COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

"Participatory Planning"

Community Radio Show Text

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Guest: Terry Bergdall (Terry)

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TODD: Welcome to the June Community [Radio Show]. My name is Todd Wellman and I am with Public Allies, the Community Strengthening Training & Technical Assistance provider of the Corporation for National Service. Today's call is brought to you by The Leadership Practice, a partnership between Public Allies and the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University.

TODD: For the next 25 minutes or so, Terry Bergdall, international consultant will speak on: "It is easy to say that we should involve those affected by decisions in decision making, but how does a project director ensure input without giving everything over to the slow process of consensus?"

Terry will guide us through Participatory Planning, a method that allows for collaboration among a diverse array of stakeholders. Terry will define the difference between traditional planning and participatory planning and give listeners concrete steps on how to jump start projects, mobilize teams and access more resources.

Please welcome Terry to the show.

TODD: So Terry, we're here today to talk about Participatory Planning—but before we dive into that, what other types of planning might people be using instead, in a general sense?

TERRY: Most traditional planning takes place in the organizational framework of a pyramid. Someone sits at the top and is clearly in charge. Various pieces of the planning process may be delegated out to a small circle of advisors, but these are usually very small and tightly controlled. Options and proposals are primarily presented and discussed behind closed doors with resulting plans, once completed, being simply announced to lower echelons. This is a bit of a caricature, but it is also very typical.

TODD: How is Participatory Planning different from this then?

TERRY: Rather than closing the doors, it opens the planning process to involve those who have a stake in the outcomes. It is widely recognized that effective implementation of any plan is directly related to a sense of ownership among those who are actually responsible for making things happen, for those who do the nitty-gritty work. There is a clear relationship here to the three basic assumptions of an assets based approach: 1) everyone has gifts, 2) drawing upon those gifts is a key to personal motivation, and 3) the expansion of social capital enhances effectiveness, by which I mean, growing connections between people opens up new possibilities that might otherwise be overlooked. All of this is of particular importance to social service organizations and helps to break patterns that have traditionally treated some stakeholders as passive clients. Participatory planning is about transparency. It doesn't start with

decisions having been made by a small group but is open to considering different options and conclusions from different perspectives.

TODD: Why might a person be resistant to this method?

TERRY: It is scary. For one thing it redefines expertise. It also raises fears about matching visionary thinking with limited financial resources. Or there are fears about awakening sleeping dog issues – like comparisons between who is paid to do what and who is asked to make voluntary contributions. I suppose the biggest fears have to do with control and relinquishing power. However, the benefits of participatory planning are huge: greater commitment – and ability – to implement decisions and strategies, the potential for more innovation due to a larger portfolio of ideas and options, and the encouragement of initiative and responsibility among a larger pool of knowledgeable and motivated actors.

TODD: If a person wanted to start using Participatory Planning, what steps would he or she take to do so?

TERRY: Participatory planning begins with a focus question that clarifies the subject of the planning. The creation of a strategic plan is often one such focus. In Africa, I have worked with several country offices of CARE International. While each of these country offices share much in common, particular program priorities and working style, etc., depend upon the unique circumstances in which each office finds itself. Strategic plans spell out the big picture about where an organization sees itself going and how it intends to get there. On the other hand, some participatory planning is much more focused on smaller, specific issues. For example, I also facilitated participatory planning processes with CARE offices that ranged from reviewing and modifying procurement procedures to overcoming implementation conflicts within particular projects. Establishing a clear planning focus is the first step.

The second is to identify the key stakeholders in regards to the focus question. For strategic planning, you would want to ask yourself who perpetuates the organization, including service workers, the general community, and the staff? Who benefits from its activities? Who gives time as volunteers? Who are the general supporters, boards, and clientele? Are there other important players beyond these who have an effect on the organization? Who are donors and what are their interests? All major stakeholders need to be involved in some way or another in the planning process.

A third step is to appraise your situation in regards to the focus of the planning. What external trends might affect the organization or group and its future activities? What has been the group's past experience? Where has it established a proven track record? What are other organizations in the same field doing? What is your comparative advantage? In the strategic planning exercises I facilitated with CARE, the raw data for much of this appraisal occurred through an extensive number of interviews. One very helpful set of questions sought information about how they were perceived as an organization: what did they do well and not well? This also gave them feedback about real potential partners. By starting with an appraisal of their situation, organizations can more effectively ask themselves "What can we do now? What do we dream about? Where might we go?"

TODD: So, do organizations just take this information then and make decisions?

TERRY: All of this sets the stage for making decisions, but this is, as you might expect, where the hard work really begins. Rather than opening up options, which is the result of most preparation work, attention now turns to narrowing priorities and bringing closure to the planning. Almost all participatory planning

processes with which I am familiar do this through a planning forum, or a workshop, attended by various stakeholders. The make-up of those sitting around the table is, of course, extremely important. It may not end up with everyone from every group of stakeholders attending the workshop, but it is important for each perspective to be represented, or at least invited. Then, almost by definition, those people who then show up to participate are the "right" people. This goes back in a sense to the three assumptions of an assets based approach that I mentioned before: 1) everyone has gifts, or insights, to offer, 2) motivation is enhanced when people have an opportunity to share those gifts, and 3) people working together results in greater effectiveness.

It is important for these workshops to follow a structured format that might take place in one or two days -- and sometimes even longer. There are a lot of tried and tested formats for reviewing, sorting, and collectively reaching decisions. At least two aspects almost always come into play. One has to do with reaching consensus about major directions or priorities while the other has do with creating action plans to accomplish the directions agreed upon. A designated facilitator guides all these discussions during the workshop. It is their job to enable participants to express their views without a few strong voices becoming overly dominant. It is also their job to keep the discussions on track and move the planning toward closure.

TODD: Who, then, makes the decisions about what's to be implemented?

TERRY: Well, results from the workshop don't just get handed back to 'those in power.' The people who helped create the plan become valuable resources for helping to implement actions and monitor progress. Participatory planning, in a sense, doesn't simply end with formal decisions and a document. Once plans have been prepared, participatory implementation is ready to commence. When plans are created with the widespread participation of stakeholders, a sense of ownership – or "buy-in" – is greatly enhanced. Community involvement breeds community responsibility.

TODD: Can you provide us with an additional example of participatory planning from your work, perhaps where something came up that you didn't expect?

TERRY: Yes. Two years ago I asked to facilitate a "Community Forum" in Maywood, a near Westside suburb of Chicago, where gang violence was on the rise and the community had been shocked by several drive-by shootings. Three different incidences within a month had resulted in the deaths of two students and the wounding of three others. A social service agency and the local high school took the lead in suggesting that a Community Forum take place to plan violence prevention strategies. They quickly expanded their organizing committee to include block clubs, churches, other agencies, the municipal council, police department, and mayor. They also did extensive research about the efforts of other communities that had faced similar problems. As the scheduled date for the Community Forum approached, a big debate emerged on whether or not to invite youth to attend the Forum. After a lot of hard discussion, and many misgivings, it was agreed to invite several youth from the school.

Over 90 people attended the six hour forum and created three major initiatives around 1) the establishment of after school activities and "places to go" for youth – especially evening activities for older youth, 2) mechanisms for encouraging parental involvement and responsibility, and 3) business involvement for expanding job opportunities for youth. The unexpected dimension occurred on this last point: once people began discussing the issues and formulating plans during the workshop, they realized that they did not have any local business people in attendance. This was an important group of stakeholders on whom they had devoted little attention. Plans were then drawn up for approaching local businesses and seeking their involvement. They were eventually successful in obtaining their active

cooperation, but there was a major lesson learned among the organizers about the importance of more carefully identifying and involving stakeholders. This story, I should point out, resulted in some successful results. Business did become involved. Maywood was recognized by the State of Illinois for becoming a demonstration of effective community collaboration on difficult problems, especially in regards to establishing new after school activities and the creation of several new part time jobs for youth.

TODD: Why do I need to change / why get over these obstacles / why even use the tools?

TERRY: This is beyond the buy-in. Stakeholder involvement is a positive influence on improving effectiveness. Various ways of doing things may not provide as much value as intended because of operational details like the time of day services are offered … a lot of agencies are set up in subtle ways to benefit the service provider's time and expertise which are sometimes at the expense of those they serve. Stakeholder involvement can help bring those issues to the fore. But it is a genuine concern of directors that things will slow down, or even become paralyzed, when some stakeholders are brought into the planning process. Good preparation, careful design of workshop procedures, and the use of established facilitation techniques can move faster than one might think to successful planning conclusions.

TODD: "Service Providers" – what about them – how can people who have to deliver specialized services utilize this method?

TERRY: If you're responsible for an organization there is a different level to the commitment and we cannot be naïve about handing over decisions to everybody. Participatory planning and the involvement of stakeholders mean more informed decision-making which is in contrast to just a small group of people making decisions based on their own counsel. But there is a balance that needs to be maintained. The articulation of the consensus needs to be weighted to people who have a deep commitment to the effective fulfillment of an organization's mission. Participatory planning, however, can be a very effective means for expanding that kind of commitment among stakeholders and drawing upon people's resources, interests, and perspectives.

TODD: Thank you Terry – we are going to open up to questions now from the audience. To maximize our time, remember that when you're asking Terry a question, please limit yourself to questions regarding today's topic instead of sharing best practices or stories from your work.

This text serves as a reference for the Community Radio Show but it does not serve as a transcript of the recording.