Community Input – A First Step in Strategic Planning

Broadening Your Perspective

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The Purpose Behind Community Input

Discussion: Why do we need community input?

Before beginning any strategic plan, the board should ask whether or not they need additional community input. Community input has two major advantages:

1.) Community input sessions allow organizations to think outward versus inward. Asking for other opinions, thoughts, concerns and ideas helps establish and reinforce the fact that nonprofits are here to benefit the community. They show the general public that their voice matters and that the organization is open to feedback. When a board moves forward with a strategic plan and does not solicit input, they run the risk of making decisions without stakeholder feedback. Since nonprofits exist FOR the community, we must provide ways for the community to tell us what is most important to them. Organizations substantially reduce that risk when they ask for input ahead of the strategic planning process. This way the board can refer back to the feedback gathered and make decisions with community voice in mind.

2.) Community input sessions are an opportunity to plant a seed. When organizations invite others to share their voices, all participants engage in a conversation that allows them to share why they are passionate about the organization. This can open doors to deeper, more meaningful engagement with potential donors, volunteers and partners.

One organzation's praise of community input sessions:

"When we held community input sessions, we got to hear the true voice of the community and what they want us to work on. The session showed us that the community appreciated their voices being heard. It's not about what we are going to do for them, but about listening to what they want. It helped us to know if we were on the right track."

– Amy Wood, Volunteer Associate
United Way of Greater Lafayette

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Sample Community Input Questions

Sample Primer Questions:

Primer questions should be used in a one-on-one interview type conversation to get participants thinking about the "why" – the reasons they care about your organization. They are meant to generate ideas for the following critical questions.

- **What was your first experience with our organization?**
- **What about this organization made you interested enough to come today?**
- **What gives you a sense of pride about this organization?**
- **Tell me about the best experience you've had with this organization … What made the experience worthwhile?**
- **What is your favorite part about being involved with this organization, and why would you want to share that with someone else?**
- **What is it about this organization that you value? How does it impact your life?**
- **How does [organization name] make your community a better place to live? Why does this community need your organization?**

Sample Critical Questions:

Critical questions should be answered in small groups of 3-5 people on flip charts where the responses are recorded.

1. **What is the public perception of our organization?**
2. **What should some of our priorites be over the next year?**
3. **What should some of our priorities be over the next 3-5 years?**
4. **What are some of the challenges we may need to overcome to be successful?**
5. **What wishes do you have for this organization?**

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