

Tackling Wicked Problems Takes Resident Engagement

by Mike Huggins and Cheryl Hilvert



Local governments throughout the United States and many of the world's democracies are struggling to adapt to a paradigm shift—one that is resetting the roles and responsibilities of local governments, residents, and the private sector in how communities govern themselves. In the United States, disruptions to public services reached crisis proportions following the 2008 collapse in the housing market and global financial meltdown. Fiscal instability continues to plague many U.S. local and state governments.

The impact of these changing conditions is compounded by a half-century trend of local government, education, and community civic institutions becoming more task- and service-oriented, as well as organizational cultures becoming increasingly hierarchical, narrow in scope, and expert defined.

As a result, local community governance and public problem solving have become more detached from the ordinary citizen. This has led to more limited and fragmented public roles for residents, while at the same time, greatly diminishing the capacities of communities to collectively take action on the issues that confront them.

In dealing with the local impacts of national and global issues and the myriad other problems confronting local governments, managers must do so in a public policy context more frequently characterized by widely dispersed expertise in the community, rapidly expanding social media platforms and venues for sharing information and opinions, more organized and active advocacy groups, more incivility in public discourse, and a declining public trust in government.

“WICKED” PROBLEMS

The difficult issues and challenging environments confronting local governments result in managers operating more and more in the realm of what may be called wicked problems: complex, interdependent issues that lack a clear problem definition and involve the conflicting perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

Solutions to these problems are not right or wrong, only better or worse. Wicked problems rarely yield to a linear approach in which problems are defined, analyzed, and addressed in a sequential and orderly fashion.

Rather, the most effective strategies appear to be more open-ended and focused on producing ongoing collaboration and engagement with all stakeholders, including community residents and nongovernmental organizations, to find the most acceptable solution.

While collaboration and engagement are suggested as an appropriate approach to wicked problems, to many this represents a challenge that is wicked in and of itself. Many managers simply don't know where to begin, how to plan effective programs for engagement, how to measure their efforts, or where to turn for resources and assistance.

EMERGING ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Ray Kingsbury, cofounder of the Montgomery, Ohio, Citizens' Leadership Academy, believes it is essential for local government to take a more robust approach to engagement—one that empowers residents to take action, rebuilds trust with local government, and "harvests the experience dividend" that residents bring to public problem solving.

Billed as the "Coolest Civics Class You'll Ever Take," the Montgomery Leadership Academy takes a different twist on the traditional local government citizens' academy by minimizing the use of organizational charts and PowerPoint presentations to describe what city and county departments do. Instead, Montgomery's 10-session academy engages participants in conversations about aspirations for their communities and creating opportunities for participants, officials, and staff to work together on community issues and projects.

Kingsbury issues a challenge to managers saying, "Local government leaders need to understand that government is not the epicenter, but rather a *subset* of the community," adding that successful and positive community engagement requires local governments to move from:

- Directive to facilitative leadership.
- Monologue to dialogue.
- Customer service to collaboration and co-creation.
- Distrust to trust.
- Entitlement to ownership.

In her book *Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table: A Guide for Public Managers*,¹ Carolyn Lukensmeyer explores the concept of shared responsibility for civic engagement and identifies three essential roles to ensure that engagement becomes the mechanism through which local government business is accomplished:

- *Residents* need to have to embrace an active role in their communities and demand that they be given authentic opportunities to participate on a regular basis.
- *Elected officials* need to ensure opportunities for civic participation.
- *Public managers* need to embed citizen engagement in the work of the local government.

The Alliance for Innovation white paper *Connected Communities: Local Government as a Partner in Citizen Engagement and Community Building* (see Endnotes for website link) discusses how local governments can be active contributors and facilitators for meaningful resident engagement.

The report draws a distinction between *exchange* activities that provide information, build transparency, invite input and survey opinion, and *engagement* activities that move involvement to a higher level of interaction and provide opportunities for residents and

officials “to listen to and learn from each other and to work together over time to address issues or problems they feel are important.”²

The report concludes that “citizen engagement focuses on revitalizing democracy, building citizenship, and reinforcing a sense of community, and it cannot be equated with one-way exchanges between government and citizens.”³

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) offers the Public Participation Spectrum that further elaborates on the distinction between exchanges with citizens and citizen engagement, identifying five levels of interactions ranging from simply *informing* citizens to fully *empowering* them to make decision. With each increasing type of interaction, the potential impact of the public participation on the actual decision increases.

The IAP2 spectrum advocates for local governments to identify the objective of the engagement activity and the promise it intends to make to its citizens. It further concludes that not all resident engagement is the same, and the design and format of the engagement needs to be matched to purpose and intended outcomes of the engagement activity.

FIGURE 1. IAP2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM.

	EXCHANGES WITH CITIZENS		CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT		
LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
OBJECTIVE	Provide the public with balanced and objective information and assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	Obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendation into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
EXAMPLE TOOLS	Fact sheets; Websites; Open houses.	Public comment; Focus groups; Surveys; Public meetings.	Workshops; Deliberative polling.	Citizen Advisory Committees; Consensus building; Participatory decision making.	Citizen juries; Ballots; Delegated decisions.

Source: International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), www.iap2.org. Used with permission.

BRIDGING THE “ENGAGEMENT GAPS”

For most local governments, an effective civic engagement strategy will likely incorporate multiple levels of interaction described in the IAP2 Spectrum (see Figure 1). Not all participants will choose to engage at the highest level chosen; some will engage at lower levels based on their interest and available time.

In a collaborative approach, for example, some citizens will participate directly as members of a working group, still more will attend workshops or meetings (likely the "Involve" level, Figure 1), others will share input online ("Consult"), and even more stay connected through media and websites but not provide input ("Inform").

Thus, local governments are required to use a variety of approaches that will effectively engage a wide range of stakeholders where they wish to participate, while at the same time encouraging the interactions to shift from simple "exchanges with citizens" to more robust "citizen engagement."

Regardless of the approaches taken, author Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium⁴ warns of typical gaps that can lessen the effectiveness or even derail engagement strategies. These gaps include:

- The lack of cross-sector plans or structures that embed and sustain engagement.
- The need for tracking, measuring, and assessing participation.
- The use of online engagement that supports and complements face-to-face opportunities.
- The need to bring a diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds to the table.

A local government manager should be aware of the potential presence of the gaps in their community's civic engagement strategy. Addressing the potential for them begins with a commitment to planning and measuring various meaningful engagement opportunities (both online and face-to-face) for people across all sectors of their community.

Opportunities need to be created where community members can expect the chance to listen to one another, to compare values and experiences, and to make the decision to become engaged, ultimately feeling that their opinions and actions make a difference.

MOVING FORWARD WITH ENGAGEMENT

The *Connected Communities* report concludes that engagement is both the right and smart thing for local governments to do, and in the current environment of reduced resources and wicked problems, should be looked at as a mandatory skill for managers—and something they must learn to do well.

There is no single best way to achieve engagement or one technique or format that serves all engagement purposes. Recent public engagement research from a variety of sources,⁵ however, consistently suggests similar types of strategies for any engagement effort.

Building upon these research findings, here are 10 suggestions that managers should consider in building an effective engagement strategy for their communities:

1. Take stock of what you are already doing, distinguishing between exchange and engagement efforts.
2. Assess how receptive your organization is to initiatives from community groups and to what extent your organizational culture supports civic engagement.
3. Work with your elected officials to convene a community conversation on engagement to hear from residents how they wish to be involved in shaping community life and how local government could contribute to meeting their aspirations.
4. Identify potential issues that need resident engagement and involvement, including new ways staff could interact with residents in the day-to-day delivery of services.
5. Plan an engagement event by matching the purpose and intended outcomes with the appropriate technique and activity.

6. Actively recruit diverse stakeholder groups beyond the “usual suspects” who always participate.
7. Provide participants multiple opportunities to compare values and interests and articulate self-interests, and include opportunities in both large forums and small-group discussions.
8. Seek to combine both online and face-to-face engagement opportunities and venues.
9. Design engagement initiatives to move from talk to action by identifying tangible goals and desired outcomes; then, measure your success.
10. Develop an ongoing program in partnership with residents and community organizations to build meaningful engagement and facilitate resident problem solving in the work of local government.

Join the CMS Discussion

Be part of ICMA’s conversation on civic engagement by visiting these websites:

Center for Management Strategies (CMS): icma.org/managementstrategies.

CMS Knowledge Network Group featuring posted reports and documents: icma.org/cmsgroup.

CMS blog, featuring commentary by technical assistance providers and specialists: icma.org/cmsblog.

Civic engagement Knowledge Network group: icma.org/kn/citizenengagement.

A CALL TO ACTION

While there are a variety of resources available that can assist managers in developing an engagement strategy for their communities, getting started can be difficult. In fact, when local elected officials were asked in a 2006 National League of Cities survey⁶ about the main obstacles to pursuing engagement activities, the most common response was the “lack of training.” Many felt that both they and staff needed more background in how to recruit participants, facilitate meetings, frame issues, and move from talk to action in engagement settings.

Toward this end, ICMA’s Center for Management Strategies (CMS) and its partners, the Alliance for Innovation and Arizona State University, have completed research into the field of civic engagement, identifying both best and leading practices as well as key experts and practitioners to assist managers in implementing effective strategies for engagement in their communities.

Key findings of this research,⁷ suggest:

1. When done well, citizen engagement has been shown to be both the right thing to do in terms of promoting democracy and community building, but also to be the smart thing to do in terms of creating better decisions and policies, improving civility and trust in government, and fostering an educated and engaged citizenry.
2. There is a need for a more comprehensive, intentional, and holistic approach to citizen engagement that brings together actors and agencies throughout a municipality, instead of one-shot activities that occur in isolation.
One way to begin is by conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing capacities and past strategies and experiences. It may be necessary to examine and possibly revise current legal mandates and existing policies and procedures related to engaging with the public.
3. Beyond integrated plans within the formal governmental body, it is also important to develop cross-sector plans that embed and sustain engagement throughout communities.
4. There is a wide range of activities and techniques that can be used to engage with citizens. Before focusing on a particular tool or technique, it is important to first establish the purpose of the particular initiative (why engage?) and be clear upfront about the “promise to the public” in

regard to ways that residents can engage and what they can reasonably expect in terms of how their participation will be used (to what end?).

At the end of the day, effective civic action and problem solving depends on ordinary individuals thinking of themselves as productive people who hold themselves accountable—people who can build things, do things, come up with ideas and resources, and be bold in their approach. Communities need places and spaces where people can develop their civic capacities and their public lives.

Local governments need to recognize the importance of engagement work as well as the need for effective plans for engagement and ways to measure the results of their efforts. The local government manager will play a key leadership role in achieving these goals.

Key Resources

[“Connected Communities: A Local Government as a Partner in Citizen Engagement and Community Building.”](#) James Svara and Janet Denhardt, eds. Alliance for Innovation, 2010.

Matt Leighninger, [“Vitalizing Democracy through Participation: A Vital Moment,”](#) 2010 monograph for Bertelsmann Foundation.

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) [“Engagement Streams Framework.”](#)

Matt Leighninger and Bonnie Mann, [“Planning for Stronger Local Democracy: A Field Guide for Local Officials,”](#) National League of Cities, 2011.

John Bryson et al. “Designing Public Participation Processes,” *Public Administration Review*, January/February 2013. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2012.02678.x/pdf>.

ENDNOTES

1 “Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table: A Guide for Public Managers,” Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, Jossey Bass Books, 2012.

2 “Connected Communities: Local Government as a Partner in Citizen Engagement and Community Building,” James Svara and Janet Denhardt, eds. Alliance for Innovation, 2010.

3 “Connected Communities: Local Government as a Partner in Citizen Engagement and Community Building,” James Svara and Janet Denhardt, eds. Alliance for Innovation, 2010.

4 Leighninger, Matt (2012), “Identifying the Engagement Gaps.” In Kelly Campbell Rawlings (Ed.), *Civic Engagement* (pp. 75–81). Phoenix, Arizona: Arizona Town Hall.

5 “Connected Communities: Local Government as a Partner in Citizen Engagement and Community Building,” James Svara and Janet Denhardt, eds. Alliance for Innovation, 2010; Matt Leighninger, “Vitalizing Democracy through Participation: A Vital Moment,” 2010 monograph for Bertelsmann Foundation; National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) “Engagement Streams Framework,” Matt Leighninger and Bonnie Mann, “Planning for Stronger Local Democracy: A Field Guide for Local Officials,” National League of Cities, 2011; John Bryson et al. “Designing Public Participation Processes,” *Public Administration Review*, January/February 2013.

6 William Barnes and Bonnie Mann, “Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials Views about Public Engagement,” National League of Cities, 2010 Research Report, pg. 21.

7 Summary of key findings of AFI/ASU/ICMA research courtesy of Kelly Campbell Rawlings, Ph.D; Assistant Research Professor; School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University.

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