

Workshop Seven

VISIONING COMMUNITY CHANGE

Objectives

- To understand how communities change.
- To explore the relationship between our ideal and real communities.

Outcomes

- Participants will be able to reflect on the similarities and differences between the communities of their youth and the communities of today.
- Participants will be able to describe some of the ways in which communities change over time.
- Participants will be able to analyze some of the ways in which communities support their members.
- Participants will be able to define their ideal communities and compare them with their real communities.

I. Welcome and Agenda Review

(10 minutes)

Welcome everyone to the meeting, check in and see how they are doing. Review the agenda, and talk about some of the goals of the activities. Let people know that you would like to take time to explore some of their perceptions and feelings about communities and engage in a dialogue to better understand both the challenges of their present communities and the visions that the group has for doing this work.

This session begins to formally make the shift from the individual and the group to the community. Building on earlier principles, the session allows the facilitator to begin to assess how people are doing in moving from the individual perspective to a more macro view of their role in community change. To begin this process, this workshop works to give us a better understanding how people feel about their community and the challenges they face within it.

II. Social Barometer Exercise: Yesterday and Today

(20 minutes)

Draw an imaginary line down the room. Explain to the group members that this exercise involves moving across the imaginary line to express their opinions—from strongly disagree to strongly agree. After each statement, process and help people articulate their range of opinions, choosing a number of individuals across the spectrum to explain why they chose to stand where they did. After group members have shared a few explanations for each phrase, move on to the next and begin again.

It is harder to be a child today than it was when I was a child.

It is harder to be a parent today than it was when my family was raising me.

There is less support in the community for families now than there was when I was growing up.

Thank everyone for participating in the activity. Point out that people perceive situations differently, and sometimes use the same

words to mean different things. Note that when we begin to talk to each other about our communities, it is important to make sure that we understand the way in which people are expressing themselves and the specific meaning of their words.

This exercise is intended to highlight the fact that we all see our communities in different ways. Neighbors who have lived next door to one another for years may see the activities on their own street from very different perspectives. At the heart of community work is the blending of different views into common action to address a commonly held problem. It is important that you find a way to link this exercise to the experiences of the participants. For example, as people talk about their different placements on the line, try to elicit stories or experiences that illustrate their perspectives. You may find that one or two participants regularly put themselves on a different place on the line than the majority. This might make them feel alienated from others or feel that their opinions are somehow less valuable or wrong. Try to validate everyone and point out that differences represent the diversity of perspectives that exist in all of our communities.

III. Communities Change

(25 minutes)

Use puzzle pieces or some other technique to break the group down into small groups. You want to have approximately five people in each small group. Have each group brainstorm a list of some of the ways in which the communities they grew up in have changed since they were growing up in them. Give them about five to ten minutes to brainstorm within the group and then ask each group to report back to the larger group, noting the answers on the board or on chart paper. If they do not raise key issues, probe for the following: changes in

demographics (bigger, smaller, different ethnic composition, different class composition); changes in the industrial-farming base; changes in what people do for a living; changes in how people interact, i.e., rules for group interaction and for ways of dealing with people who are different.

The critical point to emphasize here is that the communities in which we live and work are always in transition. Consequently, when we work in communities, we need to be attuned to changes and how they affect the people who live there.

POINTER – There are many different ways to break a large group into small groups. Some of these methods are merely practical, such as counting off by a number that will divide the group in the desired number of small group members. The puzzle piece method mentioned in this exercise is a little more light-hearted. Use different colored sheets of origami paper and cut each sheet into “puzzle pieces” based on the number of small group members desired. Mix up all the puzzle pieces in a bowl or hat and have each group member pick one, find others in the room who have the same colored pieces, and then put together the “puzzle.” Small groups can also be assigned in advance by placing adhesive colored dots or other stickers on name tags. The goal here is to mix up individuals who know each other or who tend to congregate together.



This exercise begins to set the stage for an eventual analysis of the community through new eyes that see changes as part of an ongoing process. The important point is that communities are always changing and can change for the better or worse. We have a role in determining the course that our community takes in the future. The previous exercise can be referenced here by reminding participants that while communities are in constant change, not everyone experiences the changes in the same way. In fact, some may not notice community change at all

IV. Community Supports

(30 minutes)

Point out that community support systems often change over time. (Note some of the examples that people have already brought up in relationship to this.) Tell the group they are now going to participate in an activity to explore the issue of community supports in more detail.

Using Handout #1, have each person respond to the following:

The greatest strengths in the community in which I grew up included _____.

The people in my community who were recognized as community leaders included _____.

If my family needed help when I was growing up, they would get it from _____.

If my family needed help today, we would turn to _____.

The ways in which I feel my community today could be improved include _____.

Have group members pair up and review their responses to Handout #1. After the pairs have discussed their responses with each other, open the floor for discussion of these issues. Encourage participants to answer as concretely as possible, rather than responding in generalities.



POINTER – After participants have interacted with each other and shared their responses on the worksheet, open the discussion up to the full group. Drawing from the comments, explore the meaning of the changes in community support for the group. Participants should try to consider the implications for families that may not now have the supports being discussed. Highlighting these issues and problems may help participants think about how things could possibly change to strengthen those supports.

BREAK

15 minutes

V. Community Visioning: Our Ideal Communities

(60 minutes)

If you are conducting training with individuals who come from different neighborhoods, communities or counties, people who come from the same community should be grouped together for this activity. If all members of the group are from the same community, have people remain in the small groups into which they were divided above.

Give each group chart paper and a variety of magic markers, colored pencils or crayons (Each group should have multiple colors at their disposal.) Ask each group to engage in a brief discussion of what their ideal community or neighborhood would look like, and then draw a picture of it. Let the groups know that they will be sharing these pictures with the other groups, so they should be thinking about which of their members will be willing to present and explain their drawings to the larger group.

Give each group about 30 minutes to draw their “ideal community” pictures. (People generally become very engaged and will want to give their maps some real detail.) After the groups are done, have them share their pictures with the larger group and describe the components of their ideal community. Tape the drawings up around the room so that all participants can see them. Compare and contrast some of the visions of the “ideal” community.

The community visioning exercise is usually a highlight of the training. While some may react to the concept negatively at first, it is unusual to find a critical person after the exercise is completed. The community visioning process takes time and it is often difficult to pull people away from the drawing to report back to the group. So have the necessary pens and butcher block paper ready to go. For most people, to draw the “ideal community,” they must first think about the current state of affairs. The discrepancy is often a source of energy for engaging in this exercise. That fact, plus the opportunity to really think about what the community could be like tends to fuel the creative process—even in those who hate to draw.

Sharing the pictures after the drawing process can sometimes go flat after people have invested so much in thinking about the ideal. To address this you might consider asking the following questions of each group:

- 1) Describe why each element of your community is critical
 - 2) What makes your community special?
- Allow five to ten minutes for each report.

A Word About Drawing Ideal Communities

As one might expect, people often take many different approaches to drawing an ideal community. Many groups will seek to draw an environmental representation of the ideal community, with spacious green areas, good housing, lots of parks and recreation and other community services. Others may approach the task more conceptually, drawing something that looks more like an organizational chart than a community environment. Still others may attempt a metaphoric representation of their ideal, using rainbows and other symbols of harmony or well being to point towards their ideal community. It is important for facilitators to remember that there is no “wrong” way to carry out this exercise. The goal is for people to reflect upon and try to capture the key components/characteristics of an ideal community and to share these reflections with one another.

VI. The Ideal vs. The Real

(30 minutes)

Ask the group as a whole to compare their ideal communities with the “real” current status of their communities. How do they compare? Get a list on the board or on chart paper of some of the ways in which participants’ communities fall short of their ideal. These ways constitute the beginnings of the formation of issues for community action. The challenge is to take these generalized conversations and begin to clearly identify and articulate issues.

In this discussion, the group seeks to describe the dissonance between what “is” and what “could be.” Try to surface fairly concrete examples of the discrepancy between the ideal and the current state of affairs in the communities where the participants live and/or work. You can push the participants a little here if they seem to be disconnected between the ideal and real. Participants may feel very powerless about fixing problems in their community. Problems may seem too big or some people may have had very negative experiences trying to engage in community action before, resulting in cynicism or anger. If possible, it is better to surface these feelings during the training rather than when community action is beginning. Some of the participants may come from communities where crime, violence and poverty are everyday conditions. Anger at the current state of affairs and those holding power is to be expected and can serve as a basis for future action.

VII. Closing Activity

(10 minutes)

Have group members share their reactions to the ideal community exercise with another member of the group. How did the activity make them feel? What is needed for the ideal to become real?

VIII. Homework for Workshop Seven

Ask for volunteers to collect community maps, resource lists, and directories to be brought to the next training. Explain that these items will be used in the next workshop. To lend a more personal perspective on your community, ask if participants know individuals who have lived in the community for a long time and encourage them to interview these individuals about the community’s history. Ask all participants to take a few minutes to fill out Handouts #2 and #3 on community resources to help prepare for the next workshop.

Emphasize that the homework is essential to the process of understanding the assets and liabilities of each participant’s community. Also, failure to do the homework will make it more difficult to complete the community mapping activities that form the core of Workshop Eight.

If Your Community Action Group Is Already Up and Running

While the activities in this workshop are not critical to everyday participation in your program’s community action group, they are quite helpful in assisting residents in building a vision of what their work might accomplish. If your community action group is working on a specific issue, try including a visioning exercise in the discussion of possible outcomes. While some of the “ideal” outcomes might seem too far off to be realized, they will help your group identify its passion and heart. Ideal outcomes can then be broken into smaller steps, each of which can help bring a community closer to the ideal.

WORKSHOP SEVEN

Handouts

Notes

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Workshop Seven – Handout #1

Community Supports

The greatest strengths in the community in which I grew up included:

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The people in my community who were recognized as community leaders included:

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If my family needed help when I was growing up, they would get it from:

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If my family needed help today, we would turn to:

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The ways in which I feel my community today could be improved include:

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Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.

Workshop Seven – Handout #2

Community Description I

Briefly describe some of the primary economic, social or demographic characteristics of your target community.

Current economic conditions

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Racial and/or socioeconomic breakdown

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Geographic features

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Major employers

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Recent trends

Other factors that define your community

Workshop Seven – Handout #3

Community Description II

List all of the groups/resources that are located in or serve your target community.

Justice System/Courts (e.g., DA’s office)

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Law Enforcement (e.g., police)

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Education (e.g., elementary, middle, high school, private and parochial schools, colleges)

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Youth Serving Organizations (e.g., YMCA, Boys Clubs)

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Religious Organizations (e.g., church, mosque, temple)

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Health Services (e.g. community-based clinics, health department, hospitals, private providers)

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Civic/Volunteer Organizations (e.g., Links, Lions Club)

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Fire Department

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Media (e.g., local TV, radio, newspapers)

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Businesses (e.g., major employers, private companies)

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Government (e.g., City Council, Community Board, State Representatives, Congress, Senate)

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Cultural/Ethnic Groups (e.g., NAACP, ASPIRA)

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Senior Citizens' Groups (e.g., AARP, senior centers)

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Prevention/Treatment Providers (e.g., mental health centers, AA and NA)

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Existing community action or community development groups

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