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Building Trust in Communities Through Engaged Decision Making

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BUILDING TRUST IN COMMUNITIES THROUGH ENGAGED DECISION MAKING

Contributor

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- Co-founder of Digital Opportunity Trust's global broadband programs
- Designer of leading ICT programs for community and youth outreach
- Facilitator for public-private relations with CIDA, USAID, Cisco Systems, and others
- Developer of community programs in USA, Canada, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Kenya, and Ethiopia

After 25 years as an executive strategist, Deb founded Pownoodle: a cloud-based software that drives engaged decision-making – every person, every process, every day.

Making Good Decisions

Making decisions may involve a coin toss, gut feeling, or online research; making good decisions (especially in groups), usually requires the following:

- Collection of information, insights, ideas, conversations, and dissenting views
- Discussion and evaluation of options from different stakeholder perspectives
- Transparent communication of decisions and the decision-making process
- Actions to implement decisions in a timely manner

This is certainly true for a community, where good decision-making means engaged decision-making.

Founded Upon Trust

Trust and engaged decision-making are a virtuous circle. Without trust as a foundation, stakeholders are hesitant to participate. Without engagement, building trust is not possible. Stakeholders often rationalize mistrust along these lines:

- People talk; they don't listen
- My honesty will only offend hypersensitive and vindictive people
- People will prejudge me for who I am

- Others will be dishonest and insincere to protect their interests
- We are all too different to agree; it will just turn into an argument
- They intentionally schedule meetings so people with jobs and families can't attend
- Collaboration is nothing but good intentions backed up by smiles and hot air
- People are unreliable at best, underhanded at worst
- Things may start with sunshine and lollipops, but the honeymoon ends when times get tough

Overcoming this sometimes legitimate pessimism is a challenge communities must overcome. Without doing so, the trust created through engaged decision-making cannot exist.

What is the level of trust in your community?

Measuring Trust

Trust is difficult to quantify. Can communities, for example, “calculate” trust by counting how many people lock their doors at night? Obviously not; to diagnose the level of trust (or mistrust) in communities, we must gauge the following five “vital signs”:

1) Shared Vision and Goals:

- **This means:** Groups and individuals have identified mutually beneficial outcomes
- **This does not mean:** Homogeneity and absolute agreement (ex: one group may want to use a vacant lot for a park while another may want a mall. Both groups, however, want to bring the most value to their community)
- **Characteristics of success:** Interest groups share resources and cooperate on projects of joint interest
- **Symptoms of failure:** Interest groups compete for resources, duplicate efforts, and undermine each other's work

In one municipality, the public works department planted a boulevard with trees. Next week, the municipal utility cut them down to bury cable lines.

2) Enable Communication:

- **This means:** People and groups have a means to express themselves honestly without apprehension; they also hear differing views and dissent
- **This does not mean:** Consensus, group thinking, demagoguery
- **Characteristics of success:** Meetings are planned around everyone's schedules; everyone is allowed to speak; dissent and constructive criticism are encouraged; decision-making is transparent

- **Symptoms of failure:** Protests and low voter turnout as people respond to exclusion with anger or apathy

One city's decision to bulldoze a public park without consulting or informing the public led to month-long riots.

3) Deliver on Promises:

- **This means:** Public officials and organizations have the will and skill to turn words into actions
- **This does not mean:** Plans never change and every activity is successful
- **Characteristics of success:** Officials and organizations utilize resources efficiently to deliver optimal results in a process open to public inquiry
- **Symptoms of failure:** Projects go over budget and/or fail without apparent cause; accounting is complex and questionable; official documents are missing or shredded

A sluggish economy caused budget shortfalls that forced one city to cancel a public arena. The cancellation was well documented and justified to constituent groups so that citizens appreciated this correct though difficult decision.

4) Respect Diversity:

- **This means:** Different people and opinions are valued and encouraged even when they contradict or challenge the norm; diversity becomes an asset that brings benefits to communities rather than a liability that undermines them
- **This does not mean:** Accommodating minorities at the expense of the majority
- **Characteristics of success:** People interact with groups to which they do not belong; advocacy for issues and groups without apparent benefit to self; gains in the general community's happiness from the actions of segment groups
- **Symptoms of failure:** Active or passive discrimination; segregation of special events and homogeneity of event participants

Cities that embraced multiculturalism and homosexuality reaped huge economic gains from festivals, events, and venues.

5) Sustainability:

- **This means:** Building a community that can weather difficult conditions (like economic downturns), controversial events (like high profile criminal cases), and contentious decisions (like situating a new garbage dump)
- **This does not mean:** Recession-free, crime-free, poverty-free utopia


- **Characteristics of success:** Strong support for new businesses and the unemployed, rehabilitation programs for criminals and drug addicts, housing for low-income families
- **Symptoms of failure:** Domination by a single industry or company, self-segregation (ghettos and gated “communities”), low interaction between members of different groups

Seemingly wealthy and successful cities have joined a “rust belt” of failed communities as manufacturing moves from developed nations to emerging economies.

The following is a chart covering the spectrum of a community’s success, from failure to exceptionalism. Where your community ranks is an indicator of its engaged decision-making, which is a sign of trust.

Building Trust in Communities through Engaged Decision Making

COMMUNITY TRUST ASSESSMENT™



Community Trust Assessment		Failing	Weak	Average	Good	Optimal	Exceptional	
Shared Vision and Goals	Degrees of Success Across Five Components of Community Trust	No Vision and Goals	Informal Vision and Goals	Community Participates in Refining Vision and Goals	Understanding and Alignment of Vision and Goals	Stakeholders Know and Embrace Vision and Goals	Fully engaged community living shared vision and goals	Degrees of Success Across Five Components of Community Trust © 2013, Powernoodle Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
Enable communication		Civil Unrest	Stakeholder Apathy	Informal Process for Stakeholder Input	Formal Process for Stakeholder Input	Engaged Decision Making	Fully Transparent and Productive Honest Expression	
Making Diversity an Asset		Active Discrimination	Passive Discrimination	Tolerance	Acceptance and Harmony	Celebrate and Cooperate	Synergy and Tangible Benefits	
Deliver on Promises		Corruption	Distrust	Minimal Compliance	Best Effort	Full Accountability and Completion	Exceeding Community Expectations	
Practice Sustainability		Collapse	Remediation	Subsistence	Stability	Investment	Vibrant Growth	

Who “Owns” a Community’s Trust?

Everyone is responsible for trust within a community. At every level, we must ask ourselves how we can build enough trust to engage others (and ourselves) in decisions that make our community successful.

- City Council
- Municipal Offices
- Service Providers
- Interest Groups
- Citizens
- Other Communities

For more information on how to build trust in your community through engaged decision-making, please contact us: solutions@povernoodle.com or visit our community page: <http://www.povernoodle.com/landing/community?community>

For other “Building Trust” reports from Trust Across America, please see: <http://www.trustacrossamerica.com/building-trust-reports.shtml>