

More than a Contract

Black Self-Determination and People's Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi

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 case, “More than a Contract: Black Self-Determination and People’s Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi.”

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 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 Jackson, Mississippi—a city with a 200-year history of racialized terror and division—failing infrastructure, disinvestment, and crime plagued residents. For those who saw a future for Black self-determination in a majority Black city built on the labor of enslaved people, however, Jackson was fertile ground for experimentation, collective visioning, and collective action. The Jackson People’s Assembly (JPA), a vehicle of “Black self-determination and autonomous political authority of the oppressed peoples and communities in Jackson,”¹ launched the political career of Chokwe Lumumba, a veteran civil rights attorney who was elected mayor in 2013. His close friend and fellow organizer, Dr. Safiya Omari, served as his chief of staff until Lumumba’s sudden death in 2014.

When Lumumba’s son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, was elected mayor with the support of JPA organizers in 2017, Omari returned to city hall to serve again as chief of staff. Antar Lumumba vowed publicly to make Jackson “the most radical city on the planet.”² This bold promise to shake up the status quo ran headlong into practical and political realities—including one extremely contentious and consequential procurement process. Facing snowballing crises, hostile city council members, and a history of corruption and exploitation, could Omari help Antar Lumumba realize this promise? Could they build a city government that was effective, accountable, and representative of the kind of “radical” values Jackson legends like Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the late Mayor Lumumba had embodied and espoused?

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:

- *If you were Dr. Omari, would you have advised the mayor to fight city council on the garbage contract? Why or why not? What would be the next step?*
- *Legal technicalities aside, who do you think should have the right to select a vendor? The mayor? The council? Residents? Others?*
- *Why did Dr. Omari and Chokwe Lumumba (Sr.) create the JPA? Would you have advised Mayor Antar Lumumba to engage the JPA on the issue of garbage contracts? Why or why not?*

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 in your engagement efforts?*
- *What makes the subject or problem you are trying to solve suitable for engagement and what is the most effective way to frame it?*
- *Whose engagement do you need in order to achieve your aims?*
- *What methods and activities will help you engage the right people on the right topics to get the outcomes you are seeking?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (10 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants may continue to reflect on and apply to 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:

- There are often multiple values at stake in public problems and multiple motivations to engage residents. Naming and reflecting on those values helps clarify a city's internal goals as well as those of its residents.
- There is no recipe for success in civic engagement but designing efforts with clarity of purpose and aligning goals (why), with topics (what), participants (who), and methods (how) is essential for improving engagement and reducing disappointment on all sides.
- Civic engagement does not exist in a historical vacuum; past efforts and outcomes inform residents' perceptions and willingness to engage. Understanding this context will help you design more effective engagements.

Suggested Reading

For the epilogue to this case, see [More than a Contract: Black Self-Determination and People's Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi \(Epilogue\)](#).

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:

- ["Trust the People": Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy](#) by the authors of this guide.
- [Operation Pufferfish: Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan](#) by the authors of this guide.

Endnotes

¹ Kali Akuno, *Jackson Rising* (Jackson:Daraja Press, 2017), “The Jackson-Kush Plan: The Struggle for Black Self-determination and Economic Democracy.”

² Anna Wolfe, “Mayor-Elect Lumumba: Jackson ‘to Be the Most Radical City on the Planet,’” Clarion Ledger, June 12, 2017, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/06/12/lumumba-jackson-most-radical-city/387058001/>.