

Leading Civic Engagement

Three Cases

Practitioner Guide

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Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the set of cases, “Leading Civic Engagement.”

Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants also have the option to fill out the attached worksheet to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheet, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

Case Synopses

These three cases are stories of city officials leading civic engagement and public participation in pursuit of public goals. From various positions in city government, the protagonists in each case departed from typical bureaucratic processes to reach out directly to the public, using unexpected methods to solicit input, raise awareness, and effect behavioral change in their communities.

In the first case, the new director of the Seattle Solid Waste Utility, Diana Gale, implemented sweeping changes to the city’s solid waste collection practices. To secure compliance with new rules and regulations and tolerance for inevitable stumbles along the way, she developed a public relations capacity, became the public face of her agency, and embraced an ethos of humility and accountability.

In the second case, Antanas Mockus, the eccentric mayor of Bogotá, sought to improve public safety—focusing particularly on the unregulated and lethal use of fireworks around the Christmas holiday. He tried at first to effect change through persuasion, offering citizens alternatives to fireworks and engaging vendors in the effort to reduce fireworks-related injuries and deaths. When a child suffered severe burns, however, Mockus followed through on a threat to ban firework sales and use in the city.

In the third case, David Boesch, city manager of Menlo Park, California, decided to engage city residents in setting priorities around cost reduction as a major budget shortfall loomed for the coming fiscal year. He hired a local firm to plan and execute a comprehensive participatory budgeting process. In a city with a sharp divide between haves and have-nots, Boesch and his partners had to take special care to ensure that everyone’s interests were heard and represented in budgetary decision-making.

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (30-45 minutes)

The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the three cases from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions for each case:

- *What was the public problem that each official was trying to solve?*
- *Could the official have addressed the problem without citizen participation? If so, how? If not, why not?*
- *What did they need citizens to do? How did leaders use their resources to engage citizens to address the problem?*

Part 2: Application (15-20 minutes)

As a class or in small groups, participants may apply the concepts discussed to their own challenges in engaging their communities. If the class is divided into groups, you may suggest a public problem for each group to work on. *Is civic engagement needed here? If so, what form of engagement? What does the government need citizens to do, and who should lead the engagement effort?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (5–10 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants will continue to reflect on and apply to collaborative challenges in their work. Some sample, high-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion could include the following:

- Successful civic engagement efforts focus on the practical problem to be solved, not engagement for its own sake.
- Effective engagement requires communication, facilitation, mutual accountability, and follow-up actions.
- The position of the entity managing the engagement and the inclusiveness of the process are critical considerations.

Appendix

Optional Worksheet

Pre-discussion Questions:

1. *What objectives were city officials pursuing and why?*
2. *How did they design their interventions?*
3. *Whose knowledge, ideas, and resources did they put to work?*
4. *How did members of the public change their understandings, attitudes, and behaviors to become “part of the solution”?*