

“Trust the People”

Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy

Practitioner Guide

JORRIT DE JONG, HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN, ARCHON FUNG, AND GAYLEN W. MOORE

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 case, “Trust the People: Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy.”

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 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.

For this conversation, consider assigning pages 5-12 of the [City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement](#) as pre-reading alongside the case.

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 Synopsis

In the 2010s, Bologna, Italy, faced a crisis of civic trust and participation that seemed at odds with the city’s long tradition of progressive politics and cooperative enterprise. Moreover, those who wanted to work with the city government to improve conditions in the community found themselves stymied by bureaucratic dysfunction. A task as simple as repainting a bench in a public park required authorization and coordination between five separate city departments. Taking the principle of subsidiarity—the idea that those closest to a problem are best equipped to solve it—as a starting point, city leaders in Bologna launched a series of reforms and initiatives to deepen the city’s engagement with residents. Among these was the establishment of a new enterprise, in partnership with the University of Bologna, called the Civic Imagination Office. This collaboration was initiated and overseen by Matteo Lepore, the city’s deputy mayor for culture, sport, tourism, and civic imagination. The office launched “labs” in each of the city’s six districts to learn from and respond to residents’ needs, interests, and initiative at a hyper-local level, using proximity as a primary tactic for organizing and strategizing with them to take action in their community.

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns hit Italy hard, and Matteo Lepore faced a confounding new social and civic landscape. Would he be able to use the Civic Imagination Office to solve this puzzle? Would the investments made in building trust and co-productive capacity yield a public with the resilience and adaptability to address this crisis and help Bologna rebound stronger?

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (30 minutes)

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

- *What objectives did Matteo Lepore and the Office of Civic Imagination pursue and why?*
- *What design choices did they make and why?*
- *Whose knowledge, ideas, and resources did they put to work?*

Ask participants to consider what they would have done in Matteo Lepore’s shoes. How would they have redesigned or rethought engagement strategies? Suggested questions:

- *What challenges and opportunities did the COVID-19 crisis present to the city?*
- *How would the city’s approach to civic engagement have needed to change?*
- *How would YOU have redesigned Bologna’s civic engagement efforts at that time and why?*

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group to apply the concepts discussed to their own managerial challenges. Suggested questions:

- *What are the primary goals you are trying to achieve through your engagement efforts?*
- *What is the subject or problem you are trying to engage residents on? How do you frame it?*
- *Who are you hoping to engage and why are they important to include? What’s in it for them?*
- *What methods of engagement and forms of interaction are a good fit for your goals and the people you are hoping to engage?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (10 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants will continue to reflect on and apply to engagement challenges in their work. (At this point, it may be helpful to review and/or share the case’s epilogue to resolve participant questions. See link below) High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- The goals of civic engagement are broader than a given project or interaction. Effective civic engagement can help city leaders strengthen relationships with the community, gather essential knowledge, mobilize resources, share decision-making power, and advance equity.
- Well-designed civic engagement efforts align the goals of engagement (why) with the subject of engagement (what), the people being engaged (who), and the methods of engagement (how).
- Experimenting thoughtfully with new forms of engagement that remove barriers between city government and residents can help build trust and co-productive capacity.

Suggested Reading

For the epilogue to this case, see [Trust the People: Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy \(Epilogue\)](#).

For more on designing effective and equitable civic engagement, see the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative’s [City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement](#) by the authors of this guide and Rebecca Rosen.

See also the other cases in this Civic Engagement collection:

- [More than a Contract: Black Self-Determination and People’s Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi](#) by the authors of this guide and LaChaun Banks.
- [Operation Pufferfish: Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan](#) by the authors of this guide.

Worksheet

1. *What objectives did Matteo Lepore and the Office of Civic Imagination pursue and why?*

2. *What design choices did they make and why?*

3. *Whose knowledge, ideas, and resources did they put to work?*