

BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES



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- **WHAT IS AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY?**
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Global changes and natural disasters have led to the migration of people to different communities all over the world. Communities that were once fairly homogeneous are experiencing large influxes of newcomers from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

A community that feels threatened by its growing diversity or is at a loss about what to do with the newcomers is at risk for all kinds of harmful confrontations including riots. Consider a community that went from being primarily European American to being a multicultural community. When the new members started to move into the community, the existing organizations, which reflected the dominant culture, did nothing to change the way they go about doing their business. One day, an African American boy who was attempting to cross the street was killed by a drunk driver who happened to be of European descent. The driver did not get the punishment that the African Americans in the community felt he deserved. The boy's family, friends, and other African American citizens staged a protest in front of the city hall. Feelings of injustice were already on the rise. When a European American citizen walked by the protest and made a derogatory comment, a fight broke out and before they knew it, there was a riot.

Could the violence have been prevented? Most likely, if there had been structures and processes in the community to ensure that all its citizens were treated equally and fairly. Such negative incidents, which have happened before and continue to occur in some communities, demonstrate how important it is for us to build an inclusive community.

WHAT IS AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY?

An inclusive community:

- Does everything that it can to respect all its citizens, gives them full access to resources, and promotes equal treatment and opportunity.
- Works to eliminate all forms of discrimination.
- Engages all its citizens in decision-making processes that affect their lives.
- Values diversity.
- Responds quickly to racist and other discriminating incidents.

Why is building an inclusive community important?

- Acts of exclusion and injustice based on group identity and other factors should not be allowed to occur and/or continue.
- All people have the right to be part of decisions that affect their lives and the groups they belong to.
- Diversity enriches our lives, so it is worth our while to value our community's diversity.

In 1995, the city of Clarksburg in West Virginia experienced a demographic change when the FBI's Fingerprint Identification Services Division moved into the community, bringing along with it more than 2,000 African American employees. One day, a young European American man burned a cross on the lawn of an African American FBI employee's house. This incident made the citizens of Clarksburg realize that it was important to build a community that appreciated its new diversity so that such acts of hate don't occur again. Hence, Clarksburg began its journey towards building an inclusive community. The story of Clarksburg is told in M. Potapchuk's book *Steps Toward an Inclusive Community*.

WHEN SHOULD YOU BUILD AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY?

An inclusive community can be built at any time. The need to have an inclusive community, however, is most obvious when there has been a decision or an incident that caused harm to a particular group of people.

It is important to consider the motivation behind an individual, a group, or a community's desire to build an inclusive community because the motivation affects the following:

- Types and sequence of strategies selected – if there were a crisis, you might have to start with a strategy that transforms the conflict. If there were no crisis, but rather the vision of a community leader that sparked the effort, you might consider starting with a public education campaign.
- Resources available – more resources could be mobilized if the motivation came from a large institution or a local foundation.
- Amount of support and obstruction – if the dominant group in the community is just as motivated as any other group, there is likely to be more support. If, however, the dominant group has no interest in changing the status quo, there are likely to be more barriers.
- Rate of progress – if the major leaders and groups support the effort, progress is likely to be faster.
- Expected outcomes – if the goal is to raise awareness, everyone involved is likely to be satisfied if they learned new things about other groups. If the goal is to promote fair treatment of every group, everyone involved is more likely to be satisfied by policy change.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK AND GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE COMMUNITY.

Find out what major groups live in the community and learn their history (i.e., length of residence, migration patterns, and changes in political, economic, and social status)

There are a couple of ways to do this.

You can start by contacting local government agencies and planning groups. You could also check out the [Census Bureau](#) and/or the website of the city or county; consult the [National Neighborhood Indicators Project](#) read the local community newspapers; drive and walk around the community and pay attention to social activities, housing developments and conditions, street life, etc.; attend community activities and talk to people; and meet with local community leaders.

Keep in mind: You may be perceived by the community as representing the organization that hired you to gather the information, or as favoring the identity group that you may be associated with. One way to overcome this perception is to work closely with community citizens that represent different groups. Attend meetings and events with them.

Observe and ask about the characteristics that distinguish the groups from one another. Such characteristics could include cultural tradition and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, employment categories, and/or religion.

Learn about the social organization of the different groups, including their social points, support networks, and major institutions.

Identify the major events (e.g., political, social, and economic) that affect the community. These could include the election of a new mayor who does not value the community's diversity, the closing down of a major factory that cost many residents their jobs, the establishment of a casino, or the expansion of a mental health center. Consider the links between such events and other changes in the community. Pay special attention to how these events have affected the major groups in the community.

Tip: How do you determine if you have heard from every major group in an equitable way?

- Conduct the same number of interviews or discussions with each major group.
- You could conduct a survey and ask group members to name their most influential leaders (or the leaders in whom they place the greatest trust), and then speak to those leaders.

Identify and attend the events that signify the traditions of the community. Such events could give you insights into whether or not the community values its diversity, what is important to the community, and which group is most visible and valued. They could also provide an ideal forum for distributing information and demonstrating change.

ENGAGE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL LEADERS REPRESENTING THE MAJOR GROUPS IN THE COMMUNITY FROM THE BEGINNING TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE.

Convene a community council comprised of influential leaders from different groups to help you review, analyze, and summarize the information that you gathered before. Be sure to identify cultural resources and assets as well as needs.

The process of convening this community council is an important consideration when you are working with two or more racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to build an inclusive community.

Consider carefully the history of exclusion and power differences. See Tool #1 for a guide on establishing a diverse community advisory board or council.

WORK WITH THE COMMUNITY COUNCIL TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL ENTRY POINTS AND/OR STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY.

Consider the way in which a problem or concern was raised and described by different groups and their leaders and the groups that may be associated with being the perpetrators, objects, or by-standers of exclusive practices. This information will give you a sense of the individuals or leaders who are most ready for change and those who are most resistant to change.

BRING TOGETHER PEOPLE REPRESENTING DIFFERENT GROUPS AS EQUALS IN TERMS OF POWER, RESPECT, AND IMPORTANCE.

Make sure that all groups involved are considered as equals. Processes and procedures, formal or informal, must be put in place to ensure that people are treated equally and that decisions are made collaboratively. A simple and common example is how language differences are dealt with during meetings and other forms of interaction.

Tip: You may find that the community has a list of concerns. In order to prioritize which common concern should be addressed first, you could consider:

- The concern that impacts the most number of groups.
- The potential consequences, if the concern is not addressed.
- The feasibility and practicality of addressing and resolving the concern.
- Results from past polls and formal surveys.

A common goal helps groups understand that they share certain desires or goals, which compels them to work together rather than against one another.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT GROUPS TO IDENTIFY AND SHARE THEIR SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES.

By getting to know someone as an individual, there is less of a tendency to perceive another group as monolithic and homogenous. This allows members of groups to recognize that even though they may differ in some ways, they may share a common identity or common goals and perceptions in others.

Find a phrase that appeals to all the groups (e.g., "better quality of life," "safe streets") and facilitate discussions about the meaning of that phrase to each person and each group. Build in time for informal social opportunities to talk, share a meal, etc. as part of these discussions.

Coordinate activities and events to celebrate the community's diversity.

Educate the different groups and the larger community about conditions and forces that help shape a group's identity and current situation. This is essential, because otherwise, groups can end up appreciating their similarities only and ignoring the structural factors (e.g., institutionalized racism) that underlie and perpetuate their differences. If the root causes for such differences are not recognized and addressed, the change that comes about from your effort will be superficial or short-lived.

ALLOW FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF EACH GROUP'S ASSETS AND USE AND EXCHANGE THEM AS PART OF YOUR EFFORT.

Assets in this context refer to the values, traditions, historical events, art forms, language structure, and other characteristics that make a group of people proud about their identity.

Find opportunities for this type of exchange to occur throughout your effort. For example, you could create such opportunities for members of the community council and during other community discussions. You could work with the editor of the local newspaper to publish a series of articles about the assets of each major group in the community, or you could also work with a popular radio station to allocate an hour a week to share such information.

Use such exchanges as a way to point out misinformed stereotypes or perceptions.

Albuquerque Project Change (APC) in New Mexico was launched in 1991 to build an inclusive community in Albuquerque by promoting equal access to economic resources for people of color in the city. One of the issues identified by the Project was unfair lending practices and poor outreach by local financial institutions to that population. Through community partnerships among different groups, anti-racism training for community groups and financial institutions, and a strong community task force, the Project was able to get local banks to commit to low-interest rates and flexible underwriting that benefited low-income groups of color. For more information, check out [Project Change](#).

IDENTIFY, RESPECT, AND TRANSFORM CONFLICTS INTO IMPROVED CAPACITY AND RELATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY.

Conflict between two or more groups may be unavoidable if they don't understand or appreciate one another's cultures, have misinformed or negative stereotypes about one another, and/or compete with one another for resources and power.

Recognize that different groups have their own ways of dealing with conflict. Some cultures encourage their members to conform, while other cultures encourage their members to challenge the forces that impinge on their rights. The goal is not to do away with conflict, because that is an impossible task, but rather to use conflict in a constructive way to develop people's capacity to work together.

Consider hiring an outside facilitator who can work with you and the community council throughout the effort to transform conflicts. Recognize that the potential facilitator's perceived group identity (this might be any characteristic from a physical trait to something less visible) could have a positive or a negative effect on the process. Make sure you, the potential facilitator, and the community council discuss this concern before actually getting down to work.

ENSURE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR PROMOTING INCLUSION, EQUITY, AND JUSTICE.

Equity means that everyone has equal access to economic, social, and educational opportunity. Justice means we uphold fair treatment and due reward in accordance with honor, standards, or law.

Support from institutions (e.g., local governments, schools, community networks, faith groups, the media) are essential for creating an environment that supports your community effort. Because of the status, power, resources, and relationships that these institutions have, they could either sanction or obstruct your effort.

Identify and engage institutional leaders in your effort, if they are not already part of the community council. You could make presentations about your effort or invite them to participate in an event or activity.

Find a way to show the institution how it could benefit by valuing and including all of the major groups.

The [South Orange/Maplewood Coalition on Race in New Jersey](#) is advised by a board of institutional leaders in the two communities. Through its multilevel strategies, the Coalition has been able to initiate pro-integrative strategies that value the racial diversity of the two communities and prevent re-segregation. Its efforts have resulted in institutional practices that ensure inclusion and equity for all the racial and ethnic groups that live there. For more information about its work, contact the coalition at (973) 761-6116.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND CELEBRATE SUCCESSFUL COLLECTIVE ACTION.

Successful collective action not only improves a community, but also strengthens the groups' relationships. It reinforces the positive experience and outcome of working together. Groups are more likely to want to work together again.

Take time to acknowledge and celebrate even the smallest accomplishment. For example, on a smaller scale, the council members could have dinner together at a restaurant. The council could also make an award to the groups that were part of the success.

On a larger scale, an organization that played a big part in the success could host an open house and invite leaders and members of all the groups to join in the celebration. Invite an important person in the community (e.g., the mayor, school superintendent, faith leader) to inaugurate the event. Write an article for the local newspaper.

In the acknowledgement and celebration, point out the fact that success was possible because the groups built on their strengths, appreciated their diversity, and worked together on a common issue.

SUSTAIN THE RELATIONSHIPS, STRATEGIES, AND CHANGES AT MULTIPLE LEVELS, INCLUDING THE INDIVIDUAL, GROUP, AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVELS.

Building an inclusive community is not an event that has a beginning and an end. It is a process that continuously evolves. Sometimes, it may feel like the community made three steps forward and then took two steps backward. Or, you had three successful actions and six ineffective attempts. What is considered success and progress, as opposed to failure and regression depends on the individual, group, and institution.

Regardless of where you stand, it is important to sustain the relationships, strategies, and changes, no matter how minor or insignificant they may seem to be, because they become the tools for managing the process of building an inclusive community.

Create opportunities to maintain frequent contact and cooperation among the groups. For example, if three groups came together to start a new multicultural after school program and it was successful, encourage them to institutionalize the program. This could mean hiring a grant writer to identify additional funds to continue the program.

Keep in mind: Efforts to build an inclusive community are sometimes conceived in either-or terms. In other words, the effort either focuses on dialogue OR action; assets OR needs; race OR class; individuals OR institutions; social relationships OR neighborhood improvement. The tools and resources that are available also tend to emphasize one focus or the other. While it is not wrong to choose one strategy or focus over another, it is preferable to implement a comprehensive effort that operates on multiple levels-individual, group, and institution.

Establish a task force or committee that could serve as a "watchdog" to hold institutions accountable to changes that affect inclusion.

Encourage leaders who understand and work towards inclusion, equity, and justice to run for office.

IN SUMMARY

The work of building inclusive communities is not easy; results will not occur overnight. It takes time, patience, perseverance, and courage, because this work is about transforming attitudes, behaviors, and policies. It requires strategies that operate at multiple levels, including the individual, group, and institutional levels.

Contributor

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Print Resources

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(For a copy, contact [CAPD](#), 111 Presidential Blvd., Suite 234, Bala Cynwyd, PA: 19004, phone: 610-664-4540,

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(This guide provides a list of interview questions and checklists for identifying the best training program for your community. To get a copy, contact The Aspen Institute, Fulfillment Office, P.O. Box 222, 109 Houghton Lab Lane, Queenstown, MD 21658, phone: 410-820-5338, publications@aspeninstitute.org).

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Organizations:

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