



SOMOS Community Engagement Philosophy

SOMOS Mayfair was created in 1997 to address the chronic crises that resulted from the high rates of poverty in the Mayfair neighborhood of East San Jose. As SOMOS has effectively and comprehensively responded to community needs, we have honed our focus on building the power of our residents (parents, neighbors, and youth). Our intentional leadership development model has advanced collective action in Mayfair, and we have made meaningful changes in the areas of community development, health, and education.

SOMOS is committed to shifting power back to the hands of community and challenges institutions to do the same by honoring authentic community engagement. Below is our guiding philosophy that holds us accountable to our mission to support the leadership of Mayfair residents; strengthen the self-determination of our neighborhood; and establish a culture of collective power. We believe this philosophy can be adapted to service delivery, advocacy, and organizing strategies.

Traditionally, and most commonly, community engagement strategies consist of engaging community via meetings, forums, and surveys to discuss issues and provide input to be considered by a decision-making body. SOMOS disrupts this tradition by following the lead of a community developed agenda; by funding community-led solutions, and by honoring community decision-making. We encourage others to walk with us on this path and we ask that you embed the following into your engagement strategies.

1. **Check your privilege.**

Meet community where they are. Focus initial efforts by going beyond institutional walls, and into residents' homes, gatherings, and most trusted spaces. Ensure that your language in print and in conversation is accessible. Work to ensure that your engagement is rooted in cultural humility, a practice of recognizing your biases to be open to new ideas, contradictory perspectives and advice. Also, it's important to be aware that your experience in navigating institutional systems may be vastly different than how community members most affected (or disproportionately impacted) navigate and experience systems.

2. **Build trust through clear expectations.**

Often partners want to learn, teach, and gather information from community to focus and advance their work and priorities. However, community members lose trust when they are not able to see how their contributions have concretely manifested in something tangible for them. Make the purpose of input and feedback known so that community knows from the onset what to expect. Authentic engagement will result in a longer more mutually beneficial relationship for the common good.

3. **Support a sense of belonging.**

Take the time to understand the community's vision; ask questions and listen to their stories and their solutions. Come prepared to engage with community having already done your research on what has been done in the past, what worked and what didn't. Provide progress on past efforts and bring a new lens, strategy, focus and/or action based on reflections from the past. *So, Listen!* A listening campaign first allows for you to gather ideas, challenges and solutions. Determine where perspectives are aligned and where they are not. Strive for the common goals that are mutually beneficial. Create a safe space, with shared agreements. Bring fun, hope, and joy into the space. It is always a best practice to provide food, child care, translation, and when possible honorariums.

July 2018



4. Recognize leadership and celebrate legacy.

Community members are not waiting for you to save, help, or create change for them. They are already sharing resources, generating solutions, and supporting one another in their communities. In many cases, they have established networks of mutual support and are organizing for sustainable change. All of this IS expertise and should be valued as such, as others can learn from their work and adapt it to support other efforts. Authentic respect for their experience go a long way!

5. Take action. Do something tangible.

Time and time again, institutions and other non-profits have asked for us to facilitate a conversation with community to meet their goals and deliverables. Often times, we put the trust built with community at risk when nothing comes of an engagement opportunity. Be mindful that community values their time too and tend to have more stressors, so be prepared to DO SOMETHING tangible. Take action that community can see as fruits of the time spent together as much as possible. Community members are tired of talking about the same issues and solutions without seeing a difference in the neighborhood.

6. Shared decision making.

Come in with an open mind and an open heart. Do not come with a pre-determined agenda or decision. Create a process where participants are able to contribute their ideas, perspectives, concerns, and hopes openly and honestly. Honor the various voices and authentically work alongside the participants to arrive at solutions and decisions that are reflective of the process. Shared decision making will allow for shared ownership during implementation.

7. Show up and keep coming back.

Connect and reconnect with the community and share: What were your learnings from your time together? How did it shift your perception or your beliefs about your work and intention? What do you hope to continue to learn? Where can you be a resource? How is this process integral and imperative to the greater strategic direction of your organization? Share with community what you learned and your intentions of moving forward. Report back on any actions that have been taken. Also, be responsive to the community when they reach out to you with questions, requests, suggestions, etc.

8. Nurture relationship/partnership.

Build trust with community. Be clear as to whether this is a one-time experience or if you are in it for continued collaboration. Community members are interested in working on initiatives and strategies that lead to real impact in their communities. Identify spaces within the process where their voices are critical and where their feedback will result in real change to the strategy. Share additional decision-making opportunities.

From our experience, this philosophy has allowed community engagement and community ownership to thrive. While this is by no means a comprehensive guide, we hope it provides you with some context as to how people from diverse backgrounds want be communicated with, respected, and honored.