
LEADING CHANGE

Strategies for Successful Citizen Engagement and Other Change Management Challenges

by Linda Goldstein



“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” ~ John F. Kennedy

Change is inevitable and that is especially true when it comes to local government. Public policy revisions are necessary for growth, staff members retire or pursue other opportunities, elected officials rotate off the board and new members are sworn into office. Community demographics change as residents enter different phases of life, from marriage and children to empty nesters. Businesses close. New businesses open. Change can be disruptive as well as necessary.

Do any of the following situations sound familiar?

- A vacant lot on the border of a commercial and residential area has sparked sudden, intense public interest. Some residents are lobbying for a dog park, others for a community garden, and the local retailers want the green space paved and turned into a parking lot. Some sort of improvement is long overdue, but what is the “right” choice?
- One of your city’s largest corporate citizens just announced their plan for a major campus expansion and

redevelopment project. It is wonderful news but you’re worried that when the initial enthusiasm dies down, nearby commercial and residential citizens will voice opposition because of traffic changes, possible parking issues, or other uncertainties. How do you address these and other legitimate concerns before the project goes from exciting to controversial?

- The cost of municipal services will exceed revenues next year, and the gap is projected to increase in subsequent years. Residents seem to want to maintain the existing service level, but not with increased taxes or fees to pay for them.

What to do...?

As the former mayor of Clayton, Missouri, I faced these challenges and many others that are shared by municipal staff and elected officials everywhere.

Fortunately, early in my career, I learned the importance of listening; asking the right questions; encouraging a reasonable and respectful dialogue; and moving stakeholders towards a

collective vision. An inclusive approach to change enabled the community to move forward with some bold initiatives.

No matter the cause, we can all learn from each other ways to steer difficult change towards a positive, productive outcome. Use the following concepts as a guide:

IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS

Who will be impacted, positively or negatively, by the change? In addition to residents, don’t forget businesses, organizations, neighborhoods and adjacent communities. Greater stakeholder diversity result in more creative and accepted decisions. In the development example referenced earlier, the project was adjacent to the local high school and a neighboring municipality. We recognized the potential impact of traffic flow for each of these two stakeholders and engaged them early in the process.

USE DATA

Gauge community knowledge and preferences as they currently stand. Remember the dog park, community garden, parking lot dilemma? A

statistically valid survey indicated that neighbors within a half-mile of the project supported “none of the above.” Instead, the space is now a beautifully landscaped park with picnic tables, public art, and open play space for children.

CREATE AND IMPLEMENT A COMMUNICATION / OUTREACH PLAN

What forms of communication are most effective in your community? What efforts will result in maximum public participation? Be sure to consider personal invitations via telephone, letter or email, as well as community-wide methods such as newsletters, e-blasts, website and social media posts. After determining the most effective communication methods, develop a timeline for message delivery.

CONDUCT A DIALOGUE AND OBTAIN INPUT

Explain why the change is being considered; objectively present the facts; and clarify any misunderstandings about the project. Be clear about how stakeholder input will be used and the influence participants can have on the final decision.

Some people are intimidated speaking in a large group setting, so in addition to public hearings and town hall meetings, consider smaller venues. For example, take your message to neighborhood association meetings, local coffee shops, condo meetings – go to places where people congregate and feel comfortable. Another effective outreach strategy is online discussion through interactive websites and social media.

EVALUATE, ADAPT AND CONTINUE DIALOGUE

Incorporate appropriate ideas to improve the original proposal and report back to stakeholders. As Clayton considered becoming smoke-free, officials learned through engagement efforts with restaurants and retailers that a highway reconstruction project was negatively impacting business. As a result of this input, the City delayed implementation of the Clean Air Ordinance until the highway re-opened; expedited permits for outdoor dining areas; and conducted a promotional campaign inviting visitors to enjoy smoke-free restaurants and shops.

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essential for growth and change in our communities. Citizen engagement is an ongoing process and it will help you:

- Determine the best solution through collective wisdom and multiple perspectives;
- Maximize the public’s satisfaction with the ultimate decision; and
- Foster the public’s support for this and future initiatives.

Dialogue needs to continue as changes unfold, unanticipated issues emerge, and new stakeholders and partners come forward.

In addition to external change when creating a collective vision, it is important to address internal change. Teamwork and effective communication are essential for policy-making and administrative teams alike. What can a leader do to get everyone on the boat and rowing in the same direction?

In the book *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown, the author writes that rowing takes discipline, hard work, talent and coordination. Leading your crew whether in a boat or in city governance, winning the race starts with a reality check of the team’s current effectiveness and a plan to maximize team and individual strengths. Once everyone is in the boat, it is important they know where the finish line is and that they are all

engaged in working together to win. After the win, everyone’s contribution should be recognized as the team celebrates its achievement.

The pace of change is accelerating, and it is more important than ever to learn to steer change for powerful, positive outcomes. □

Prior to starting her consulting firm, **Linda Goldstein** was a senior level organizational leader and small business owner. She was elected as Clayton’s first woman mayor and served a total of 14 years in public office. Her consulting firm, Linda Goldstein Consulting, helps facilitate change for a positive outcome through citizen engagement and community outreach, leadership development and organizational planning. They work with local governments, public agencies and communities to help them embrace change in order to move forward and grow.

If you would like to learn more about strategies to make change possible in your community, please join Linda at the MML Annual Conference for the pre-conference workshop on Sunday, Sept. 11.