

To FEAST or Not To Feast...

Community Organizing Best Practices

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There is no one-size-fits all in community organizing

Communities are a unique collection of individuals and contexts – so community organizing is often most effective when it is treated as a fluid/ “organic” process. Differences between communities and community members are strengths, for diversity fosters resiliency. It is important for community organizers to recognize that the inherent uniqueness of communities necessitates creative responses to community challenges. What works for one group may not work for another. While the Oregon Food Bank offers FEAST as a highly adaptable model for organizing, broad enough to meet a variety of community contexts, FEAST is not necessarily a good fit for all communities. As you and others are organizing, be sure to check-in periodically with one another to make sure you all agree what you are planning will work in your area. Don’t be afraid to think outside the box and make your own model!

Who to involve?

The FEAST Planning Manual offers a list of potential “types” of community members to engage in your community organizing and community event. The list reflects the importance of involving diverse perspectives, but do not feel limited to that list. Inviting more “types” of people to the table can lead to the realization of previously unknown community assets or allies. Ask yourself, which groups are typically “left out” of local community conversations? Then, encourage those unheard voices to get involved – even if you don’t know them yet. Embrace the challenge of involving people of all ages, genders, professions, ethnicities, races, political perspectives, religions, and backgrounds in your community organizing work. Just the act of bringing a broad cross-section of a community together can have powerful outcomes. Concerned that bringing people with conflicting viewpoints together will lead to conflict? See note below about keeping it positive. It works!

Keep it positive

While negativity can cause stagnation and limited action, cultivating and maintaining a positive tone in group conversations can greatly bolster forward momentum and enthusiastic participation. The “Reframe Card” in the FEAST Toolkit is a tool designed by the Kansas Sampler Foundation to help establish and maintain positive sentiments among a diverse group of participants. Introducing the Reframe Card at the beginning of a meeting or event can help to lay the foundation for positive, productive communication. The Reframe Card can be an asset in balancing group dynamics. For example, when a particular participant is dominating the conversation or “bringing the group down”, the Reframe Card can empower other group members to speak up and share their own perspectives, or change the subject.

Participants are experts

All participants in community organizing and community conversations – regardless of background – have their own unique perspectives, experiences, and expertise to share. This includes members of planning committees, speakers, panelists, event attendees, volunteers, staff – anyone involved in the activities you pursue. If one of your goals is to empower people in positive ways, opening and running each meeting or event with an inviting tone and respect towards the expertise of all persons in the room can greatly improve participant engagement and event outcomes.

Sometimes saying less accomplishes more

If the goal of your event is to empower participants to offer their own creative input, be forewarned that infusing your own ideas, ideals or agenda into introductory presentations or handouts may stifle the contribution of others. Are you hosting this meeting or event in order to inform the public of your point of view, or to empower participants to share their own perspectives and ideas? If you hope to accomplish the latter, be careful not to let your own views drown out the contributions of other experts in the room. The FEAST model suggests using a handful of panelists from the community to set the tone at the start of an event – but having an opening panel is not required. As an alternative, you may choose to engage participants in group discussions right from the get go.

Diversify event activities

When planning an event program, put yourself in the participants' shoes. Sitting and listening for long periods of time can be exhausting. How can you diversify event activities to keep participants energized and engaged? Especially for long events, I encourage you to brainstorm with your planning committee on creative solutions to this challenge. Here are a few ideas that have worked for others:

-Integrate interludes of entertainment between segments of the program:

*One planning committee contacted participants in advance to see what skills and talents they could contribute. They discovered that several participants were musicians and invited everyone to bring an instrument. When the event's energy hit a low, they had a quick jam session! Later on, a ventriloquist participant performed a comedic skit that corresponded with the event theme.

-Promote energetic engagement and forward momentum:

*At another event, to keep the energy up the facilitator led "speed meeting" sessions – some standing and some sitting – in which participants had several back-to-back breakout sessions with different sized small groups (ranging from 2 to 12 participants each). The fast pace of the meetings created an excited energy among participants as they brainstormed on solutions to their various topics of discussion.

-Introduce new, inspirational voices:

*Some event organizers have integrated short, inspirational video clips as interludes between program activities – such as a favorite Ted talk. Videos could be locally produced to address specific community challenges or sourced from outside communities who have pulled together to do great work.

-Feed the people:

*FEAST is about coming together to discuss food systems issues. Will your participants eat at your event? One group hosting a long event decided to offer local apples as a snack food. Another took a break during their event for a potluck picnic. The FEAST Planning Guide offers other creative food ideas.

-The sky is the limit:

*What do people in your community respond positively to? What creative activities can you integrate into your event to make it unique to your community and keep people engaged?

Use what you've got

Concerned about how to fund a FEAST-like event? No need to worry! Events like this can be pulled together on a shoe-string, or no budget at all. They are run on creativity. Ask around and explore local resources to meet your needs. Let people know what you are planning, and that it is meant to have a positive impact on your community. You may be amazed by what opportunities open up to help make your event a success.

Trust the Process

FEAST asks event planners to involve participants in driving the content of their small group conversations. It offers the “snow card” activity as one method of gleaning participants’ perspectives on what topics are important to them, and then letting their submitted topics shape the small group conversations. To succeed in accomplishing this type of activity, planners and facilitators must be open to “going with the flow.”

Participant-driven breakout topics are easiest to accomplish if you can let go of control. Remember, one of the main goals of your event is to bring people together and put them in conversation. As event facilitator, your job is to create space for participants to discuss what they need to discuss, and then step back and let them do it!

In our first FEAST event, we only planned for one small group break-out session, but we had over 40 different topics submitted! When we divided into small groups, we decided to assign broad categories that could encompass a number of the topics submitted and only have one break-out session so they would have ample time to talk. At other events, we’ve had success with multiple break-out sessions with more specific subjects, allowing broader networking of participants as well as the discussion of more focused topics. Either way, the goal is accomplished: bringing people together and giving them space to connect over issues of import!

Who will carry on the torch?

Perhaps the trickiest part of events like FEAST is taking what is learned from the event and promoting further conversation and action. FEAST, or FEAST-like events, easily accomplish the work of making connections. They network people together and get them talking about possible projects. But how do communities take those ideas and turn them into action? Planning committees must ask themselves this question, before *and* after the event. Here are some tactics:

Report Back-

Your planning committee may want to integrate report-back activities into the event program. This could be in the form of worksheets completed by the small groups and submitted to event organizers (see FEAST Toolkit and Planning Manual) and/or creating time in the program for presentations of “key takeaways” from members of the small groups. Your planning committee may come up with other creative ways for gleaning and documenting the information and ideas that are shared. At one event, rather than putting a few individual participants on the spot to present takeaways to a large group of attendees, each member of their 3 small groups was numbered off (1 through 7) and then reorganized into even smaller groups (so 7 groups of 3, where before it was 3 groups of 7) to share their discussion outcomes. In this way, everyone in the room learned about what the other groups discussed, and everyone in the room got to share with someone else what they thought was important about their own group discussions.

Follow-up-

In order to ensure that follow-up actions take place, planning committees should create a follow-up plan *prior* to the event. This could involve a plan for surveying participants about their experience at the event. It could mean assigning a volunteer to type up the name and contact information of all participants and then emailing the group that information so that communication between participants can continue. Part of the plan could be setting a date for the planning committee together within a couple weeks of the event, to discuss event outcomes and brainstorm next steps (highly recommended). Regardless of approach, having a follow-up plan prior to the event is key to carrying forward the momentum and energy generated during your community event. It is essential for transforming interest into action.