Community Engagement Toolkit Activity:

Organizing the Engagement and Communications Strategy

Who: Engagement team/grantees, community advisory team

When: When you’re ready to compile all the other elements of Parts 1 and 3 into a comprehensive strategy for your engagement and communications plan

Introduction:

Within your community is a powerful learning network. We learn from one another, and as we teach one another, we become more comfortable in our knowledge. While we can gain valuable insight from outside experts, the process of peer-to-peer teaching is necessary for the sustainability of a project and its evaluation.

An engagement and communications strategy should answer four primary questions:

1. What are the core elements and objectives of outreach and community development?
2. Who am I trying to engage through this process?
3. How can I connect with those communities in an accessible and inviting way?
4. What do I want these communities to gain from this outreach?

The template below can be used to guide your process in understanding how to answer these questions, and how to utilize a community-informed approach to build your engagement and communication strategy.

Utilize the Community Vision of Shared Values:

The shared vision you created in Part 2 helps to clarify what you are trying to accomplish from your outreach and engagement and what type of spaces you are trying to create to connect with the community (virtually and/or in-person). Essentially, this should act as your thesis statement. Your vision should be a synthesis of your work with the stewardship team in defining goals and outcomes for the community engagement and your primary strategies to accomplish those outcomes.

Ex. We want to build a network of aligned groups, create a shared culture based on human and environmental well-being, and develop a system of communication between county departments and community organizations. The network will serve as a collaborative online space to share community events and distribute information and resources to collectively address the needs and challenges in the community.

Root Issues:
Your root issues are the “upstream challenges” that need to be addressed for you to be successful. Without knowing what the root issues are, you will never be able to effectively address the “downstream challenges” or consequences of those issues. For example, one of your strategies may be to hold multiple joint community events to present your design ideas and connect with different communities in the neighborhood. However, from your community analysis you've found that a big issue from past events is that many of the community members are not actively attending.

Based on your community research and situational analysis, you should also be able to identify the specific reasoning behind the community's choices, and use them to inform your process and approach to the communication strategy, and what tools you will utilize to ensure you are reaching as wide of an audience as possible. For example, maybe you found that most communities didn't attend because of three root issues:

1. There are no shared spaces for communities to come together where they feel safe or welcomed.
2. There are no professional translators in the community that are being paid to attend these events so there have been huge language barriers.
3. Due to a lack of accessible and efficient public transit options, many of the communities have no way of getting to the events without wasting hours of their day.

Goals and Outcomes:
The goals and outcomes of your strategy should come out of your community development objectives. They define in detail what you are trying to accomplish in your communication strategy both short and long term, and how you will track your progress to either ensure you are moving in the right direction or clarify if you need to adapt your strategy. The goals and outcomes are what will help establish alignment within your community engagement team, and should drive all decision-making within your communication strategy.

Shared Values:
Write out your shared values for community engagement that you created with the stewardship team. It is important that every stage of the engagement process is in alignment with those values because they are going to be the one liners, the elevator pitch, and components that the community will be most attached to and which they will hold you most accountable for.
Community Benefits:
The benefits are why stakeholders should care about community development and what they will gain from participating in the community engagement process. When outreaching to stakeholders, you need a way to connect with your audience where they can feel personally attached to outcomes of the community development, and where there is a clear value (financial or otherwise) to participating in the engagement process. These should be 3-6 realistic benefits, such as an...

- Open channel for direct input to the community development professionals
- Opportunity to guide decision-making for the community development
- Gift card if they attend one (1) of the engagement opportunities
- Receive updates on the progress of the engagement and development process

Channels of Communication:
This component addresses which communities the outreach is focused on, what tools and assets can be used to effectively reach those communities, and how those communities will be able to connect with the engagement and development teams. This can be built out using your community research and analyses, and through input from the community advisory team. Answer for yourself:

1. What larger groups and communities are important to involve in this process?
2. What accessibility needs should we be aware of? (Language, learning styles, etc.)
3. What will be the most impactful platforms and channels for engagement? (Door knocking, WhatsApp, radio, community forums, etc.)
4. Based on your choice of platforms and channels, what materials will you need for outreach? (email templates, memos, photos, posters, etc.)
5. How and who should the communities contact if they have questions or feedback?

Timeline:
Finally, outline your timeline. Following the same process and tools as the “engagement plan”, outline your schedule and key dates for material development, outreach, follow-up, and implementation. You do not need to share this timeline with the broader community, however everyone within the development and engagement team should be notified and on the same page.

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