OFFICE of EQUITY

COUNTY OF SONOMA

County of Sonoma Office of Equity
Community Engagement Toolkit

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Key Takeaways

A culturally responsive framework for community engagement is one that "affirms the worth and preserves the dignity of individuals, families and communities" (NAMI California, 2020) by being responsive to the needs, wisdom, and ways of being and knowing of community members who are marginalized by traditional engagement processes.

Two foundational organizational culture shifts are needed for culturally responsive community engagement:

- *Moving from Transactional to Reciprocal Relationships*

- *Moving from Saviorism to Redistribution of Power*

Accountability is essential for community engagement work, which looks like systemically:

1 | *Acknowledging the responsibility taken on by the institution when launching an engagement process.*

2 | *Creating the capacity to receive feedback about the impact of that process and what changes folx want to see.*

3 | *Committing to change structures and systems to incorporate and respond transparently to feedback from communities most impacted by systems.*

> *Honoring our Community-Based Leaders*
>
> Co-creating the conditions for culturally repsonsive engagement with community-based leaders.

Creating these organizational culture shifts requires accountability and operationalizing of key community engagement principles. These principles include:

- *Design to the Margins*

- *Prioritize Reciprocity*

- *Engage at Every Step*

- *Be Accountable*

This toolkit provides (1) examples ("practices") of what the application of these principles can look like, either in ways that promote healing or ways that create harm, (2) reflection questions to support teams and leadership with operationalizing these principles, (3) an accountability framework and (4) resources for implementation.
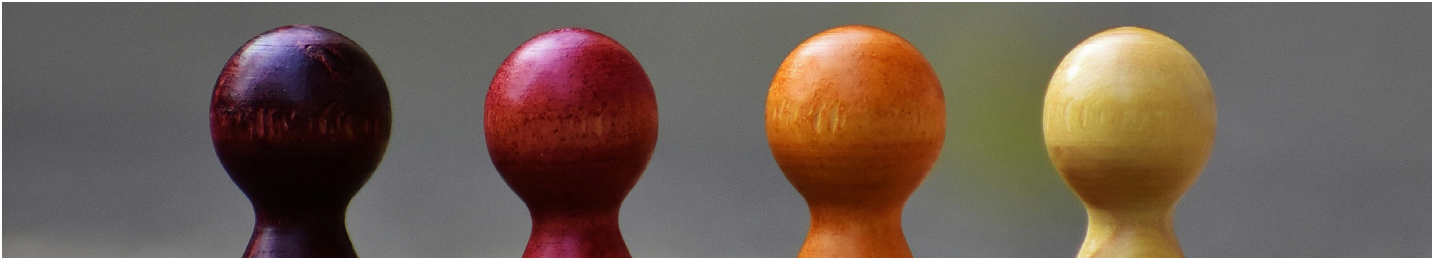
About the Office of Equity

In the summer of 2020, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors created the Office of Equity, taking a meaningful step to recognize the County's powerful role in unseating racial inequity in local communities. Since then, the Office of Equity has gone through a strategic planning process and engaged in an ongoing way with department heads and staff from across the County to further equity work. The work of the Office of Equity has been mostly internal. However, in line with the County's Racial Equity and Social Justice Pillar (Goal 4: Objective 1) to engage community members and stakeholder groups to develop priorities and to advance racial equity, the County Board of Supervisors invested American Rescue Plan Act funds to develop a Community Engagement Plan to provide clarity in expectations and responsibilities, as well as guidance on best practices on the County's community engagement efforts.

About the Toolkit

The Office of Equity of the County of Sonoma and the County Administrator's Office commissioned Equity First Consulting to develop and implement an equity-driven community engagement process to develop a Community Engagement Plan, informed by County leadership, staff, and community input, to provide guidance and best practices for engaging in a culturally responsive manner between County departments and community members and to break down barriers to meaningful engagement in Sonoma County.[1]

Guided by the framework Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership ("Spectrum") by Rosa González, this toolkit offers organizational culture shifts and an accountability framework to support creating the organizational systems needed to conduct culturally responsive community engagement. Informed by the development of Sonoma County's Community Engagement plan, and refined through the implementation process by Community-Based Leaders (CBLs), this toolkit is for municipalities, agencies, and departments to operationalize cultural responsiveness and equity within organizational systems when doing engagement with community.

[1] Language note: The County of Sonoma and Sonoma County: Throughout this Toolkit, the terms the County of Sonoma and the County (with a capital C) refer to the county's government (including electeds and staff). Sonoma County and the county (with a lowercase C) refer to the broader community of folx living within the county's borders, and the land on which they live.

Findings from the development of the Community Engagement Plan for the County of Sonoma included staff sharing that their experience with County-led community engagement was primarily outreach (pushing information out to community members), and that there was often not a clear understanding of the difference between this and meaningful, bidirectional engagement. Additional findings highlighted that some staff may not know that different forms of engagement are needed and have a lack of clarity, guidance, resources, policies, and procedures to learn how to conduct more active and authentic engagement.

While this toolkit cannot address all of the support needs raised by County staff in the Community Engagement Plan, it intends to create a foundation from which departments can build a County-wide shared language around what it looks like to design equitable, culturally responsive, and bidirectional engagement processes.

Utilizing this Toolkit

This Toolkit is meant to provide a framework for how to approach culturally responsive engagement in a way that moves an organization along the Spectrum of Engagement toward "community ownership."
The resources provided support the following two goals:

1 | *Support structural shifts in how organizations think about and approach community engagement.*

2 | *Create clarity on the role organizations play in increasing democratic participation.*

This toolkit is a reference guide for organizations who are ready to devote the necessary time, labor, and resources to create the internal systems needed to move along the Spectrum of Engagement. To facilitate this, the toolkit offers:

- *Overview of terminology and frameworks to guide community engagement*

- *Guidance for moving towards culturally responsive engagement*

- *Accountability mechanisms to support creating systems change*

- *Principles and practices for operationalizing culturally responsive engagement to increase healing and reduce harm*

- *Spotlight: Co-creating the conditions for culturally responsive engagement with community-based leaders*

- *Intentional use of engagement methods*

Defining Culturally Responsive Community Engagement

Community Engagement is defined by the Sonoma County Office of Equity and Equity First Consulting as the bidirectional (two-way) process by which an organization can learn from local communities about their needs and visions and offer meaningful co-design spaces, programs, resources, services, and information flow. A **culturally responsive**[2] framework for community engagement is one that "affirms the worth and preserves the dignity of individuals, families and communities" (NAMI California, 2020) by being responsive to the needs, wisdom, and ways of being and knowing of community members who are marginalized by traditional engagement processes.

DESIGNING TO THE MARGINS

Designing for the most privileged ▶ Designing for the communities who have been systemically excluded

CENTERING COMMUNITIES ON THE MARGINS

Culturally responsive community engagement requires the application of a design-to-the-margins framework. This framework focuses on the experiences individuals are likely to have when interacting with systems. These experiences differ for folx from different backgrounds, simply because the systems themselves were designed with the experiences, cultural ways, needs, and wisdom of a small subset of our broader community (the folx at the center of system design) in mind and without incorporating the experiences, ways, needs, or wisdom of communities at the margins.

Race is the single largest factor in determining whether an individual has meaningful, stable access to health, wealth, and overall well-being over the course of their lifetime, and when individuals live at the intersection of additional

[2] Cultural responsiveness as a concept is fundamentally different from the frequently used term, cultural competence. We do not recommend using the words (or, more to the point, the concept) cultural competence, as it implies that expertise on another culture is something one can fully "achieve." In reality, because cultures shift over time and the people within them are themselves quite diverse, this process must be iterative and ongoing.

identities on the margins because of systemic inequities, they will experience compounded harm. Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is defined as "the complex and cumulative way that the effects of different forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect—especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (Intersectionality, 2024).

THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The goal of culturally responsive community engagement should be movement along the Spectrum towards community ownership. The Spectrum charts a pathway to strengthen and transform local democracies through deep participation, particularly by communities commonly excluded from democratic processes and power, and to assess and transform community engagement efforts so that they advance community-driven solutions.

STANCE TOWARDS COMMUNITY	IGNORE	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	DEFER TO
	0	1	2	3	4	5
IMPACT	Marginalization	Placation	Tokenization	Voice	Delegated Power	Community Ownership
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GOALS	Deny access to decision-making processes	Provide the community with relevant information	Gather input from the community	Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into process & inform planning	Ensure community capacity to play a leadership role in implementation of decisions	Foster democratic participation & equity through community-driven decision-making; Bridge divide between community & governance

Source: Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership ("Spectrum") by Rosa González, Facilitating Power
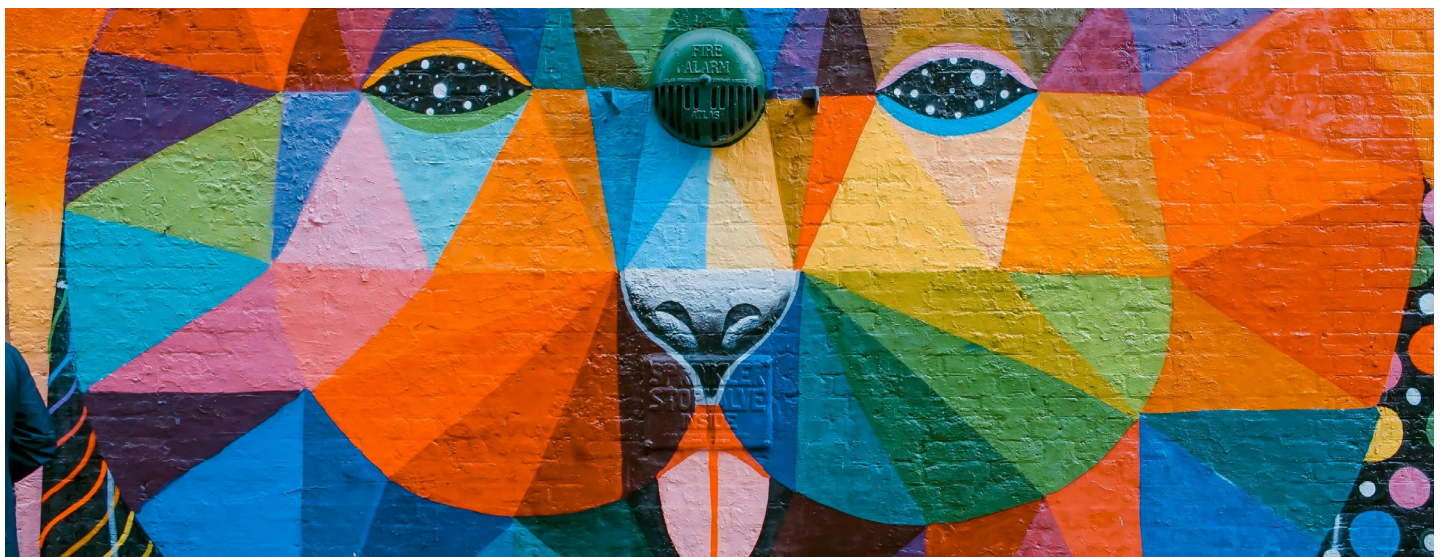
Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Community Engagement

An increasing number of agencies, organizations, and governments are recognizing the importance of engaging community members in the process of creating policies, programs, and allocating resources. However, many are finding it challenging to figure out how to do so in a bidirectional and reciprocal manner.

In response to these challenges, organizations can apply a culturally responsive approach to community engagement efforts. This requires holding a longer term lens of relationship building and a genuine desire to strengthen local democracies through deep participation of communities most often excluded from decision making.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE SHIFT

The organizational culture shifts needed to do this work start with your organization pausing to make sure its systems and processes are aligned with a deeper "why" driving your community engagement efforts. This means reflecting on the **mindsets** (attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, values, and worldviews) that underpin your organizational culture and how your systems are designed, which includes the extent to which an organization prioritizes meaningful engagement at all. This toolkit is concerned primarily with shifting the ways mindsets are **systematized**.

Authentic community engagement will only become embedded within an organization if leadership supports and dedicates the time and resources needed to operationalize systemic shifts. Systems shifts are needed to reorient policies, programs, budgets, and processes so that engagement is integrated throughout all areas of an organization.

Traditional engagement practices have often resulted in performative community engagement practices where an organization doesn't set up processes and systems that support long term culturally responsive relationship building. Performative engagement creates harm and erodes trust, which is why organizations must examine how their internal systems are set up, and the mindsets that underpin these systems, in order to redesign systems that operationalize relationship building and power redistribution throughout the engagement process, and ultimately, all points of contact with community.

For example, dominant narratives about who should be making decisions for whom have been embedded into our current engagement systems and structures since inception. The belief that academic expertise is more valuable than lived experience becomes operationalized when businesses staffed by people with advanced degrees receive large contracts, but community members are expected to share their wisdom

through engagement processes for free. This type of engagement is harmful in multi-layered ways: It is extractive, in that it literally extracts wisdom, time, and emotional labor from community members who receive nothing in return; and it further erodes trust.

MOVING FROM TRANSACTIONAL TO RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Community engagement is often assumed to be a one-way, single interaction. But this is more correctly labeled marketing and communications, and when it is substituted for community engagement, it results in transactional interactions with the community. Authentic community engagement is about creating systems, policies, and processes that center building long term relationships, so that **bidirectional** (two-way) learning between organizations and communities most impacted can occur and inform the ultimate outcome. Rather than confining engagement to a stand-alone "engagement process," organizations can invest in maintaining ongoing relationships throughout the year, have processes to maintain relationships when staff depart, and generate positive impacts in the community through your work.

MOVING FROM SAVIORISM TO REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Community Engagement practices can too often fall in the "ignore" or "inform" stage of the Spectrum of Community Engagement. Performative engagement efforts that extract information, which is then deemed less important than the advice of so-called experts who are assumed to know better than community members themselves, is a manifestation of saviorism.

Organizations who seek to do genuine community engagement must strive to move along the spectrum toward **community ownership**. According to Gonzalez (2021), this approach recognizes the critical importance of operationalizing increased "democratic participation and community-driven decision-making to bridge the divide between community and governance." This is particularly necessary when organizations

are looking to address inequities. The "nothing about us, without us" mindset, which originated from Eastern Europe at an international disability rights conference and was later invoked by Michael Masutha and William Rowland in the 1990s South African disability rights movement (Charlton, 2000), must be kept front and center throughout every step, which means that organizations serving communities on the margins cannot design any programs, policies, or structures without genuinely engaging with these communities and co-designing with them.

Examples of harmful mindsets

- *"Experts" (as determined by credentials, degrees, schooling, policy training, job experience, etc.) should guide decision making on behalf of community members.*

- *Defining "acceptable" forms of engagement as participation in the engagement process you structure and conduct, when in reality, communities can engage on an issue in ways of their own choosing (i.e. protests, rallies, letters to the editor, public dissatisfaction at engagement events about the engagement process itself, ect.) that are just as valid (and often more authentic) forms of input and which should be integrated into the ultimate results.*

- *Conflating "community engagement" with informing the community about what the government is doing or has already done.*

- *Measuring "success" only by the number of people you gave fliers to, or the number of people on your newsletter list, or the headcount at an event.*

- *Extracting "data" in the form of documenting often traumatic lived experiences with no reciprocity or accountability to follow through, then decontextualizing these stories to solicit funding.*

As a team and with leadership, discuss how harmful mindsets may show up in your organizational systems and culture and in how community engagement processes are designed, implemented, and evaluated:

1 | *What mindset(s) do your systems currently reflect? For example: Asking staff to do meaningful engagement without providing adequate funds for it.*

2 | *How can you help shift your organizational systems to more genuinely reflect the principles of culturally responsive community engagement? For example: investing in a full time staff position whose position includes relationship building.*

3 | *How can you engage communities who are most impacted by systemic harm to learn whether these organizational shifts are having a positive impact or not? For example: Asking community members about how their experience of engagement has shifted over time while noticing how as an organization you are responding to that feedback (or lack thereof, which is also a form of feedback).*

Building Accountability Mechanisms

At the core, organizational accountability means taking responsibility for the actions of the organization when they cause harm, and shifting your systems and structures to create the conditions for healing and repair (as defined and guided by the communities harmed). This requires (1) **receiving feedback**, (2) **taking responsibility,** (3) **committing to change structures and systems** to incorporate and respond transparently to feedback from communities most impacted by systems.

Receive Feedback

Feedback is an essential component of all systems design because without it there is no way of knowing if the work you are investing in is actually having a positive impact on people's lives. The most impactful programs, policies, and processes will be iterative, including feedback early and often, so that the resources invested have the greatest ability to improve the quality of life of folx most impacted. Partly because of the long history of harm at the hands of government and the resulting lack of trust among impacted communities towards government agencies, people may understandably not be willing to provide feedback to an organization. Recognize that people who give honest feedback have often been systemically punished for it, therefore, organizations need to be patient, responsive, and make sure you do not inadvertently punish people when they do provide feedback.

Take Responsibility

Accountability depends on an organizational culture and systems in place to take responsibility, act with transparency, and maintain consistent open and honest communications. Part of this responsibility is acknowledging that launching a community engagement process *signals institutional responsibility to then follow through.* When a community engagement process is launched, what is being communicated to the public is "our institution wants your input on what changes we can make to make your life better." If no changes are made nor updates provided on changes that are in the works, it will create greater harm and increase lack of trust among communities on the margins.

Commit to Systems Change

Performative engagement adds to existing distrust and deepens harm. Accountability requires an organization to do the internal work of changing systems, policies, programs, processes, and budget structures in response to the needs, priorities, and wisdom of communities on the margins while maintaining relationships, transparency, and communication with folx these systems are supposed to help.

SYSTEMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Mindset shifts are the beginning of what ultimately needs to become structural change and organizational culture shift as reflected in systems, policies, and programs. The organizational principles below are meant to support creating the systems needed to operationalize mindset shifts around community engagement. The decision to do community engagement holds inherent responsibility to institutionalize it in ways that create systems of accountability and follow through. Recognize that your decisions through each phase of the engagement process holds that possibility of creating harm or healing.

Planning

- Create internal systems that apply a design-to-the-margins framework, for example by requiring the use of data sets like Portrait of Sonoma when planning engagement efforts.

- Create systems to include community input on the community engagement process, for example by doing the internal organizational work and building the kind of relationships necessary to implement a program like the Community-Based Leader model.

Implementation

- Implement a process that includes organizational follow-up to solicit feedback on the engagement results, for example through reflection sessions that reflect back what was learned during the engagement process and ask if it accurately captures what was shared and what participants want to see.

Reflection and Revision

- Create a system for community oversight to give feedback on the community engagement process and to provide ongoing oversight to track implementation of the recommended changes that came from the engagement process. For example, a Community Advisory Board with Community-Based Leaders.
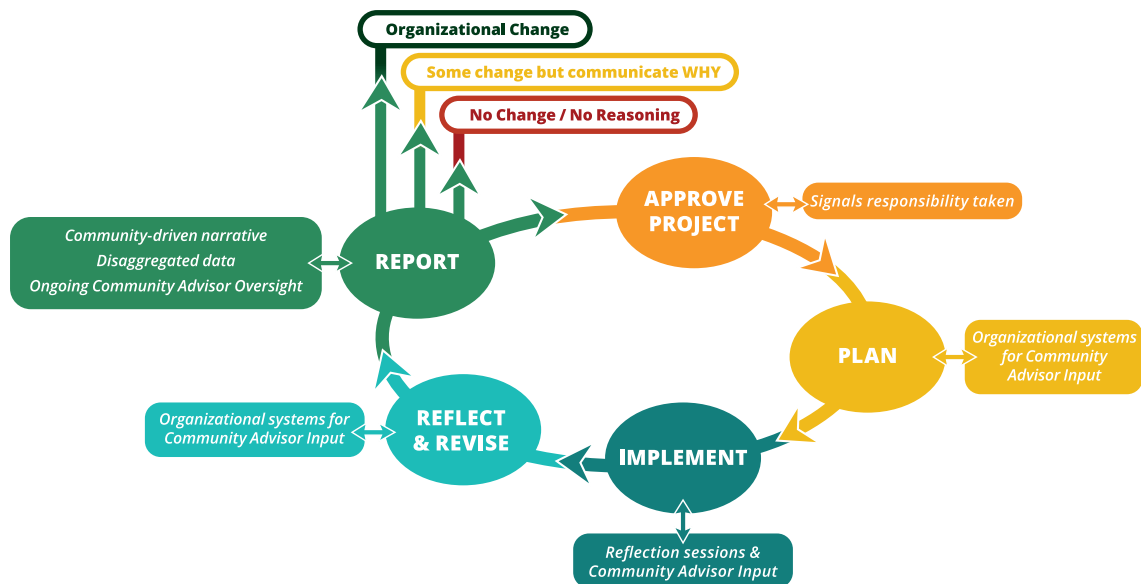
Operationalizing Culturally Responsive Engagement

It is one thing for an organization to state lofty community engagement goals, and it is quite another to shift organizational cultures so that culturally responsive community engagement principles are embedded into programs, processes, and policies. There are a million micro-decisions that happen throughout a community engagement process, and working to create internal alignment on the principles that will guide your decision making at the start of the process is important for organizational effectiveness towards that stated goal.

The principles and practices outlined below support operationalizing culturally responsive engagement. It is important to note that *no decision is neutral*, for this reason, the principles are offered in a way to show what healing and harmful organizational choices look like, noting that in both cases a choice is being made. These offer guidance to support the planning, implementation, and reflection stages of community engagement. The process of applying these to decision making should be cyclical, ongoing, and iterative in a way that adapts to the needs of the moment throughout each stage of engagement.

- *The principles* are meant to be discussed, adapted, and integrated into an organization's decision making processes, and should be used as a reference tool throughout decision making.

- *The practices* are offered as examples of what the application of principles can look like, either in ways that promote healing or ways that create harm.

- *The reflection* questions support critical reflection of how these principles can be applied in your own organizational setting.

Principle: Design-to-the-Margins
(See design to the margins framework on Page 110)

You Choose to...	As opposed to...
Center folks at the margins of system design, community members whose experiences, cultural ways, needs, and wisdom are systematically ignored.	Conduct engagement using current systems and engaging only folx at the center of system design.

Plan		
Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Be proactive and transparent about the fact that you are seeking to center the voices of the people who are most impacted by your organization's work.	How will you work to ensure that community members most vulnerable to systemic harm are the majority in the room and involved in planning, implementation, reflection, and reporting stages of our community engagement?	Not being intentional in identifying who is most impacted and planning a 'one size fits all' approach to engagement.
Acknowledge that operationalizing this spans beyond the engagement process, and identify any necessary systemic shifts, including hiring and resourcing staff.	To what extent does your organization, including leadership, reflect communities on the margins?	Assume that your engagement staff person can meaningfully conduct engagement efforts without shifting any internal systems.

Implement		
Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Build hiring, funding, staff support, and professional advancement systems that are aligned with cultural responsiveness so that (1) community members see themselves reflected in staff, (2) staff are fully resourced to do authentic engagement, and (3) staff have the institutional power to respond to the wisdom of the community.	How are you actively shifting internal systems to align with cultural responsiveness?	Tokenizing staff of color by asking them to do meaningful engagement without sufficient resources or organizational support.

Principle: Design-to-the-Margins

Implement		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Prioritize and resource engagement activities that build relationships with community members experiencing systemic harm.	*How are you creating spaces of belonging for staff of color and communities most impacted as you work to build relationships through engagement?*	*Not investing in relationship building with community members who are ignored in system design.*
Reflect & Revise		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Weigh the importance of demographic representation over the total number of individuals present; disaggregate the data that was learned by demographics to get a clearer picture.[4]	*How are you measuring the quality of engagement?* *What did you learn and from whom?* *Who is missing?*	*Reporting out on engagement success based solely on an aggregate number of people who showed up.* *Not examining how data is gathered, who is gathering data, who is analyzing data.* *Not valuing qualitative data.*

[4] Resource: A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration. Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy. University of Pennsylvania. (2020).

Principle: Prioritize Reciprocal Relationships

You Choose to...		As opposed to...
Build trust and prioritize reciprocal relationships.		*Treat interactions as one-directional, one-off, and/or transactional.*
Plan		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Research the social, historical and cultural contexts within which the communities most impacted exist (understand that this is done as a symbol of respect for the communities you are entering into NOT as a way of intellectualizing communities' experience or as a shortcut for the work of relationship building).	*What have you learned about the social, historical and cultural contexts of the communities with whom you want to engage? From whom?*	*Believing that the intellectualization of communities' experiences is equivalent to understanding.* *Believing communities are monolithic.*

Principle: Prioritize Reciprocal Relationships

Plan		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Provide ongoing cultural responsiveness training as a foundation for building reciprocal relationships, which integrates research around social, historical, and cultural contexts, to support staff in understanding how to respectfully and appropriately attend cultural events, celebrations, and gatherings that are open to the public.	How can you create organizational systems to retain and build on these learnings as an organization? How can you design a reciprocal engagement process?	Believing expertise can be achieved about communities. Seeking to collect information from participants immediately without relationship building, context or expectation setting.
Reflect with community partners/stakeholders about the strategies they use to foster healing, and work to create the conditions for community members to share themselves without experiencing harm, retraumatization, and/or tokenization.	What engagement strategies will create the most opportunities for building healing relationships?	Not considering relationship building to be an important part of community engagement.
Implement		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Acknowledge the historical and present harm in the relationship between government/organizations and impacted communities and work to repair the harm on the terms of the folx harmed.	How are you working to repair historical harm done and create spaces of belonging for participants?	Assuming individuals with a shared ethnic background are homogeneous in cultural practices, life experiences, knowledge, skills, ect.
Explore the many ways you can build reciprocal relationships, acknowledging that folx both need to be compensated for their time and expertise[5], and that relationship development must go much deeper than that.	How are you facilitating a bidirectional exchange of information/wisdom/experiences/knowledge/practices? How are you doing the work of moving towards anti-racism[6] so that you are able to show up authentically and respectfully in spaces with community?	Not providing opportunities for bidirectional dialogue. Expecting that you are entitled to the stories/experiences/wisdom of community members.

[5] Resource: Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook, Urban Institute. (2023).
[6] Equity First Consulting defines Anti-Racism as an active stance and process, whereby institutions look openly and honestly at their systems, structures, policies, and practices; to identify the connections between these and racially disparate outcomes; and to shift them so that power and resources are shared equitably.

Principle: Prioritize Reciprocal Relationships

Reflect & Revise		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Implement a process to (1) reflect on insights from these learnings and (2) embed them into future engagement efforts, evolving your organizational culture and practices to ensure closer alignment with community and cultural responsiveness, which is important for relationship building.	*In what ways are the organization's culture and systems evolving as a result of what you've learned as an organization?*	*Doing nothing with the information learned from the engagement effort, including the engagement process itself.*

Principle: Engage at Every Step

You Choose to...	As opposed to...
Engage at every step through co-created processes and goals.	*Conduct an inflexible engagement process with minimal ability to influence the final project goals and outcome.*

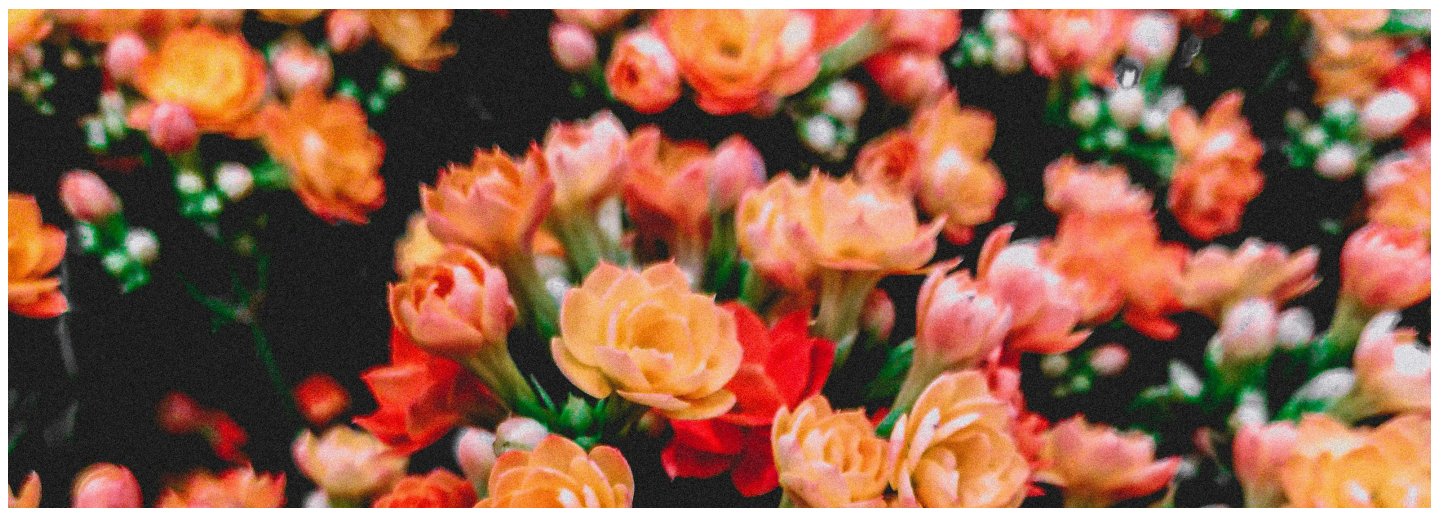| Plan		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Clearly outline the engagement process and identify opportunities for co-design, community input, and decision making, including receiving feedback on what you learned from the process and the process itself.	*What elements of this project could be co-designed with community leaders now, how might that increase over time, and how might that be a step towards community-driven decision making?* *Which partners/ stakeholders are rooted in the community (and are truly trusted by the people who are most impacted by systemic inequities) who you can go to as part of our engagement process?*	*Not involving the community in any part of your community engagement design process.* *Retroactively engaging the community to ask what needs a project will address after it's already been mostly designed.*

Plan		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Build the relationships with partners/stakeholders, and resource and support their capacity building efforts.	How are you supporting and resourcing partners/ stakeholders to engage during implementation?	Expecting partners/stakeholders to share their relationships with you.
Create a communications plan to share what was done with participant input and how it influenced the final outcome.	How will you maintain consistent and accessible communications throughout our engagement process?	Assuming community members will come to you for information.

Implement		
Healing Practices	**Reflection Questions**	**Harmful Practices**
Implement your engagement process while continuing to build relationships year round, with staff who are fully resourced and supported to invest in authentic relationship building.	Are you working to build and maintain genuine relationships on an ongoing basis? Do your systems (job descriptions, time allocation, performance measures) support staff to build authentic relationships?	Confining "engagement work" to a defined engagement process and inflexible timeline. Never reaching out to communities most impacted unless actively conducting "engagement".
Design flexible systems (timelines, budgets, staff who are resourced to respond to changes) into your engagement implementation while providing stipends for some community members to help with real-time program refinement.	How can you provide flexibility to staff conducting engagement to make changes as needed during the engagement process?	Being inflexible around your engagement process once planned.
Make sure implementation includes (1) gathering input on desired results and outcomes and (2) going back to participants to reflect what you learned to ensure accuracy.	How is your engagement process shaping the ultimate outcome? Did you do reflection sessions to reflect back what was learned during the engagement process and ask if it accurately captures what participants shared and want to see?	Soliciting information and never returning to participants to ask if your analysis is accurate.

Implement		
Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Hand over the mic, i.e. give participants the opportunity to inform the narrative/story tell about the work, results, and outcomes.	*How is the community helping craft the narrative of what was learned from the engagement process?*	*You overlay your own belief systems on top of the narrative/ story being shared by participants.*

Reflect & Revise		
Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Reflect with community partners/stakeholders about the engagement process itself.	*Did partners/stakeholders involved in this project feel valued and heard?* *Did you provide partners/ stakeholders different avenues to provide feedback (Ex: Group meeting, 1:1, anonymous survey, etc)*	*Not getting feedback on the engagement process itself.*
As staff, reflect on the community engagement process.	*What do staff recommend is changed about future engagement processes to be more culturally responsive?*	*Continuing with the same project approach and outcome despite what was learned through the engagement process.*

| You Choose to...	As opposed to...
Be accountable to communities by changing your systems of engagement.	*Assume that it's the participants responsibility to access engagement done your way.*

Plan

Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Acknowledge that (1) the system as currently designed creates barriers, which will remain in place without an intentional effort to remove them, and that (2) it is the organization's job to not only remove barriers, but also to design welcoming spaces of belonging.	*How can you increase access structurally, culturally, and through your communications?* *How might you continue to deepen your understanding of how to create access and what it means to create spaces of belonging?*	*Operating from unexamined biases and assumptions about communities.* *Designing engagement programs that are not grounded in co-design with communities.*
Create a plan to address barriers you assume may be present for communities at the margins, be open to redesigning systems that may have barriers that are not evident to you, and remove the barriers you can while not losing sight of the larger vision to redesign systems that don't create barriers in the first place.	*How might you take steps forward, while not losing sight of a larger vision, towards changing entrenched systems? For example, adding translation and acknowledging the ultimate goal of bilingual/bicultural spaces of engagement.*	*Labeling communities as "hard to reach" and utilizing traditional methods of engagement that routinely fail to "reach" them.* *Burdening an employee of color with becoming the representative for communities of color and tokenizing their experience and knowledge.*
Research what prior engagement has been done on this topic and build off that, including which communities were engaged and who was missing from that engagement process.	*What engagement has already happened on this topic? How can you recognize that work and build off that?*	*Conducting performative engagement to make it look like you care about a topic when there is no intent to make systemic change or the solution is already fully designed.*
*Get clear among staff about what the engagement **does** have the ability to influence, and what it does **not** and communicate that to participants.*	*How can you communicate honestly about what community members can expect about the project scope?*	*Overpromising what you can deliver.*

Implement		
Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Ask what barriers to engagement have been created when conducting engagement (aka check your assumptions).	How might you learn more about how to create access through the engagement process itself?	Assuming you know all of the existing barriers.
Ask what belonging looks and feels like, so you can make shifts next time.	What do you need to do to facilitate spaces of belonging? Who needs to be the group that defines belonging?	Assuming that if you receive no feedback on how you are holding space, that it means you are creating spaces of belonging.
Conduct reflection sessions to reflect back what was learned during the engagement process, what recommendations are coming out of the process, and if it accurately reflects what participants shared and what outcomes and results they want to see.	During reflection sessions, ask: How, if at all, does this resonate with you? Does it reflect what you shared? Does it address what you raised? What would you prioritize?	Ignoring the wisdom shared during the engagement process when recommendations are made.

Reflect & Revise		
Healing Practices	*Reflection Questions*	*Harmful Practices*
Center community feedback in how changes to the ultimate outcome are decided and communicated.	How are you centering the priorities of communities most impacted by systems in your work and communications resulting from your engagement?	Ignoring what communities most impacted shared, or ignoring the absence of communities most impacted in your engagement process.
Make a plan for how you will increase access and a sense of belonging for community members during future engagement.	How did you address the concerns of communities most impacted by making systemic/ structural changes? How can you expand access and create spaces of belonging during future engagement?	Assuming that if people didn't engage, that they don't really care and/or that it's their fault for not being civically active.
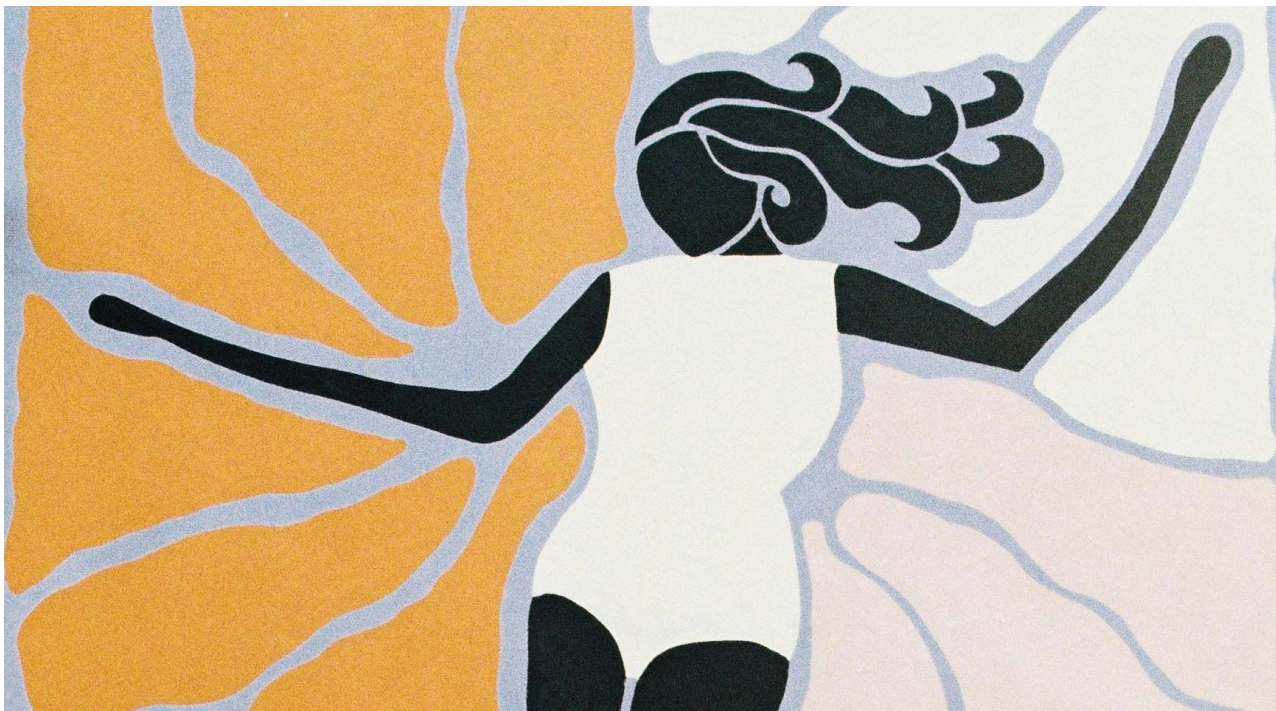
Equity First Consulting had the privilege and joy of working with an incredible group of leaders from across Sonoma County in the development of the Community Engagement Plan for the County of Sonoma. The container for these relationships was the Community-Based Leader (CBL) model, a method of community engagement carefully designed and implemented by Equity First Consulting with support from the Office of Equity, which was utilized for the development of this plan.

It is with gratitude, humility and love that we offer a snapshot into our model and the critical role the CBLs played within every step of this engagement process, as well as the ultimate development of the Community Engagement Plan. We offer this model as an example of what is possible when organizations' internal systems and culture have adopted anti-racist processes and when organizations learn how to hold a container that authentically provides the space for the brilliance of community to guide processes, decision making, and ultimate outcomes.

The CBL model centers on co-designing with community members who are already recognized as trusted leaders within their communities, but who may, due to systemic racism, be ignored and erased by existing power structures. The leaders who chose to work with us held tremendous insights into how to best approach community engagement within their communities, expertise

that laid the foundation for the entire community engagement process. These leaders also held the wisdom gained from the experience of living at the intersection of multiple identity markers regularly marginalized by the government.

Despite the harm done by these systems, the CBLs who signed onto this project voiced that a motivating factor was a hope for change, while acknowledging the long history of lack of government action. It was within this delicate balance that we worked to design, facilitate, and hold an ever evolving container for co-creation with the CBLs. This included:

- **Facilitating spaces of belonging that were warm, authentic, and welcoming which celebrated and valued everyone's contributions.**

- **Prioritizing space for relationship building.**

- **Acknowledging the historical harm of the government and what we could, and could not, commit to as a result of this process.**

CBLs chose to define their own roles within the project, including having increasing ownership over time. Our role was to consistently communicate that CBLs would guide our process, and that our job was to support CBLs in implementation, removing barriers, and creating support systems. With their leadership, we co-created outreach and engagement strategies, focus group and interview approaches and facilitation, and communication of the results. We were grateful for the generous wisdom shared with us from the CBLs who helped the engagement efforts be culturally responsive, for example, with CBLs holding focus groups in church starting with a prayer.

At the end of the engagement process, CBLs provided feedback on their experiences, which shone a spotlight on the delicate tightrope of holding hope within systems of harm that the CBLs navigated and felt when choosing to engage with us. Specifically:

- **CBLs expressed the weight of responsibility the County took on when approving this project, that CBLs also held distrust that anything would change, but participated because they hoped this time would be different.**

- **CBLs took a risk by participating and utilizing their existing relationships to conduct outreach, as next steps taken by the County could reflect on them.**

This served as a critical reminder that *people engage because they hope for change.* When change doesn't happen, they lose hope and their willingness to engage. As Equity First Consulting, we don't hold this responsibility lightly. Any organization conducting deep engagement needs to too.

Methods of Application

Methods of engagement can be transformative or oppressive depending on how they are used. An engagement method becomes equity-centered when it is designed and implemented with intentionality. How you approach, design, apply, and analyze your community engagement efforts can either engender safety or perpetuate extraction and harm.

Interviews and Focus Groups

An interview is just that; it alone is not engagement. A transformative interview or focus group process is one that is culturally responsive and is centered around relationship building and repair. Interviews and focus groups done with intentionality can foster dialogue, bidirectional learning, and deeper reflection on the nuance of an issue through follow up questions. To create thoughtful containers for interviews and focus groups, consider:

- *Keep your context setting brief. The purpose is to hear from participants, so prioritize your time for that. For example, briefly share (1) the purpose, (2) the players, and (3) what will be done with what is shared.*

- *Set a container for group norms during your time together through grounding agreements so folx know what to expect.*

- *Ask questions that allow for participants to define key concepts being discussed. For example, if asking about community health and wellness, how do participants define community, health, and wellness? Questions should also invite participants to share recommendations for what changes they want seen as well as what that might look like. For example, what needs to change and who needs to be involved in the changemaking process?*

- *Be intentional about who is facilitating and in the space. Facilitators should understand how to be culturally responsive and be aware of how their identity markers and positionality may influence participants' sense of safety.*

- *Analysis should aim to honor, uplift, and stay true to what was shared, not extract decontextualized quotes for their emotional impact.*

- *Check the assumptions and biases that will inherently enter your analysis by facilitating reflection sessions with engagement participants as part of your analysis process. Design these intentional reflection sessions at the first stage of the process and in such a way that insights will actually inform your analysis results.*

When conducting interviews or focus groups, some parameters and considerations we found helpful were:

- *We recommend 60 minute interviews with no more than two participants at a time. Interviews can feel like a safer environment to share for some people and for some, can also be seen as a sign of respect and loving focus.*

- *We recommend 90 minute focus groups with no more than 15 participants and no less than four. Focus groups can create a container where participants' reflections spark ideas for others and build off each other, which may be preferred for some folx.*

- *Communities on the margins whose knowledge comes from lived experience have expertise that is no less valuable than expertise informed by academic study or research experience. Thus, equitable compensation[7] is a recognition of participant expertise as fellow colleagues in the engagement process.*

  - *For example, in the development of the County of Sonoma's Community Engagement Plan, stipends of $75 were offered for interviewees and stipends of $50 were offered for focus group participants.*

  - *There is also a precedent at the County of Sonoma for Child Care and Travel Expense Reimbursement, as already implemented by the Child Care Planning Council of Sonoma County (4Cs).*

  - *Snacks or a meal should be provided, consider buying food from local businesses.*

Surveys

Surveys can help provide overarching input from communities, can help inform what groups/communities are still missing in an engagement process, and can provide demographic information. Surveys should be thoughtfully integrated into a larger engagement strategy that builds relationships and provides a deeper understanding of the issues, barriers, opportunities, and proposed solutions from community members.
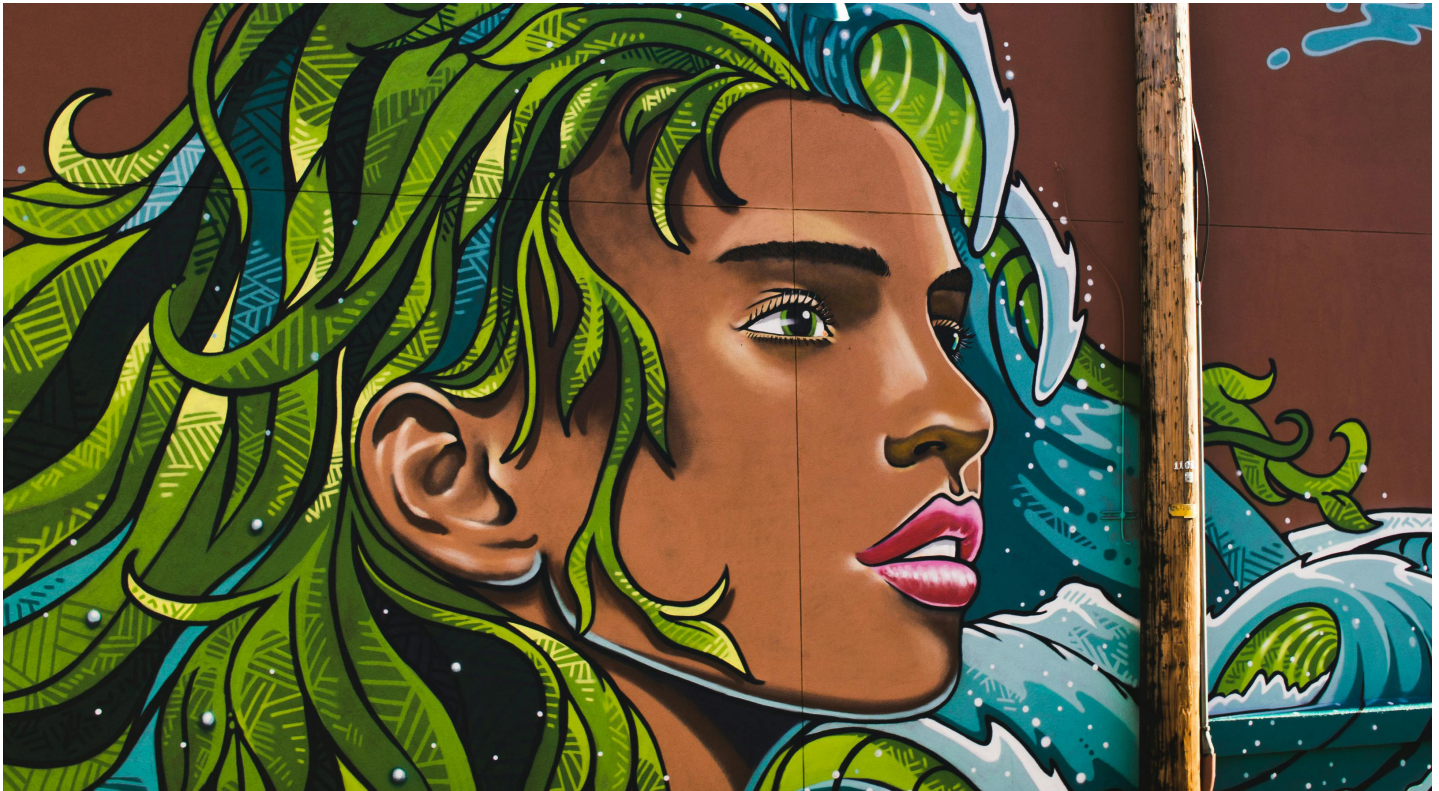
[7] Resource: Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook, Urban Institute. (2023).

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