities. It can be hard to see how the groups' respective activities fit together. Beginning with aspirations, then moving to challenges that stand in the way, can help groups discover new agenda items to discuss and, perhaps, work on together. These agenda items are often invisible when we jump straight to activities.

**Set conditions for working together.** When groups decide to work together – whether in direct collaboration or in complementary ways – it is just as important to decide how to work together as it is to decide what to do. Establishing who is responsible for what, spelling out what it looks like to fulfill these responsibilities, and talking about how to manage situations when responsibilities are not being met – dealing with issues like these up front can do a lot to foster long-term relationships between organizations.



# How Well Do We Know “Them”?

Gather together three or more people from your organization. Pick a group that you would like to work with to find common ground. Answer these questions from their perspective (putting their best foot forward).

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**What** kind of community does this group want to live in?

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**Why** is that important to this group?

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**What** are things that this group does to help create this kind of community?

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**What** does your group share in common with this other group?

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If you had to report back your answers to this group, how confident are you that they would agree with your answers?

## Test Yourself: Should You Join this Group in a Civic-Engagement Session?

You can use this simple test to help you decide if you should reach out to this other organization to hold a civic-engagement conversation with each other.

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**Are you very confident that the other group would agree with your answers to the questions above?**

Yes | No

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**Did everyone from your organization answer the questions above in the same way?**

**Is there agreement in your own organization about what this other group would say?**

Yes | No

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If you answer “No” to either one of these questions, then you and this other organization may benefit from doing civic-engagement work with each other.



# Plan from a New Perspective



This is a story of a local foundation that promotes lifelong learning.

The foundation wanted to invest money in a part of the city that was being redeveloped for mixed-use housing and commerce.

The foundation designed a planning process, hired a facilitator and invited some leaders to participate, including school, housing and chamber representatives, executives from the redevelopment company, and representatives of non-profit groups focused on education issues.

New  
Perspective





This group of invited leaders worked very efficiently together. The facilitator kept the group focused on the most common steps for planning – brainstorming how lifelong learning might become part of community life in the redeveloped area, narrowing in on projects to promote lifelong learning, and developing detailed implementation plans. The group also held several public open houses to solicit comments on its plans. The people who attended these forums (mostly teachers, school administrators and others interested in schools and education) seemed very receptive.

**On paper, the final plan was rock solid.** But when the planning process was complete and the leaders went home, the foundation staff had a difficult time sustaining action.

Foundation staff quickly realized that the vision for lifelong learning – the context of the entire plan – was almost entirely a vision from the perspective of traditional educational institutions (schools and education non-profit groups). **A larger community context was missing.**

People living in the redevelopment area did not respond as well to the programs as did the people who participated in the public open houses. When foundation staff tried to promote specific programs, people in the community struggled to connect the proposed programs to their own aspirations and challenges.

Foundation staff members regrouped to figure how they could salvage something from all the work they had done. They spent an hour or so talking through questions about “imagining the community we want” – striving to answer the questions from the **community’s point of view, rather than the foundation’s.** The staff then reevaluated the programs and felt confident that the foundation could continue with two of the six it had planned to pursue.

The group pushed forward with the two programs, making a conscious effort to connect these programs to larger community aspirations and challenges. The group went back to the drawing board to rethink what else might be done. The group vowed it would remember the lesson learned: Start with community context.

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

When it comes to planning, context is everything. Most people are familiar with the planning axiom that in order to get where you want to be, you first need a clear sense of where you are going. But the perspective from which we ask “Where do we want to go?” is as important as the question itself. Asking from a community perspective is essential to support the community in sustainable ways. The community perspective is as important as your own organization’s perspective.

What is the context that shapes your organization’s plans for action? To what extent have you considered the community’s context – people’s aspirations and challenges – to help shape your plans?



# Questions for Action

1. How can you imagine using community context and perspective to define issues and plan effective action for your organization?
2. How can you imagine using civic-engagement questions to support your planning process? Can you use the approach in staff meetings, board meetings, retreats or other planning sessions? As pre-planning homework?
3. What can you do to make these things happen?

## Potential Pay-Offs

**Take a fresh look at your work.** It is easy to get lost in the context of our day-to-day work and our current programs and activities. Grounding ourselves in the context of people's larger aspirations for community life is a good way to break free of tunnel vision and discover possibilities from a fresh perspective.

**Get below the surface of issues.** Ask simple but probing questions. It is important not to settle for the easy or first answer. If we take the time to really wrestle with questions about community context, we can add a tremendous amount of depth to our planning conversations.

**Get focused.** Asking people to share their aspirations and getting them to brainstorm possibilities are important but not sufficient by themselves. Help people close the loop by committing to action steps. Make sure they resonate with community context as much as they do with organizational context. The action steps that people agree to are an important reference point to help groups stay focused over time. The more the action steps consider community context, the more likely they are to work.



# Check Your Context



**Answer the following questions:**

**What** kind of organization do we want? What do we want to accomplish as an organization?

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**What** kind of community do we (defining "we" as broadly as possible) want to live in?  
 What are some of the things that need to happen to create this kind of community?

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**Now look at the action plans of your organization and ask:**

1. To what extent do our action plans take into account both community and organization context?

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2. How might our action plans change if we examined community context more closely?

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3. How might our action plans change if we examined our organization's context more closely?

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4. To what extent are we satisfied with our organization's action plans?

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**Now decide: Do we need to consider our action plans in a different context?**



# Go Beyond Hard Facts



“We have incomplete knowledge.”

That was almost a mantra for the executive director of a Western state health-care association. He took part in countless meetings with state policymakers and health-care coalitions, and the information shaping the discussion was always the same. The information was limited to health-care indicator data – teen-pregnancy, diabetes, HIV/AIDS rates, etc. – and people’s anecdotal experiences.

Statistical data was clearly important. But completely missing from these conversations was any rigorous understanding of how people actually experience health care; what type of support people want for better access to health care; what they can do for themselves; and how health care connects to other aspects of community life. Policymakers, funders and other decision makers were basing decisions on their assumptions about people, not on actual knowledge.

# Facts





The results of the investments in health services also followed a familiar pattern: Not good. A health center for underserved people was opened in the state's largest city. It closed within 18 months – three times.

The executive director of the state association wanted to generate some public knowledge, knowledge that can be produced only by engaging members of the public directly. He wanted insights on how important health care was to the community where the health center failed. He wanted to understand what the community was willing to do for itself and what support it thought it could use from state and federal groups.

He wanted to know **under what conditions the community would support a health center for the underserved.** He wanted to provide these insights to policymakers so that the pattern of opening and closing clinics would end – and meaningful change could happen.

The executive director hired an individual from the local university to ask specific groups of people in the community a handful of questions about community aspirations and ways people might contribute. This civic-engagement effort went on for nine months, without publicity or fanfare.

Afterward, the executive director convened a meeting of key health-care decision makers in the state. He and the professor outlined what they had learned. They were able to explain clearly how various groups in the community viewed health care; the connections between health care and other community issues; what different groups were prepared to do, and where a health center for the underserved fit in the overall picture. The health-care indicator data was the same as it always was.

**Two years later a health center was open and flourishing.** It recently received a million-dollar state grant for general operating funds.

The executive director was asked at a conference if he thought he could have accelerated the nine-month civic-engagement process. “I thought that was fast,” he responded. “We tried the accelerated approach three times, and we opened and closed a health center three times, too.”

The person from the university has a new job now. He works for a local hospital facilitating civic-engagement processes for various health-care groups.

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

Most people respect hard facts. Few people would disagree that quality statistical data is critically important to any decision-making process.

Public knowledge does not always garner the same respect. Sometimes we dismiss the idea of public insights because we have had bad experiences. We have heard public input (a process often confused with civic engagement) in which people talk about aspects of an issue of which they know nothing. Or public input generates a laundry list of jumbled and incoherent wishes too long to manage.

Sometimes we dismiss the idea of soliciting public insights because it seems to require too big an effort: “It takes forever to get a process like that organized. We don't have the time or the budget to do it.”

Such concerns can be addressed by thinking through how to ask useful questions that generate useful information. Here are three suggestions. First, ask people questions that are reasonable for them to answer. Anyone can speak to community aspirations and concerns, make connections between an issue like health care and other aspects of community life, and share ideas about what they might be able to do. Second, ask different kinds of questions. Rather than asking only about people's self interests, ask people to talk about what's best for the whole community. People are capable of answering this question, too. Third, be strategic about the means required to question people. Sometimes one professor can do the work.


Taking the time for civic engagement to generate public knowledge may be the difference between a health center that opens and closes and a health center that flourishes.



# Questions for **Action**

1. What kind of public knowledge would help you think about your community?
2. How will you be able to use the knowledge you generate in your work?
3. Who else in your community can you share this knowledge with?  
How might they benefit from this knowledge?

## Potential **Pay-Offs**



**Discover new possibilities.** Sometimes the issues we care about seem intractable, or people with different approaches to the issues are at an impasse. Public knowledge can help us discover new ways to move forward. We can discover unexpected common ground, uncover support for action or find new ways to talk about problems.

**Make better decisions.** Statistical data about community trends and issues is important information. Knowledge about people's experiences, aspirations and concerns is equally important. When we have both, we are better prepared to make sound and sustainable decisions.

**Build stronger relationships.** Strong relationships depend on what we know about people and groups and how well people understand one another.

**Bring more to the table.** Authentic and rigorous knowledge is an invaluable resource in public discussions. When we bring public knowledge to the table, we position our organizations and ourselves as better contributors to groups and coalitions.



# Pursue civic engagement to generate public knowledge, not public input.

## **In generating public input, we often:**

Ask each person to give his or her individual view and quickly — “Please line up at the microphone in front; you have two minutes each.”

Assume that we can add up all these individual responses and thus figure out what people as a whole believe.

Set as a goal getting as many people as possible to speak: Credibility is gained through numbers.

Focus on individual opinions or preferences (often expressed as what someone “thinks” or “wants”).

## **In generating public knowledge, we:**

Encourage give-and-take between and among people, which requires time.

Ask people to consider different perspectives and points-of-view and to weigh choices and trade-offs against each other.

Set as a goal discovering what people hold valuable: their aspirations, common purpose, directions for action, willingness to act.

Recognize that, while everyone has self-interests, people also have the capacity (and desire) to act as citizens and are willing to consider others’ interests as well as their own.





# Set Better

# Ground Rules



In Macon, Georgia, a group of 24 strangers gather to talk about ways to improve public schools. People are given three to four minutes to introduce themselves and express their feelings about schools.

Everyone knows the drill; this is the time allotment people typically get in public meetings. The comments of two women stand out. One is African-American. One is white. One is an unabashed supporter of public schools.

# RULES





The other has lost her confidence in public schools. One says she wants condoms freely distributed to high school students – especially to young women. The other argues that prayer should be brought back to the classroom. **Each speaks with passion.** Each folds her arms across her chest and scowls as the other talks. The tension in the room is palpable.

The other participants look around uncomfortably. Their eyes seem to say: “Where can I disappear?” The expression is familiar to anyone who has been part of a meeting riddled by hostile and judgmental remarks – exchanges that produce resentment and frustration but do little to help a group decide on ways to act on a challenge.

But after the introductions, **the meeting’s moderator takes a simple action to avert eruptions of raw conflict. He asks the group to agree to a few simple ground rules – listen to understand, show respect when you disagree, stay focused on the question at hand** so we can get work done, and so on. Everyone, including the two women, readily agrees. Some in the group breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe this conversation will be different.

Over the course of a **Saturday afternoon, the two women discover** that they both care deeply about nurturing a sense of personal responsibility in young people. Two hours after the end of a five-hour meeting, the two women stand in a parking lot enveloped by dusk swapping ideas about how best to support young people.

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

This scenario is true. It happened as part of the Georgia Education Partnership’s statewide initiative to uncover directions for change. What kept these two women – and the other 22 participants – at the table were the ground rules for conversation. Everyone believed that they would be heard, which allowed them to hear. Everyone believed that it would be possible to get work done. The ground rules also let two women who seemed on opposite ends of the universe discover that they had a great deal to talk about.

Many civic-engagement processes use ground rules. People who adhere to these rules say the rules have the power to transform conversations. The rules let people discover possibilities for working together when no possibilities seem to exist. As much as ground rules are common sense, it takes real discipline to practice these rules consistently. Simple reminders such as hanging them in meeting rooms can help transform ground rules into community norms.

Now imagine extending these rules beyond the civic-engagement meetings we attend. Imagine adapting these types of rules to all of our public interactions – one-on-one conversations, office staff meetings, civic-club or religious functions, meetings between groups. How might applying these rules to all our public interactions change how the community works together?





# Questions for Action

1. In what circumstances can you imagine using ground rules for working together?
2. What would it take to adopt ground rules? What can we do to make this happen?
3. What might make it challenging to adopt ground rules in these circumstances? How do we overcome these challenges?
4. How do we find the fortitude and courage to uphold ground rules for working together?
5. How do we imagine that ground rules – extended to many different public interactions – might change community norms?

## Potential Pay-Offs



**Keep people at the table.** People are quick to drop out of public conversations if the tone or focus of the meetings leads them to conclude, “No work will get done.” People are more likely to stay focused and stay at the table if everyone agrees on how we will conduct ourselves.

**Build new relationships.** Without ground rules, we are prone to write people off based on first impressions and surface-level remarks. Ground rules keep us together long enough to forge genuine relationships.

**Discover serious issues.** When people have confidence that others will try to hear and understand them, they are more likely to raise serious issues that might otherwise be ignored for fear of conflict.

**Uncover new possibilities.** The longer that people stay at the table together, the more likely they are to find ways to work together that everyone can live with.



# Some Useful Ground Rules

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## **Everyone participates; no one dominates.**

Treat each other as if we're sitting around a neighbor's kitchen table.

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## **There are no wrong answers.**

Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs – you do not need to be an expert.

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## **Keep an open mind.**

Listen carefully and try hard to understand others' views.

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## **It's okay to disagree.**

Everyone has a right to his/her own views. Focus on ideas, not people.

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## **Focus on constructive ideas and solutions,**

not on complaining or placing blame on others.

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## **Help keep the discussions on track.**

Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.

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## **Use the "Can we live with it?" rule.**

Rather than vote to reach decisions, make sure everyone can live with a decision, even if she or he does not agree 100 percent.



## Add Your Own...

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# Ask New Questions



Do you take part in any meetings that you wish produced more meaningful results?

**United Way staff members** in a mid-size city in Michigan sure did.

It is standard practice for United Way program officers to meet twice a year with grant recipients at the recipients' worksites. Program officers make these site visits for two purposes – to ensure accountability and to provide support. And they want to help grantees discover ideas, develop practices and obtain resources essential for successful operations.

NEW  
Questions





Program officers complained for some time that many, if not most, of these **site visits had become superficial** at best and often counterproductive. Program officers cared most about providing support. But they seldom, if ever, talked with grantees about ideas and best practices. Their meetings typically focused on a recounting of grantee activities, whether the grantee was staying within budget, and how much funding might be available during the next grant cycle.

**Program officers often felt and acted more like auditors than supporters** in these meetings.

Grantees would concur with this assessment.

Senior managers and program officers gathered to evaluate the site visits. They discovered that few program officers came to the grantee meetings with a well-thought-out agenda. And the questions program officers asked – “Do you feel like you’re meeting your grant objectives? How are you doing in terms of finances?” – took conversations to precisely the place they found so frustrating.

The group decided to change the site visits by asking different questions and giving the questions to grantees in advance so they could prepare.

**The questions completely changed the context, tenor and content of the grantee meetings.** Now the conversations helped grantees focus on such topics as:

- What role are we playing in the community?
- What are we doing well to fulfill this role?
- What other possibilities exist? What could we do more, better or different?
- Who else might we need to talk with or involve?
- What resources and support do we need? How does that match with what we have?

United Way program officers are now much more enthusiastic about site visits. The meetings, they say, help them play the role of supporting partner.

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

It is easy to underestimate the power of questions. Yet questions – implicit or explicit – shape our meeting agendas. United Way program officers may have wanted the agenda for site visits to be about both accountability and support, but the questions they asked created an agenda that was in reality only about compliance.

New questions create new possibilities. In the case of the United Way site visits, the change in questions lifted conversations out of the minutia of a single grant. The program officers and grantees were able to frame their conversations as part of the big picture, to look forward rather than back, and to talk about resource issues in the context, what more can be done.

Consider your most important meetings. What are the questions – implicit or explicit – that shape the agenda and conversation in those meetings? Now imagine using different questions in those meetings. What would be different?



# Questions for Action

1. What meetings do you lead in which you could use different questions?
2. How will you use these questions? How will you ask others to use them?
3. What meetings do you participate in – but don't lead – that could use different questions? How could you change the questions asked or implied in these meetings?
4. What meetings outside of your own group or organization could use different questions?
5. What results do you imagine you could achieve by asking such questions?



## Potential Pay-Offs

**Change the focus.** Questions establish the focus of our meetings. When our meetings are off-target from what we really want to accomplish, the best way to change the focus is to change the questions we ask.

**Engage everyone in the meeting.** Many meetings are a series of people talking at each other, listing items that interest them or making their case. Questions that explore possibilities and probe for understanding create room for everyone to contribute their wisdom and knowledge and to stay focused on issues of common concern.

**Figure out what's really at issue.** Questions help us dig below the surface of issues and what is easy to see. Many meetings stay at the surface. When we keep asking simple but probing questions – questions as simple as “Why?” – we are better able to use meeting time to discover the issues of real concern.

**Exchange knowledge, not just information.** Meetings are an opportunity to exchange knowledge with other people. Effectively worded questions can help us discover context and perspective, relate areas of ambiguity and complexity, and connect fragmented information into something coherent.



# Effective Questions ...

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>	<b>How</b>
Create shared context	Rush straight to laundry lists of activities	What are we trying to accomplish? Why is this important? <i>rather than</i> What is each of us doing?
Focus on progress	Focus on incomplete activities	What are we doing that is working to meet our objectives? <i>rather than</i> What's left to do?
Identify possibilities	Get stuck in setbacks and problems	What other possibilities exist? What could we do more, better or different? <i>rather than</i> What's the problem? Why aren't we making more progress?
Identify actions to match possibilities	Limit possibilities to match perceived constraints	What needs to happen to pursue these possibilities? <i>rather than</i> What do we need to do to stay within budget? To comply with all the rules?
Open up issues	Force people into boxes	What do others think? <i>rather than</i> Does everyone agree?



# Remember Why

You Do

# What You Do



Many groups organize training sessions and workshops for the groups and people they serve.

Salem Housing, a **Flint, Michigan organization**, is among them.

Remember  
Why





Salem Housing works with families who want to buy their own homes. For years, the organization has been putting together workshops for prospective homeowners. The workshops include all of the basics one might imagine – money management, loans and mortgages, how-to's of home maintenance and repairs. The group is proud of what it helps prospective homeowners learn. It believes – and has evidence to support this belief – that participants benefit from the workshops whether or not they ever buy a home.

Yet folks at Salem Housing had a nagging feeling that **the workshops were missing a critical element.** Salem Housing is committed to doing more than facilitating home ownership. Its larger mission is to help make a healthy community. A critical element of this, the group believes, is helping people become connected to and participate in their neighborhoods. How could a workshop on homeownership speak to these elements?

One day, during a meeting to help develop the **Take A Step tool**,\* a light bulb went off. “This is it,” one staff member realized.

**“This is what is missing from our workshops.”**

Salem Housing added to the workshop conversations exploring participants' aspirations for their community. The workshop now asks people to consider **what kind of community they want to live in**, and what needs to happen to create that kind of place. These conversations help people see their relationship to the larger community. It helps people see themselves as citizens.

Workshop participants now **make the connection between owning a home and being a member of a neighborhood and community.** Participants discover for themselves the direct links between buying a house, maintaining their property, saying hello to their neighbors, supporting neighborhood projects and creating the kind of community they want to live in.

Participants indicate in evaluations that the Salem Housing workshops help them understand not only what it takes to be a homeowner but also how their own actions – small and big – affect the neighborhood.

How well do the workshops or training programs you are familiar with make the connection to a larger mission or purpose? What might happen if these workshops included a discussion exploring aspirations and possibilities?

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS...

Many workshops, conferences and other discussions focus on the how-to's of some technical issue or provide “all the information” you need to know about \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank). The larger purpose – why we even need to know the how-to's and information – often gets lost somewhere along the road. Think about the workshops and sessions you attend. Has this ever happened?

Salem Housing changed the conversations in its workshops to connect technical issues to the larger purpose of building community. Salem Housings' ultimate goal is to build healthy communities. The group believes homeownership is a central component of strong communities. But helping people buy homes merely for the sake of buying a home falls far short of what it is trying to promote. Calling on people to consider what kind of community they want closes the circle.

\* Take A Step is a Harwood Institute tool that helps individuals begin to take a more active approach to the public life of their community.





# Questions for Action

1.

What workshops or other discussion sessions can you think of that would benefit from making a connection between individual opportunities or technical issues and the larger community?

2.

How might you adapt this kind of a conversation to fit into a workshop or training session?


3.

Who would you need to work with in order to make this happen?

4.

What benefits do you imagine workshop participants would take away from such a session?

## Potential Pay-Offs



**Call on people** to consider the whole community. Many workshops focus exclusively on the personal needs of participants. Clearly this is an important aspect of training. Any session with community members as participants is an opportunity to reinforce the notion that everyone should consider the needs of the whole community – what it means to be part of a community.

**Connect professional and technical issues** to your larger purpose. Most groups undertake training programs and workshops to help move toward some larger aspiration – in the case of Salem Housing, healthy communities. It is important not to let this larger purpose get lost in the midst of professional or technical training.

**Help people take the first step.** Many people have retreated from public life – not because they don't care, but because they do not see paths that connect them to this part of community life. Training sessions, workshops and other discussion sessions are a good place to ask people to consider the possibility of finding these paths.

**Connect public and private actions.** When we ask people what kind of community they want to live in during a workshop on personal or professional development issues, we are in essence asking them to think about how their individual actions affect others. People begin to see that public and private actions are not walled off from each other but very much connected.



# Connecting

## Home Ownership to Public Life

Here are sample **Take A Step** questions adapted for use in a home ownership workshop:

**What** kind of community do you want to live in?

**Why** is that important to you?

**What** are some of the things that need to happen to create the kind of community you want?

**What** are steps you can take to help create this kind of place?

**As** a homeowner, what else can you do to help create this kind of place?

Create your own **Take A Step** questions for use in a workshop on your issue of interest.





## **ABOUT THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC INNOVATION**

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation invigorates people, organizations and communities to improve public life and politics so that we all can do the unfinished work of the nation and reach for our common ideals.

We hold this core belief: as a nation, as communities and as individuals, we can do better—in ensuring that every child receives a good education; that people can live in safe neighborhoods and in strong communities; that we find ways to improve race relations and rid ourselves of prejudice; that we make certain that all people and all perspectives have a place at the public table.

The Harwood Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that works within a long tradition of small, catalytic and public-spirited organizations in American history that have sought to improve public life and politics. Our vision for 15 years has been to chart a different course for public life—a goal even more important for the changing times in which we now live. For America to move forward, we believe people and organizations must bring new sensibilities and practices to public life and politics.

## **ABOUT THE C. S. MOTT FOUNDATION**

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, established in 1926 in Flint by an automotive pioneer, is a private philanthropy committed to supporting projects that promote a just, equitable and sustainable society. It supports nonprofit programs throughout the United States and, on a limited geographic basis, internationally. Grantmaking is focused in four programs: Civil Society, Environment, Flint Area and Pathways Out of Poverty.









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