



Engaging communities: What's involved and how it's done

17 May 2016 | Sue West, Tim Moore and Angela Sayer

Comments

“ Thank you for the terrific presentation and for linkage to the Further Reading paper. I am involved in secondary research - not directly with the community - but personally involved as a parent and community member of a Community Engagement sub-committee of a small country town's health service board. My question relates to 'Avoiding disillusionment' mentioned in the paper and touched upon in the presentation. It is great to leave room in a budget for changing and new evolving priorities of the community, but what we have found very disheartening is the lack of resources (in this instance, support of a youth worker - in fact recent removal of this resource) needed to help with the initiatives identified as worthwhile for our town's youth. Whilst one of the ideas is to formulate and support a young leaders group - what is holding us back is the risk that the ideas that the children come up with will not be doable do to lack of resources. We do not want to set the children up for disappointment if only certain (low cost!) initiatives can be supported. Recruitment of members to our community engagement sub-groups is also difficult - the people we know we need to reach are not engaged (refuse to engage) . And burn out from the ones that do go on these groups is common (as they are called upon for many voluntary work in the community.

Jodie | 17 May 2016

“ Hi Jodie, I understand totally where you are coming from with the recruitment of community members. We always have issues with engaging volunteers, I believe a lot of people won't volunteer because they do not believe they have anything valid to offer. Something I've learnt from our centre leader is identifying one quality in a person and focussing on that, he took that approach with me and as my confidence and experience grew he then dobbed me in for other things, knowing I could deliver. My friends then started to see how much fun I was having and wanted to join in. Quite a few of us have young toddlers and I think this was initially one of the blockages to me stepping up to help. But now everyone knows if they want me my son comes along too, and I have done radio and TV interviews, spoken at conferences and attended meetings with him in tow. It's about adapting to each person's needs and helping them help themselves.

Angela Sayer | 20 May 2016



“ Hi Jodie, and thanks for your positive feedback. Here are some thoughts on the issues you have raised. One of the main concerns that services and professionals have about engaging communities (or families or young people) is that they will ask for something that cannot be done or is not affordable or is even potentially harmful. While these sorts of requests may indeed happen sometimes, people rarely continue to insist on them once they know what the constraints are. What is important is that information about the available resources are shared openly, that the requests are taken seriously, and that genuine effort is made to find ways of meeting reasonable requests. Generally, people respond well when the relationship between them and professionals is a genuine partnership in which both parties try to work out a way of achieving the goals that the community wants. However, they will become disillusioned very quickly if the professional services make no real effort to adapt their practices or redeploy their resources to meet the community's needs. The key point to keep in mind is that community engagement is essentially a partnership between equals, not a relationship in which services have to give communities whatever they want, or communities have to take whatever the service system offers. One of the challenges for services is that parents or parent groups might prioritise something that the professional might see as relatively trivial or unimportant. This is particularly likely to happen when communities are first engaged and have relatively little understanding of the service system's perspectives or resources. In such cases, it is a good strategy to do what the community wants this time, as a way of demonstrating that the service system is genuine about taking the community's views seriously. As the service system / community partnership develops and information is shared by both parties, the joint decisions made will become progressively more focused on actions likely to lead to positive outcomes. Professionals need to trust the process, and have faith in the community's capacity to rise to the shared responsibilities of partnership. Another challenge arises when the community requests something that the professionals know to be ineffective or potentially harmful. In these situations, the professionals have an ethical obligation to share their knowledge with the community members, and draw the line at using public funds and resources for programs that provide no benefit or may do harm. Partnerships, like all relationships, involve boundaries – both parties will have sticking points, actions that are unacceptable for whatever reason. What matters is that these views are respected by the other party, and that the partnership is able to continue despite any disagreements. A third challenge is when there is simply too few resources or funding to do what everyone agrees would be desirable. If the service system really is unable to find the wherewithal in the short term, then it's time for some creative brainstorming and lateral thinking. Is there some other way in which the activity can be organised that does not cost so much? Are there some other local groups or businesses that should be brought into the partnership to contribute to the pool of ideas and resources? At the same time, the service system needs to be exploring ways in which local needs and decisions can be fed up the line, so that decisions made at higher levels about resources and funding are informed by community views. The changes that are required to make services more responsive to community needs are two-fold: the service system needs to develop ways in which decision-making involves bottom-up as well as top-down thinking, and the community needs to build its capacity to mobilise its many underutilised resources to contribute to this process.

Tim Moore | 30 May 2016



“ Hi Angela - yes, my son has come along too and is always welcomed. Tim, thanks so much for your comprehensive response - very handy strategies!

Jodie | 30 May 2016