Partnership Development and Community Engagement

Overview

Adapting the Evergreen-Model requires building a multi-stakeholder engagement process. Because the approach involves a conscious attempt to leverage *external* capital into disinvested neighborhoods, much of the initial work also is necessarily external to the community as well. In particular, the Evergreen development process was based on the very real need to develop strong partnerships amongst anchor institutions and other organizations in the Greater University Circle neighborhoods as well as the outside support from various additional entities and consultants.

The need to attract external support, however, does not mean that community engagement is unimportant. This short outline is based upon those lessons learned in Cleveland to help adaptation efforts build a more equitable process from the beginning. What follows are the lessons learned in Cleveland on how to increase the involvement of local residents and additional stakeholders in the process of adapting the Evergreen-Model in other cities and what steps are now being taken in Cleveland to improve the ongoing process.

Lessons from Cleveland

In Cleveland, it took over two years to start the first Evergreen cooperative, Evergreen Cooperative Laundry. Those two years were spent building support amongst anchor institutions and a wide variety of community development corporations, additional non-profit organizations, and outside consultants focusing on workforce development, business development, financing, etc. Through an extensive series of conversations, these different anchor institutions and community organizations developed a strategy to launch a new grouping of companies.

The process in Cleveland involved foundations, anchor institutions, outside consultants, non-profit organizations specializing in different, needed skills, and local organizations in the surrounding communities. Even though the adaptation process is already quite complex, it's essential to develop a community engagement strategy and be sure to include as many stakeholders as possible. Partnership development and community engagement go hand in hand. The lessons learned from Cleveland point to utilizing two different processes with ways bringing them together at certain points. On one side is the necessity of a space where organizations and anchor institutions can develop partnerships and specific strategies for bringing their strengths together. At the same time though, ensuring communities have a voice at the table helps ensure that the process is both equitable and inclusive.

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As outlined in the *Phase One* and *Phase Three* documents, it's important to engage potential partners from the beginning. Those documents outline all the different types of partnerships needed to make an Evergreen adaptation projects successful, but partnership development isn't the only facet of creating successful efforts. Community engagement cannot be overlooked. Even though community engagement may not be a large component initially (indeed, in working with community groups it is always important to remember the central rule to "under-promise and over-deliver"), its role is critical.

Even though it isn't necessarily one of the partnerships that has to be investigated through the initial assessment process, engaging community organizations and residents at this beginning stage is a great way to get a sense of how an adaptation project will be received by the surrounding community. Large-scale community engagement initiatives like the one associated with Evergreen might not be done in every community where an adaptation project is launched. Getting a sense of the community from the beginning through the interview and assessment process is an easy first step. Community engagement isn't only for the community's benefit.

Evergreen had the good fortunate of being able to work with a local organization to find people to hire. That isn't where this portion ends though. Organizations rooted in the community are great conduits for spreading the word about jobs that are available, finding interested

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entrepreneurial people in the community whose passion can be tapped into for launching new businesses, and ensuring the maximum positive impact possibly by spreading the word about a new community revitalization effort where the residents themselves, by becoming worker-owners, are in charge.

Evergreen is a community wealth building strategy aiming to create jobs, build wealth, and stabilize neighborhoods. Stabilizing or revitalizing neighborhoods isn't just about creating jobs or building wealth, but about helping to re-weaving the social fabric of a community. It entails not building yet another organization focused on community building, but putting in place a system that will facilitate local residents to do it themselves, together with local institutions large and small.

It's up to each and ever local adaptation effort to decide to what extent they want to develop a community engagement initiative alongside the business development and general community wealth building strategy. This section provides an outline of how community engagement has been integrated into the Evergreen initiative.

Community Engagement Goals:
- Create a shared sense of ownership and responsibility based on the concept of partnership and co--investment between grassroots and institutional stakeholders.
- Build cross-neighborhood connections to promote a unified identity among stakeholders in the neighborhoods.
- Identify, develop, and support local leadership within local residents, groups and community organizations.
- Deconstruct historical barriers between stakeholders, enabling residents to the access the social capital opportunities provided by local anchor institutions, and helping the institutions to be more responsive to the community needs, interests, and priorities.

STRATEGY COMPONENTS
The Community Engagement Strategy has four components: 1) direct engagement; 2) leadership development; 3) community grant making; and 4) communications.

1. **Direct Engagement:** A significant area of work under the Community Engagement Strategy is that of developing trust, connections, and networks within and between each level of neighborhood stakeholder: individual residents, neighborhood groups,

community and faith-based organizations, and anchor institutions. Activities and programs in this area will include:

a. *A Listening Campaign.* The first component is a six-month experience of listening to community members and anchor institution leaders throughout the neighborhoods to learn about their perceptions of the area's strengths, needs, and priorities for addressing current and future challenges. Information is being collected through one-on-one interviews; living room meetings; and community leader interviews, reaching over 100 leaders and supporters in the neighborhoods. This information will inform the design and implementation of the grantmaking program and other aspects of the overall strategy.

b. *Network Weaving*: Through network weaving, neighborhood stakeholders will build connections around specific issues, bridging social capital, interweaving relationships, and developing trust to produce positive, reciprocal exchanges. Specifically, the following techniques will be employed:
   - Network Nights – Monthly gatherings of the entire network (individuals, grantees, non-profits, faith-based organizations, institutions) to come together, share, and learn about what is happening throughout the network and to build relationships.
   - Community Conversations – Quarterly convenings of grant recipients to highlight successful projects and share lessons-learned, and to connect grant recipients to more established organizations, institutions, and resources. Conversations have different themes (inclusion, foreclosure, safety, etc.).
   - Neighborhood Lunch and Learns – Quarterly luncheons (modeled on the Skillman Foundation's work) will provide opportunities for organizational stakeholders (i.e. large institutions, community based non-profits, faith based organizations, and neighborhood groups) to know each other and build trust between their organizations.
   - Neighbor Circles – In an effort to build community, improve safety, and involve more people in the network, Neighbor Circles is a tool to develop relationships on individual streets and within organizations. This tactic will be taught to organizations

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throughout the neighborhoods as an approach to use with their constituents (modeled on Network Centric Organizing from Bill Traynor, Lawrence Community Works).

2. **Leadership Development**: Leadership and capacity building strategies that offer training to residents and other partners are vitally important to develop strong neighborhood leaders that can act as effective and empowering change agents in their communities. Here are some examples:
   a. *Coaching and Technical Assistance to grant recipients* (and institutional stakeholders, pending availability of external funding), provided by a single organization or grant recipients with specific expertise.
   b. *Complementary education and training opportunities* through referrals to available opportunities in neighborhood and larger region for individuals and groups interested in building their capacity and improving their skills. If there is widespread interest in particular trainings, it would be important to organize training sessions for stakeholders as part of the engagement strategy. Possible trainings could include data analysis, community building and organizing, strategic planning, and others.
   c. *Learning Circles* are small groups (no more than 20 people) from various organizations in the community interested in deeply exploring an issue important to grant recipients. Each organization that participates in a circle is required to contribute to the learning of the circle and to prototype new ideas they have learned as a result of their participation.
   d. *Supporting Community Organizing*. It's important to find an organization that will incorporate leaders and networks developed through the strategy into its city-wide activities, and leverage the work currently being done by community organizers in the neighborhoods by providing them technical assistance, training, and promoting collaboration among them.

3. **Community Grantmaking:** A Community Grantmaking component is an essential part of community engagement in order to help launch innovative ideas and projects that come from neighborhood residents. Through a neighborhood focused, community or "grassroots" grantmaking program, individuals, neighborhood groups,

community and faith based organizations, and anchor institutions can partner with each other as co-investors in the revitalization of the neighborhoods. Specifically, community residents will be empowered as independent agents of change with social and financial capital to identify and address needs, challenges, and opportunities in their own neighborhoods.

A neighborhood grant fund can be structured as a tiered system to provide graduated grant funding support between all levels of stakeholders. It can invest in community-led projects that result in:
- Connections between neighborhood groups (up to $500)
- Connections between neighborhood groups across neighborhoods (up to $2,000)
- Connections between neighborhood groups and organizations, neighborhoods and anchor institutions (up to $5,000)

It's important to find a project champion who can provide a large portion of the community grantmaking funds; so as little as possible will be raised from other, local supporters. As this work becomes established over time, anchor institutions and corporations will see the impact of this program and it is expected that they will want to establish a collaboratively capitalized fund that sustains this vehicle of community empowerment and responsiveness.

4. **Communications:** Building an environment where self-navigation, peer support and exchange, and viral marketing are attributes requires investment in communication and information technology and the reinforcement of member behavior focused on the dissemination of information. A Community Engagement Strategy should create an information rich environment where community members have access to timely information about events, resources, and opportunities in their and close-by neighborhoods; are able to share their successes and struggles; and are able to make positive contributions to civic discourse through a community-based media outlet.

In Cleveland, we created *Neighborhood Voice*, an innovative, "hyper-local," community-based information source (integrating print and online media) serving the Greater University Circle neighborhoods of Hough, Fairfax, Glenville, Little

Italy, East Cleveland, and Buckeye/Shaker. With the guidance of a full-time professional publisher, high school and college students from the target area will be trained to run the business side of the *Neighborhood Voice*, thereby developing their entrepreneurial skills. They will also receive invaluable real-life work experience in the communications field.

The *Neighborhood Voice* is based on the "citizen journalism" model pioneered to great effect in many parts of the country. The principal idea is to create a communications vehicle of, by, and for the citizens of the Greater University Circle area of Cleveland. It will solicit stories, photos, and other content from residents of local neighborhoods and will provide a forum for their unique perspective on community issues, challenges, and opportunities. It will also report on and promote local events, sports, artistic and cultural efforts, and civic activities.