

Assessing a Community’s “Readiness”

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Assessing community readiness to take on an emerging issue is a critical step toward successfully solving a problem. Tools to help assess and capitalize on readiness are included.

Despite all of their unique differences, it is amazing to discover how much communities are alike. Today, communities all over the country are faced with numerous issues, including that of affordable housing, health care, safe food, economic transportation, and increasing the number of living wage jobs — just to name a few. And, while the context of each issue will be different for every community, the similarities remain. How communities choose to deal with the issue is what will make them successful — or not successful.

As community leaders begin to contemplate the importance of an issue and how it might be addressed, it is important to assess the “readiness” of the community to take on that issue. The willingness of community citizens to support an issue or the readiness of the civic and governmental components of the community to take on the work needed to solve an emerging issue is critically important to the success of the overall approach.

Assessing community readiness is not easy, but it can be enlightening to community leaders and the issue stakeholders. Begin your community readiness assessment by conducting two simple tasks that will help you learn baseline data about the community and its available assets. Start with:

- a demographic review of the population base broken out by race, age, and income, and
- conduct a SWOT analysis of the issue identifying the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Next, communities may wish to survey the targeted populations that will be affected by the issue. The purpose of the survey is to gain an assessment of the level of awareness the targeted population has about the issue and the willingness or capacity of the population or associated entities to address the issue. Sample survey questions are provided on page 3.

In some instances, outside groups or individuals may be asked to provide leadership for a specific issue. This is usually the case when the outside source has expertise that no one else in the community has. Or, in other instances, an outside group is asked to provide leadership because of the sensitive or controversial nature of the issue. An observer’s assessment of community readiness may be helpful in these situations — usually completed after visiting with citizens and observing the leadership and civic structure of the community. A sample tool — Community Readiness Grid — is on page 2 if observations are preferred as a means to assess community readiness.

There are stages of community readiness that should be taken into consideration as issue stakeholders or community practitioners move forward on an issue. The goal in raising community awareness and acceptance toward addressing an issue is to ensure that many diverse sectors of the community are aware of the issue, support the need to address it, and have an opportunity to voice their thoughts, feelings, and observations about the matter. Likewise, the community must be able to identify its skills, expertise, or willingness to obtain outside assistance in addressing the issue if it is needed. If community awareness or readiness is low, strategies may be needed to move a community toward readiness. Finally, there needs to be a strong leadership component identified specifically for addressing the issue, and the community must be aware of and support the leadership effort and its strategies and overall objectives for addressing the issue.

Stages of Community Readiness

| <i>Stage</i> | <i>Brief Description</i> | <i>Goal</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| No awareness | Issue is not generally recognized by the community or leaders as a problem. | Raise awareness of issue. |
| Denial/resistance | At least some community members recognize that it is a problem, but there is little or no recognition that it might be a local problem. | Raise awareness that the problem exists in the community. |
| Vague awareness | Most feel that there is a local problem, but there is no immediate motivation to do anything about it. | Raise awareness that the community can do something about the issue. |
| Pre-planning | There is clear recognition that something must be done, and there may even be a committee. However, efforts are not focused or detailed. | Raise awareness with concrete ideas to address the problem. |
| Preparation | Active leaders begin planning in earnest. Community offers modest support of efforts. | Gather information with which to plan and improve programs to solve issue. |
| Initiation | Enough information is available to justify efforts, and activities are underway. | Provide community specific information. |
| Stabilization | Activities are supported by administrators or community decision makers. | Stabilize efforts/programs. |
| Confirmation/Expansion | Standard efforts are in place. Community members feel comfortable using services and support expansions of efforts. Local data are regularly obtained. | Expand and enhance services. |
| High level of community ownership | Detailed and sophisticated knowledge exist about an issue. Effective evaluation is in place. | Maintain momentum and continue growth. |

Sample Survey Questions
Assessing Dimensions of Community Readiness

| <i>Dimension</i> | <i>Sample Questions</i> |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Community efforts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please describe the efforts occurring in the community to address this issue. • What are the strengths of these efforts? Weaknesses? • Are there any segments of the community that may not be able to access these programs or services? • What formal or informal policies, practices, and laws address this issue in the community? |
| Community knowledge of efforts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How aware are people in the community about these efforts? • How does the community view the policies, practices, and laws that address the issue? • Who are the leaders specific to this issue in the community? |
| Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a scale of 1 to 10, how much of a concern is this issue to community leaders? • How are the leaders involved in the issue? |
| Community Climate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the community's attitude about this issue? • What are the primary obstacles to efforts in the community? • Is there ever a circumstance in which members of the community might think that this issue should be tolerated? |
| Knowledge about issue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How knowledgeable are community members about the issue? • What local data are available? • How do people get information about the issue in the community? |
| Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where would an individual affected by this issue turn to for help? • Do efforts that address this issue have a broad base of volunteers? • What is the business community's attitude about supporting local efforts with funding, personnel, space needs, etc.? • Is there any evaluation of these efforts? |

Community Readiness Grid

A score of “1” indicates the community’s readiness is low while a score of “5” indicates the level of readiness is high.

| <i>Characteristics of Community Readiness</i> | <i>Current levels of community capacity</i> | | | | | <i>Comments</i> |
|---|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>4</i> | <i>5</i> | |
| Local citizens are open to outside assistance. | | | | | | |
| Local citizens are open to sharing and learning from each other and outsiders. | | | | | | |
| Local organizations and groups are connected to one another, they trust one another, and they seek opportunities for collaboration with each other. | | | | | | |
| Local organizations are open to collaboration with entities outside of the community. | | | | | | |
| Local citizens can identify and appreciate their local assets. | | | | | | |
| The community can articulate a desire for supporting and/or creating a vision for the future. | | | | | | |
| The community’s leadership structure is inclusive of citizen ideas, feedback, and involvement in community initiatives. | | | | | | |
| When challenges or issues emerge, citizens come together with a sense of unity and urgency to seek a solution. | | | | | | |
| A hopeful attitude is present in the community. | | | | | | |
| Community sparkplugs (citizens) are willing to champion specific efforts or initiatives within the community. | | | | | | |
| A sizeable group of local citizens are willing to commit time and energy to an identified initiative. | | | | | | |
| Committees and groups are well represented by a broad inclusion of the community demographic. | | | | | | |
| Local citizens are inclusive of all residents being involved in community decision-making processes. | | | | | | |
| Local citizens demonstrate civic engagement by their involvement in community activities and organizations. | | | | | | |

Resources

The community readiness model. (1995). Donnermeyer, et al., 1997; Edwards, et al., 2000; Jumper-Thurman and Plested, 2000; Jumper- Thurman et al., 2001; Plested et al., 1999; Plested et al., 1998; Oetting et al. 1995. Colorado State University.

Hubbell, K. and Emery, M. (2009). *Engaging in sustainable community change: A community guide to working with a coach.* W. K. Kellogg Foundation; The Annie E. Foundation.

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