

Solving Problems Block by Block

Clean Sweeps and Neighborhood Improvement in Buffalo, NY

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, “Solving Problems Block by Block: Clean Sweeps and Neighborhood Improvement in Buffalo, NY.”

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. If you choose to use the worksheet as a basis for group discussion in the Application section below, 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 Synopsis

This case examines Buffalo, New York’s longstanding Clean Sweep program and the challenges it presented to Oswaldo Mestre, Jr., the city’s director of Citizen Services, in moving the initiative forward. For over two decades, the innovative program had brought together staff from various city departments and outside community partners to improve the quality of life in Buffalo’s most distressed neighborhoods. Mestre had been instrumental in the program’s design and management from the beginning.

The case explores how, under Mayor Byron Brown’s and Mestre’s leadership, the neighborhood improvement program grew steadily from six to eight Sweeps per year in 2002, to around thirty-four in 2023; developed a data-driven way to select neighborhoods and improve collaboration among participants; and moved away from an emphasis on law enforcement and towards building resident trust and capacity. In 2022, when a racially-motivated mass shooting killed ten Black residents on the city’s East Side, Mestre and his trusted advisors joined the broader effort to support the community by conducting several consecutive Clean Sweeps in the affected neighborhood. This suggested that the program had evolved from an enforcement-oriented intervention that sometimes intimidated residents to a service-oriented intervention that many residents knew and perhaps even trusted.

As the last Clean Sweep of the 2023 season came to a close, Mestre considered what should happen next: Would continuing to grow the Clean Sweeps overtax partners, leading to attrition and lesser impact? Would it compromise the quality of the services and interactions with residents? Was there a way to increase impact while holding steady? Were Clean Sweeps just a BandAid disguising ineffectual neighborhood development policies, or a promising approach to neighborhood revitalization?

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 problem was Buffalo trying to solve with the Clean Sweeps? What value did the city seek to produce?*
- *Whose support was needed to run the Clean Sweeps? How did the city cultivate the trust and legitimacy necessary to obtain this support?*
- *What were the program’s costs and benefits? Were the city’s efforts more—or less—than the sum of their parts?*
- *How did the city know it was doing a good job with Clean Sweeps? How did the city define success with respect to the program?*

- *Should Director Mestre have recommended increasing the number of Clean Sweeps, reducing it, or keeping it the same? If you were Mestre, what data should you have asked the team for to help guide your recommendation to the mayor?*

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group to apply the concepts discussed to develop a new approach to a key mayoral priority of their choice. If you handed out the worksheet, you may provide a few minutes for participants to fill it out individually and then discuss their proposals as a group using the questions below.

- *Pick one issue in your city that might benefit from leveraging data, innovation, and collaboration.*
- *What is the problem you would want to solve? Why does it matter?*
- *What is your city currently doing about it? How do you know if it's working or not?*
- *How might the use of data, collaboration across departments, and rethinking current practices improve the situation?*
- *What did you learn from the Buffalo case?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (15–20 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. High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- Using data intentionally and systematically can help public leaders better understand problems and needs as well as evaluate what does and doesn't work.
- Collaboration is about working across silos and sectors as well as with the community. Part of a leader's role is to figure out which partners can help tackle a problem and cultivate the trust and legitimacy necessary to get them on board.
- Innovation is about challenging assumptions and trying something new. The process can be messy, but the tradeoffs are often worth it.
- Not everyone will agree on what problem(s) to solve in their city or how to solve them. Collaborative innovation is about helping diverse participants to agree (enough) on what problem we should be tackling and getting them to agree (enough) on what should be done.

Invite participants to apply the concepts and lessons from the case to develop a new approach to a key mayoral priority of their choice. You can prompt them to consider their key priority through the following lenses:

1. *Data: What data do you have that might inform your approach to this problem?*
2. *Collaboration: Who needs to work on this problem? How can you encourage them to collaborate?*
3. *Innovation: What practices might need to be reinvented to get closer to a solution? How would you reinvent them?*