

Operation Pufferfish

Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan

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, “Operation Pufferfish: Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan.”

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

Lansing native Andi Crawford returned home and took over a mismanaged and outdated neighborhood grant program. She revamped grant processes, brought in new money and capacity, and expanded eligibility.

This shift became just one element of much larger project, championed by incoming Mayor Andy Schor, that centered neighborhoods as the starting point for community building and civic engagement. His first executive order established a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement (DNCE) with Crawford at the helm. With a small but mighty team, Crawford created a portfolio of programs and activities to build and foster neighborhood spirit, civic pride, and resident engagement. When COVID-19 arrived in Lansing in 2020, the DNCE worked tirelessly to push out information, connect residents to support, and shift its activities from in-person to virtual.

Looking ahead to 2021, Crawford felt the time had come to hand over the reins to DeLisa Fountain, a former community organizer who had been working as the DNCE’s neighborhood resource officer. Fountain prepared herself to take on the new role in an uncertain environment. What could she do to keep residents engaged, connected, and safe amid lockdowns and political unrest?

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 in DeLisa Fountain’s shoes, what would you would have started, stopped, and kept doing with the DNCE and why?*
- *What were the problems the DNCE was originally supposed to solve? Was it effective?*
- *What are the pros and cons of a department like the DNCE? Under what conditions can it most effectively help the city engage with residents?*

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?*
- *How are you defining and communicating the subject and scope of your engagement efforts?*
- *Whose participation 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 motivations to engage residents. Thinking about what success looks like and identifying meaningful metrics 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.
- Approaching civic engagement in a more systematic and intentional way can help increase effectiveness across the board, provided that the city continues to learn, improve, and adjust its approach in response to changing circumstances, expectations, technologies, and demographics.

Suggested Reading

For the epilogue to this case, see [Operation Pufferfish: Building and Sustaining a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement in Lansing, Michigan \(Epilogue\)](#).

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
- [More than a Contract: Black Self-Determination and People's Assemblies in Jackson, Mississippi](#) by the authors of the guide and LaChaun Banks

Worksheet

1. *If you were in DeLisa Fountain's shoes, what would you have started, stopped, and kept doing with the DNCE and why?*
2. *What were the problems the DNCE was originally supposed to solve? Was it effective?*
3. *What are the pros and cons of a department like the DNCE? Under what conditions can it most effectively help the city engage with residents?*