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Chapter 18. Deciding Where to Start | Section 2. Participatory Approaches to Planning Community Interventions | Main Section

32-41 minutes

Learn how to use an approach that allows everyone who has a stake in the intervention to have a voice, either in person or by representation.

- **What is a participatory approach to planning?**
- **What are the advantages of a participatory planning approach?**
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- **What are the levels of participatory planning?**
- **When is participatory planning appropriate?**
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- **What do you have to do to get a participatory planning process up and running?**

Everyone who's ever worked in health or human services knows at least one horror story about an intervention that either went wrong or never worked for a minute. Often, when the story is told, it becomes clear that the well-intentioned professionals in charge had totally misunderstood or ignored some fundamental fact about the community or the target population. Since they assumed they knew what was needed, they planned the whole thing themselves...and failed miserably.

For every horror story, however, there's a story about an intervention where everything went right. In many of these cases, you'll find that the target population - and often the larger community as well - was included in the planning of the intervention from the beginning.

When an organization decides to take on a community intervention - whether a full -fledged service program or a one-time campaign to accomplish one specific goal - it can often increase its chance of success by using a participatory planning process. In this section, we'll explore what a participatory planning process is, why it's valuable, its potential advantages and disadvantages, and how to use it to plan an effective intervention - one where everything goes right.

What is a participatory approach to planning?

In its simplest terms, a participatory approach is one in which everyone who has a stake in the intervention has a voice, either in person or by representation. Staff of the organization that will run it,

members of the target population, community officials, interested citizens, and people from involved agencies, schools, and other institutions all should be invited to the table. Everyone's participation should be welcomed and respected, and the process shouldn't be dominated by any individual or group, or by a single point of view.

That's the ideal. The reality may often be quite different. Some people might not want to be involved - they may feel it takes too much time, or they don't have the skills needed. Particular individuals or groups may feel left out and disrespected if they're not invited to participate. The planning process may be a rubber stamp for ideas that have already been developed. Some people's opinions may be listened to more carefully than those of others. In some of these situations, a participatory process can cause as many problems as never involving people at all.

The important thing to remember here is the word participatory. The use of that term implies not just that you'll ask for someone's opinion before you do what you were going to do anyway, but rather that each participant becomes an important contributor to the planning process.

A true participatory approach is one in which everyone's perspective is considered. That doesn't mean that people can't challenge others' assumptions, or argue about what the best strategy might be. It does mean, however, that everyone's thoughts are respected, and it isn't necessarily assumed that the professionals or the well -educated automatically know what's best. Everyone actually gets to participate in the planning process, and has some role in decision-making.

> This is an extremely important point. Many low-income or minority individuals and groups feel that they have no voice in the society, that they are not listened to even when they are asked for their opinions. True participation means that everyone has a voice which must be acknowledged.
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> Acknowledgment also implies having enough respect for another's opinion to argue with it. All too often, low-income or minority members of a planning team or governing board are treated with reverse condescension, as if anything they say must be true and profound. A truly participatory process would include not only everyone being heard, but also everyone thrashing out ideas and goals, and wrestling with new concepts.
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> In order for this to happen, those with less education and "status" often need extra support, both to learn the process and to believe that their opinions and ideas are important and worth stating. All of this takes time, but the rewards are great.

What are the advantages of a participatory planning approach?

- *Participation carries with it feelings of ownership, and builds a strong base for the intervention in the community.* If people are integral to the planning of a community intervention, then that intervention will be theirs. They have a stake in it not only as its beneficiaries or staff or sponsors, but as its originators. They'll do what they can to see their work succeed.
- *It ensures that the intervention will have more credibility in all segments of the community* because it was planned by a group representing all segments of the community. If people know that

others with the same point of view and experience as theirs were instrumental in making the intervention happen, they'll assume that their interests were attended to.

- *Bringing a broader range of people to the planning process provides access to a broader range of perspectives and ideas.*
- *A participatory planning approach avoids pitfalls caused by ignorance of the realities of the community or the target population.* If, for instance, Muslims are part of the planning process for an intervention in a community which includes many followers of Islam, they'll know that lunch meetings during Ramadan, the Islamic month of daytime fasting, are not likely to work. Long-time community members will know what has failed in the past, and why, and can keep the group from repeating past mistakes.
- *It involves important players from the outset.* If the intervention needs the support of a particular individual, or that of a particular agency or group, and they've been part of the planning from the beginning, their cooperation is assured.
- *It can provide an opportunity for often-disenfranchised groups to be heard*, and teach the community that they have important things to say.
- *It teaches skills which last far beyond the planning process*, and can help to improve the community over the long term. People learn to run meetings, to analyze data, to construct strategic plans - in short, to become community resources and leaders.
- *It can bring together and establish ties among community members who might normally have no contact*. Such relationships - between low-income people and business leaders, for instance - are not only supportive of the intervention, but may help to create long-term

relationships and break down barriers in the community.

- *A participatory planning process builds trust*, both between your organization and the community and among the individuals involved. This trust can serve as a foundation for future community development and community action.
- *A participatory planning process generally reflects the mission and goals of grass roots and community-based organizations*. With its underpinnings of collaboration, inclusiveness, and empowerment, a participatory approach embodies the ideals that form the foundations of most grass roots and community-based organizations.
- *It implies respect for everyone in the community*, and thus sets a standard for community participation and empowerment that other organizations - and the community at large - may feel compelled to follow.
- *Logically, a participatory planning approach should be effective*. The fact that it includes the views and perspectives of everyone affected by the intervention should work to assure that all assets and needs are identified and addressed, and that unintended consequences are minimized.
- *Finally, it does things the way they should be done*. It respects everyone's intelligence, values everyone's ideas and experience, and affords everyone a measure of control. By empowering the community, and particularly the target population, rather than just superimposing its own ideas on a social structure that already exists, your organization can give substance to its ideals. In the final analysis, some level of participatory approach is almost always the most ethical way to plan a community intervention.

What are the disadvantages of a participatory planning approach?

It's crucial to understand and anticipate these considerations, and to decide when and how a participatory planning approach can work in your situation.

- *A participatory process takes longer*. A diverse group always takes longer to make decisions and come to conclusions than does an individual or small group.
- *Members of the target population or the community may not agree with the "experts " about what is needed*.
- *Education may be needed, for community members and the organization*. Members of the target population and the community may not have important technical knowledge or experience, and may need to understand some theory or past practice in order to see what the organization is trying to do. Some may need new skills in order to participate fully in the planning process. The organization, on the other hand, may need to learn more about local culture, political issues, and community history in order to tailor the intervention to the community and avoid past errors. Education takes time.
- *One determined individual can wreck the whole process if he's not handled well*. Someone who has a particular axe to grind, or who's convinced that only he knows what's right for the community can make a participatory process very difficult. Handling this situation can take both tact and toughness.
- *It may be difficult to assure that all the right people get to the table*. Some key people may simply not want to participate. Factions in

the community, a history of failed attempts at communication or at dealing with problems, ignorance of which groups or individuals are important, or just basic mistrust may complicate the task of creating a participatory planning process. Overcoming this barrier, however, can have profound positive consequences in the community over the long term.

- *A participatory planning process takes patience and commitment on everyone's part*. People have to maintain their commitment over time, remain civil while discussing issues about which they may have strong feelings, and be willing to compromise. A few misplaced words, or one or a small number of key people losing interest can upset the whole process.

While these disadvantages present potential or real challenges to the success of a participatory planning process, overcoming them may tremendously increase the possibility of designing and carrying out an effective community intervention.

What are the levels of participatory planning?

There are a number of ways to consider participatory planning. As demonstrated in the discussion above of advantages and disadvantages, this kind of process always presents, even at best, a trade-off between efficiency and inclusiveness. Time pressure, the needs of the community, the skills and experience of those participating, and the nature of the intervention, among other factors, all help to dictate the actual shape of the planning process.

So what are the possibilities? Just how participatory do you want to be? David Wilcox, in his excellent "Guide to Effective Participation," sets out the following as a model of the different possible levels of

participation:

- *Information* - The least you can do is tell people what is planned.
- *Consultation* - You offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get.
- *Deciding together* - You encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding the best way forward.
- *Acting together* - Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but they form a partnership to carry it out.
- *Supporting independent community initiatives* - You help others do what they want - perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder.

Each of these levels may be appropriate in different circumstances, or with different groups, although only at "deciding together" and above do they really begin to be fully participatory in the sense that the term is used in this section.

When is participatory planning appropriate?

Information-only may be appropriate when:

- The course of action has already been decided - by a funder, for instance
- You're simply reporting on something that's already in progress
- You're keeping people informed so that they'll have the information to be part of a participatory effort later

Consultation-only may be appropriate when:

- You want to evaluate or improve existing services

- There are limited options, and you're trying to choose among them
- There are technical reasons - again, perhaps because of a funder - why only certain people or groups can be officially involved in the planning process

> But remember, if you consult with people in the community, you have to pay attention to what they tell you. If you're simply going to ignore their ideas and recommendations, you shouldn't consult at all. Being asked for an opinion and then ignored is much more insulting and infuriating than never being asked in the first place. At the very least, people deserve an explanation of why their advice isn't being followed.

Deciding together may be appropriate when:

- It's important that everyone feel ownership of the plan
- You want fresh ideas from as many sources as possible
- You can pull in people whom the intervention will directly affect
- There's a commitment to provide support through the process for those who need it
- There's enough time

> In reality, as mentioned earlier, a planning process often is time-limited by proposal deadlines, the severity of the need (if teenagers are dying every day by gunfire, a violence prevention program needs to get under way quickly), the requirements of other partners or funders, etc. The trick is to balance participation and time restraints, and to try to use the highest level of participation possible under the circumstances.

Acting together may be appropriate when:

- The intervention will be more effective than if it were run by a single entity
- There is a funder's requirement for community oversight
- There is commitment to the development of a real partnership
- Everyone benefits from acting together
- One goal of the intervention is the eventual assumption of leadership or the learning of leadership skills by the target population and/or others in the community

> The word "partnership" implies a relationship of equals, where everyone has an equal voice, and where power and responsibility are equally shared. Forming such a relationship, even in circumstances where everyone truly desires it, is not a quick or easy task. It takes time, commitment both to the process and the end product (the partnership), and the willingness to air and work through disagreements and philosophical differences. If you're not willing to give yourself to the development of a real partnership, acting together may be only a future goal for your organization and its community.

Supporting local initiatives may be appropriate when:

- There is a commitment to community empowerment
- The community has the desire and at least some of the tools to start and run a successful intervention
- There is a commitment to provide training and support where needed
- Your organization can only provide support, or can only run an intervention for a short time

> As you try to determine what level of participation is right for your situation, consider this: A participatory planning process has the potential to become a charade meant only to convince the community that a participatory process is going on.
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> An adult educator related a conversation with his father-in-law, who worked in a factory of one of the big Detroit automakers. The company had initiated Total Quality Management, and had reorganized the factory workers into teams. Each team included workers from each step in the car manufacturing process, and was meant to be responsible for the building of a whole car from start to finish. Furthermore, each team was supposed to be able to change its procedures to make them more efficient or easier, and thus to improve production through the knowledge and skill of team members.
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> Knowing that his father-in-law was a longtime union activist and socialist, the younger man said, "That must be great. The workers actually have some control over production." The father-in-law, however, quickly burst the bubble. "No, it's the same as it was before, except now they make us sit in meetings and tell them what we think before they ignore us. Nothing has changed. They're just going through the motions, so they can tell the public they're doing something different."

When is participatory planning not appropriate?

There are also some general guidelines for when a participatory planning process may not be appropriate at all, including:

- A grant may have to be written immediately, for instance, or a situation - youth violence, perhaps - may have reached such crisis

proportions that it must be addressed immediately. In such a circumstance, it may be possible to do some participatory planning after the fact, either to adjust the intervention before it begins, or to plan its next phase.

- When a community is so brutally divided, it's impossible to get all - or even any - of the rival factions to the same table.
- When there's no way to provide proper support - facilitation, structure, etc. - for the process.
- When the target population is simply not interested in participating, and just wants the organization to take care of it. One goal may be to get them interested, but that may have to be part of the intervention, rather than part of the planning process.
- When the intervention rests on technical knowledge of a kind that the target population and community members simply don't have.
- When involving all or most stakeholders simply isn't logistically possible, because of distance, time, or other issues.
- When funding constraints or funders' regulations don't allow it.
- When there is no trust between your organization and the community. This may be because the organization is new and unproven, or because of past history. In the latter circumstance, it is important to reestablish trust, but it may not be possible to do this before the intervention needs to be planned.

Who should be involved in a participatory planning process?

The ideal answer here is everyone who is affected by the proposed intervention, but that's seldom possible, or even desirable. You may

be talking about thousands of people, too many for an effective planning process. In reality, there should be strong and effective representation for everyone involved, including:

Targets of Change

Targets of change are the people at whom the intervention is aimed or whom it is intended to benefit. That could be very specific (e.g. teen mothers, for a job training program aimed at teen parents) or very general (the community as a whole, for a smoking prevention and cessation initiative aimed at everyone in the community).

There are really two groups to be considered here:

- Members of the target community, both those on whom the intervention is specifically focused, and others who share their culture, age, language, or other characteristics.
- People whom the target community sees as significant opinion makers. They may be members of the target population itself, or outsiders - clergy, advisors, former community members who now move in circles of power, politicians, etc. - whom people in the target community trust and rely on.

Agents of Change

Agents of change are the people who make or influence policy or public opinion. These include actual policy makers, but also encompass people influential in the community at large, who can help or block an intervention by their support or opposition.

Policy makers

- Local elected or appointed officials

- State or federal elected or appointed officials who have influence in the community or over the issue at which the intervention is aimed.

  > If elected officials agree to be involved in your planning, they'll often send aides to represent them. This can be preferable to the officials themselves attending, since the aides often have a great deal of influence over their bosses, and are also more likely to have the time to participate fully.

- Local public agency heads (welfare, e.g.) who actually administer policy in the community. If they're involved from the beginning, they may be able to bend rules or otherwise alter their procedures to smooth the way for the intervention.
- Local university professors or researchers who are viewed as experts on the issue in question.

Influential people in the community

- Members of the business community. There are a number of good reasons to try to involve the business community: They tend to be practical, often a helpful trait. They also tend to be conservative, so that if they support the effort, their credibility - and, as a result, that of the intervention itself - may be high among other conservative elements in the community. They are often directly affected by such issues as illiteracy, employee health, insurance, the environment, etc., and so may be quick to see the need for an intervention. Last but not least, they often have access to money, which may be important to sustaining the intervention over time.
- Clergy and the faith community. In many communities, clergy wield great influence, and many see involvement in community issues as part of their spiritual mission. Faith-based groups, because of their cohesiveness, their sense of purpose, and their moral standing, can

be powerful forces in a community.

- Natural leaders, those whom others respect and listen to.
- The media, or others who have a public platform.
- Directors or staff of other organizations affected by the problem or issue. Many of these people may be highly respected or well known in the community.

A community intervention may involve a number of organizations, public agencies and services, and other groups. A community initiative to offer treatment to substance abusers, for instance, could involve, among others:

- Schools
- Police
- Local hospitals, clinics, and health maintenance organizations
- Services for youth
- Mental health centers
- Private therapists
- Employers
- United Way

Interested members of the community

These might include parents, youth, or school personnel, for instance, for an intervention dealing with youth. Many seniors have the time, the desire, and the experience to be excellent community volunteers. People with a personal or professional interest in the issue may also want to participate - parents whose children have

had drug problems, graduate students, retired teachers or doctors.

Members of the organization itself

Administrators and line staff, volunteers, current participants, board members, and supporters.

What do you need to do to get a participatory planning process up and running?

Recruit stakeholders

The obvious first step toward starting a participatory planning process is finding people to participate. Some of that relies simply on networking and old-fashioned legwork, but there's a logical process that accompanies it as well.

Identify the stakeholders

> How do you define stakeholders? The list of possible participants earlier in this section is one place to start. Your intervention may not need all, or even many of these groups or individuals. To determine who should participate, the best question to ask is "Who will be directly affected by this intervention?"
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> Answers here will vary greatly, depending upon the nature of the intervention. If the taxpayers will be asked to pay for it directly - through property taxes, for instance, as they would be for many school programs - then both community officials and ordinary taxpayers should have some voice in it. If the police or other community employees are to be asked to take on extra duties or to cooperate in specific ways to make the intervention work, they should be included in the planning.

These should always include, at the very least, members of the organization's staff and Board and the target population. In general, it also makes sense to include members of the community, especially if:

- The intervention needs community support or participation in order to succeed
- The intervention will affect the community as a whole
- The community is being asked to change in some way - its attitudes, behavior, assumptions, bylaws, etc.

Even if the community is not a specific stakeholder, it may make sense to involve community members in a planning process. Every intervention needs some level of community support in order to succeed. Community participation in planning will help to assure that support.

Get the word out

If your process is meant to be as inclusive as possible, then you should be using as many avenues as possible to inform the community about it - press releases, newspaper stories, fliers, posters, and public service announcements (PSA's) on radio and television, as well as community presentations, personal contact (either face-to-face or by phone), mailings, etc. If you're trying to inform only specific groups in the community, start with people in those groups you already know. They'll help to spread the word to their friends and acquaintances, who'll pass it on further still. They can also help you decide where to place other information so the target groups will be likely to encounter it.

Be sure that your message is simple and clear, and in the

languages that the community speaks. That means both using plain, understandable English, and using other languages spoken by people in the community. Your message may need to be in both English and Spanish, for instance, or in a number of languages, in order to reach everyone.

Be sure also that your message appears in places where it will be seen or heard by those it's aimed at. Supermarkets, laundromats, cafes, minority-language radio and TV stations, particular agencies, etc. may be good places to post your message.

Convene the planning process

Choose someone to convene the process

Regardless of what happens afterwards, someone needs to call people together and run a first meeting. If that person is identified with a particular group, then that group will probably be seen as in charge of the planning process. Depending upon the community, it could be important to think carefully about who should be in that position.

Sometimes it is best to find someone from outside the group - often an elected official or other respected figure - to run a first meeting. This type of choice both lends credibility to the intervention, and identifies it as a community effort, rather than that of a particular organization.

In a situation where a diverse core group has initiated the process, it may make sense for that group to convene a first meeting. The group's chair might then be the convener. In other cases - particularly where the organization will need a large amount of community support to make it work - it may make sense to present

the intervention as the project of your organization. In those situations, a Board chair or director would be the logical choice to convene the planning process.

Hold an initial meeting

An initial meeting might be open to a very large number of people (the whole community, or all of the target population, for instance) or to a smaller group (one representative from each of several agencies and organizations, a few selected members of the target group, etc.). The time, place, and tone of this meeting are all important in making sure that people will be willing to participate in it and in the process that follows. Some things you can do to help make it successful:

- Before the meeting, *try to personally invite as many people as possible*. People are much more likely to come if they know someone cares about their being there.
- *Plan meeting times around the convenience of those attending*, rather than the convenience of the organization. Evenings, weekends - even holding two or more meetings at different times - may make it possible for more people to participate.
- *Hold the meeting in a place that's convenient and comfortable for everyone involved*. If the community is divided into factions, choose a neutral place that everyone considers "safe." If there's no such problem, choose a place that's relatively easy to find and reach for everyone (on a bus line, plenty of parking, equally convenient to several neighborhoods, centrally located in a rural area, etc.)
- *Provide some food and drink*. The presence of food reduces formality and makes things more comfortable.

- *Consider carefully who'll run the meeting*. This choice may dictate how many people are willing to get involved in the process.
- *If the community is multilingual, make sure to have translators present, or to present everything in multiple languages*, so that everyone feels included.
- *Plan activities so that everyone at the meeting has a chance to be heard, either in the larger group or in a smaller one*. You asked people there to participate in a planning process: they should see from the very beginning that you were serious about that, and that their ideas will be taken seriously.
- *By the end of the meeting, there should be a clear next step, and everyone should know what it is*. Nothing can sidetrack a participatory planning process more quickly than generating enthusiasm and leaving it with no place to go.

  A large meeting is not always the best way to convene a process. In some communities, or with some groups, several smaller meetings, or meetings with one or two or three individuals may be the way to start. A large meeting may be intimidating to particular individuals or groups: they may not attend, or they may be unwilling to speak if they do attend. As with any process, it's important to start where the participants feel comfortable, and to work from there.

Maintain the planning process

Once the planning process has started, it has to be maintained. Participants have to continue to be interested, support has to be provided when it's needed, conflicts have to be resolved, methods have to be devised to keep the process reasonably efficient, goals

and deadlines have to be set, etc.

Choose someone to guide the planning process

Someone - realistically, it's usually the director or another administrator of the organization that will conduct the intervention, but it could be a Board chair, an outside facilitator, or a community member - has to monitor what's happening and make sure that nothing derails the planning. Finding the right person to fill this role is extremely important. He has to be able to communicate well with everyone involved, to see the big picture as well as the details, and to deal gracefully with both interpersonal and logistical problems. (That's why an outside facilitator is sometimes a good investment.)

Do you need an outside facilitator? In a situation where divisions are deep, or where no one available has the needed skills to keep the planning process on track, there may be a need for a neutral and experienced facilitator. A facilitator with no personal stake in the process or the community may be able to see - and defuse - the dynamics among the groups involved in the process. Her skills may be needed to handle that difficult individual referred to earlier, or to help different racial groups overcome their mutual suspicion. She may also be able to make what is by nature a sloppy process more efficient and effective.

Whether your planning will need an outside facilitator or not depends largely on the character of your community and the character of the relationships among its different elements. A good facilitator generally doesn't come cheap, so if you need one, you'll have to decide whether you can afford to hire her. But you'll also have to decide whether you can afford not to hire her, if you want to plan an intervention that works.

Decide who will issue final approval on a plan

If, as is often the case, the actual planning is done by a relatively small group, there is usually a mechanism to have the plan approved by some larger or governing body.

This body might take one of several forms:

- A meeting of all stakeholders
- A diverse group chosen to oversee the intervention
- A community meeting
- The Board of the organization
- A very small group - the director and Board chair, for instance, or even just one of them

Determine how long the planning process will go on

The planning you want to do might be for a single initiative or campaign, or might encompass years of collaboration on working with a large and diverse population. If the planning group is meant to continue, either to furnish oversight of the final plan, or to keep developing and changing the intervention as circumstances and the community's needs change, an ongoing participatory approach may be even more important to the intervention's success.

How well you maintain the process once it's begun is just as important to its success as how well you start it. Remember that the planning process itself is only a beginning.

In Summary

A participatory planning process - one in which all the stakeholders are involved - is often the most effective and inclusive way to plan a

community intervention. A participatory process provides community ownership and support of the intervention; information about community history, politics, and past mistakes; and respect and a voice for everyone. It also takes time, care, mutual respect, and commitment.

In order to conduct such a process well, you have to carefully consider what level of participation is most appropriate under the circumstances. You also must identify the stakeholders, and make sure they all get to the table, using communication techniques designed to reach them.

Care must be taken in getting the process under way. The person and methods chosen to convene it can both send messages about your intentions, and have a great effect on which and how many participants you attract.

Finally, the process must be maintained over time, so that momentum will not be lost. If you can manage a planning process that meets all these requirements, the chances are that you will come up with a successful community intervention, one that truly works and meets the community's needs.