

Case 3 Comments: Community Outreach Chaos

What Is Wrong and What Should Be Done?

Cheryl Simrell King

The Problem(s)

Dr. Schuman is indeed in trouble. Despite her good intentions (and, apparently, the good intentions of the grant), she committed the classic mistake in community development work: She built a process that was expert and institution centered instead of community and citizen centered. This mistake is repeated far too often, for many reasons, not the least of which is the institutional and attitudinal separation between “experts” and citizens played out in situations like this and in “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) movements. A group of, apparently, well-intentioned administrators and experts, assisted by a few community leaders (who are not, necessarily, neighborhood residents), decide what is best for a community and then try to export or sell their ideas to the community.

This story is reminiscent of the aborted beginning of the Dudley Street Initiative in Boston. That initiative began with a group of “outsiders” (some of whom were administrators of community agencies and community leaders, but not neighborhood residents) who invested a great deal of time in determining, without neighborhood or community involvement, the neighborhood problems and solutions. They brought their prepared (and well-funded) plans to the neighborhood and were, in the words of one Boston city administrator, “taken to the wood shed” for doing this work without the involvement of the neighbors.

Dr. Schuman has been taken to the wood shed. She made the grievous error of not engaging the neighborhood from the very beginning and she has to fix this error. In addition, apparently this is not the first time the university approached its community-based work in the same, expert-centric way. Both Dr. Schuman and the university need to consider either changing their ways or getting out of this line of work.

Some other problems:

1. Don't do community-based work if you are looking for accolades and attention. It's better to not do the work at all than to do it for the wrong reasons.

2. Dr. Schuman and her team approached this neighborhood from a needs/deficit approach rather than from an assets/appreciatory approach. This translates to the classic attitudes that folks in marginalized communities are not likely to stand for anymore: "There is something wrong with you and we know what we can do to fix it for you. . . . Oh, and we expect that you'll appreciate us greatly for doing so!" (the so-called great-white hope approach).

3. Race and class are clearly issues, although we are not sure to what degree Dr. Schuman worked to ensure that her team was representative.

The Solution(s)

Tonight

What Dr. Shuman needs to do tonight is to invite the attendees to talk to her, to vent their frustrations, and to talk about their dreams for the future of their neighborhood. She then should step back and listen. Nothing more.

Dr. Schuman should try to communicate two things to the meeting attendees: It is clear to her, after two meetings, that she and her team have acted like "uninvited guests" and they need to be a different sort of guest; and, that she is interested and willing to listen to those assembled regarding how she should go about doing this.

Tomorrow

Dr. Schuman needs to begin working on reconfiguring the project such that it is neighborhood centered, instead of expert and institution centered.

She needs to take what was suggested at the meeting last night and put it into action. She will have to meet with her college administrators and explain how they went wrong and make them aware of the importance of proceeding differently with this work in particular, and with all their community partnership work in general. The college, obviously, needs to work to heal the rift between the community and the college; it will be no small job to convince neighborhood residents that the college is not taking an “ivory tower,” privileged approach to this and other work.

Dr. Schuman would be well served to get her hands on materials describing a participatory approach to community development and on materials that explain an asset-based approach toward community development. Dr. Schuman should ask herself if she’s got what it takes to do this work well—if not, she needs to consider finding a suitable replacement. Ultimately, she needs to reconfigure her approach such that she and her team are working for the neighborhood, instead of the other way around.

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Lyle Wray

Dr. Schuman has several serious problems. The essence of what lies before her are the steps needed to recover trust and build sufficient legitimacy for the project and its goals to proceed. In 20/20 hindsight, more direct involvement of the leaders and community members from the specific part of the community to be involved in the project, with intense listening to their concerns and desires would be a good foundation. The next step would be to reach out to college members who could advise her on just who the community leaders in census tract 16 are, on strategies for connecting with the leaders, and on helping set up a “recovery” plan. One unpleasant and ego-deflating step for Dr. Schuman would be to try to work to set up a small meeting with key community leaders in census tract 16 and to lay out a candid *mea culpa* of failures to involve the affected community directly and deeply at the beginning, to listen to community concerns, and to have the community help shape the grant.

The challenge then would be to identify the nature of a “win-win” for the community and the project going forward around the common ground of attempting to improve the community. She might suggest and then hear feedback on steps to prevent communications failures and to ensure that the community and its leaders get credit equal to or greater than college academics. In sum, the problem was a failure to build legitimacy and communication with the affected community. The challenge Dr. Schuman faces is to take steps to discover, if possible, common ground and to build a win-win situation going forward for the college and the community to carry out the COPC project and to meet concerns of community members.

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Kaifeng Yang

The problem here is about an academician entering the real world of citizens, politicians, and media: What Dr. Schuman needs is not only enthusiasm and knowledge, but also planning and strategies. She has made many mistakes that led to the fiasco she is now facing. For example, the grant requirements stated that the program “should address the expressed needs of the urban community,” and “the residents themselves should identify community needs.” However, instead of appealing directly to citizens, Dr. Schuman relied on the politically selected steering committee to both select the neighborhood and to decide on the needs to address. Local political leaders were given the majority of the credit for the award. The result is an alienated community and polarized resistance from the residents.

The first thing Dr. Schuman should do is to reflect on herself, change her attitude, and seek some help. She needs to find somebody who really understands local politics, public relations, and implementation of community development programs. She may find some help from public administration or social work departments of the college, or from outside consulting firms and nonprofit organizations.

The grant program strategy must be completely revised, and new leadership must be installed from the community to instill a sense of fairness and equity to the equation. Before arranging more workshops, Dr. Schuman has to communicate with local activists including Rhonda Howard, with the Montville chapter of the NAACP, and with other community or neighborhood organizations. A meeting should then be arranged with these activists and organizations, the steering committee, the mayor, other elected officials, the local media, and the college administrators. The meeting should result in a new implementation committee that includes more African Americans and more nonpolitical members.

This more representative implementation committee should replace the steering committee and take responsibility for the program from this point on. Within the committee, open lines of communication and a system of accountability should be established. There needs to be professional financial administration of the grant so that all questions can be answered and sufficient oversight maintained. To make the new committee possible and effective, facilitation and coordination skills are essential.

A citizen survey could be administered, with the participation of the local media, to communicate the benefits and purposes of the program to

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the residents, and to collect the residents' opinion on what the community needs really are and how the grant program should be run. The survey process can serve as an opportunity to appease the grumbles, show the organizers' authenticity, and engage more residents.

The cooperation of the local media is very important. The media can be your best friend or your worst enemy. They need some involvement in the grant program so that they can identify with it and develop a desire to see it succeed. The residents need to be given the limelight and credit for tackling the needs of the community and working with the available resources in the town to address and solve those needs.

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