

From Our Experience....Ten Tips on Working with the Community

- 1. Be honest and clear about what you can do (and about what you can't do).**
We recommend that agencies identify "open" issues where there is room for change, and where community input can make a difference ... and then let community members know about it. At the same time, we encourage agencies not to be afraid to be honest about their limitations as well. Transparency is helpful for everyone.
- 2. Let the community decide what it wants to work on.**
An important component of our philosophy is that whatever the projects are, they should be selected by the participants themselves. Since the projects are implemented by participants, they need to agree about what to work on. This approach is especially effective when trust is lacking.
- 3. Don't create a new structure if it's not needed.**
Assess the communities in which you're working. Some communities are already highly organized around specific issues and may have community-driven initiatives in place to address these issues. It's most efficient and effective to plug into existing structures instead of starting something brand-new.
- 4. Don't be daunted by a limited budget.**
Significant, measurable long-term behavior change can be accomplished on a shoestring.
- 5. Never stop organizing.**
Continual recruiting efforts are necessary. Community organizing in underserved communities takes more support – not only are you dealing with participants that are low on resources, they are also stretched for time and energy. You need to spend more time than usual on recruiting efforts, and that recruiting is a never-ending process.
- 6. Proceed slowly in communities with a long history of mistrust.**
Particularly in communities that have been dealing with environmental injustice for many years. Over time communities can build up a strong distrust of government agencies, especially if things promised in the past have not delivered. Rushing in to "help" without taking the time to rebuild trust may damage more than repair relationships.
- 7. Focus on new people, not the "usual suspects."**
The most successful coalitions have diverse membership. Seek out people from various sectors of the community and think strategically about who can connect (or has connections) to the leader or organization you are targeting.
- 8. It's not one size fits all!**
Using multiple tools in a community engagement process offers a broad range of input and diverse information to use in policy-making discussions.
- 9. Model the behavior you are advocating.**
The way that meetings and other activities are held tells a lot about the way work happens. For example, meetings that start and end on time, are run efficiently, and for which everyone has tasks and follows through on their action items convey a culture of efficiency, focus and success. This creates a group people want to be a part of and an atmosphere where people feel good about contributing their limited time and resources.
- 10. and finally ... Be fun. Have fun.**
Build light moments into your work. Everyone likes to have fun.