SAMPLE Listening Campaign

Some elements have been modified to maintain anonymity.

Over the course of three days, the National Equity Project (the Project) conducted interviews with 14 leaders representing educational, philanthropic, and social service sectors in X Location. The primary purpose of the interviews was to provide information to the Project in preparation for their upcoming leadership convening.

Each interview began with a brief introduction to the National Equity Project, how we came to be working in X Location, and what we hoped to accomplish with the interview. Although our interview protocol consisted of ten questions, the questions were designed to discover the following themes: 1) strengths of the community, 2) what it is like to work and live in X Location, 3) challenges in X Location specifically in regards to racial equity and collaboration, and 4) thoughts and desired outcomes of the upcoming convening. Below are our findings, an analysis of the findings, and implications for X Organization.

Findings

1. Reflections on the Strengths/Assets of X Location

   Summary: There are many resources available in X Location to tackle difficult social problems. We heard a high degree of will expressed to work toward improving the outcomes and lives of children and families living in poverty. Many people care about others, there is a spirit in X Location of people wanting to help solve problems and there is a history of initiatives to address needs and problems.

   - The opportunity to partner with funders
   - Willingness on most to shift what we are doing to better serve kids
   - Implementation of community schools in some areas
   - Leaders learning to recognize their own level of competency
   - Strong community leaders and community based organizations
   - Strong philanthropic leaders
   - Strong social networks
   - There is an increasing awareness of the need for collaboration and communication
   - Have experiences of purposeful engagement
   - Spirit that everyone wants to help solve the problems
   - People are moved to action when they see a need
   - Belief that there is no problem we can’t solve
   - Lots of collaboration across agencies and institutions
   - Everyone works together
• Thinking outside the box/innovations produced
• People are very giving/generous
• Family values
• Small size of the community – makes it possible to be successful with programs
• Business community a good leader in collaborations
• There is a lot of money
• There is opportunity to make changes in the city now
• People are clear that the education problem has not been solved
• Diversity is a strength

2. Reflections on People’s Experience Working/Living in X Location

Summary: There is a fair amount of commonality in terms of how people experience working and living in X Location. People are very giving, but they don’t ask why conditions are such that giving is necessary. A common statement is, “people in X Location will give them a coat but will not ask why they don’t have one in the first place.” It was common to hear that X Location is conservative, paternalistic, and a segregated community. Many said there are “elephants in the living room” that are not discussed and that competition between leaders and a lack of trust gets in the way of progress sometimes. The differences in experience of living and working in X Location relates to one’s location in the community and one’s race and/or class background.

• Although people are very giving, they don’t want to know why we have the problems we have (will give them a coat but will not ask why they don’t have one in the first place)
• There are more successful collaborations around building buildings than building programs
• Although there is diversity, it is also segregated, not integrated
• “Plantation” mentality
• Paternalistic with a “good old boys” network
• Initiatives and programs sometimes get created without regard for efforts that have been underway and become exclusive of other efforts
• Have had trouble getting agreement from leaders on vision and strategies to address certain problems
• Strained relationships caused colleagues to stop talking to each other
• Have been many broken promises to poor communities
• Middle class whites can live and get around without having to meet anyone who is different from them – don’t have to see poverty if they don’t want to
• Systems are in place that keep people poor – this is not discussed
• The “minority middle class” is absent from social justice issues
• Funders control what CBOs do and the messaging about issues
• Organizations and programs are valued by not upsetting the system
• There is a lack of trust between parents and the public schools
• Tension exists between teachers union and district leadership
• Dynamic where leaders feel as though someone else’s success is their failure
• “Ceilings” exist in terms of inviting others into leadership
• Very few people of color in influential leadership positions
• There is a blaming culture
• People of color in leadership are often the lone voice with equity
• Many “elephants” in the room that are not discussed
• Demographic changes with increased diversity bringing pressure to include non-traditional people in leadership
• A difficult community for professional people of color to live in
• Conservative
• Struggled with cultural competency
• Latinos and African American leadership is not cultivated
• People of color have a “slave mentality” that helps keep them out of leadership
• In-fighting between different “minority” groups
• Conservative community – makes it challenging to implement non-traditional programs
• A majority minority district; white parents pull their students out

3. Critical Issues/Challenges/Needs in X Location
Summary: There is a belief among leaders that everyone wants to help solve social problems, but perceived or real differences in agendas and goals makes it difficult to align efforts and work together. Trust is a common challenge both from leader-to-leader and between community members and existing institutions. There do not appear to be forums in which leaders across sectors can come together to build collaborative relationships and work toward shared goals on an on-going basis. There is a feeling that the paternalistic culture mentioned earlier contributes to the lack of community members being in formal leadership positions or seen as experts. In addition, there is a sense that while there is a strong culture of service and giving, community members are not always included in identifying priorities and developing solutions. There are differences of opinion with regard to the role of government institutions in ameliorating poverty and its effects. Likewise, there seem to be multiple belief systems operating regarding the causes of poverty and other inequities and what should be done about it. Among the leaders interviewed, all mentioned the challenges of poverty, the achievement gap in education, and the lack of diversity in leadership.

• Although everyone wants to help, leaders have different agendas, goals, and expected outcomes which presents a challenge
• Joblessness
• Reliance on social services
• Intolerance on issues of religion and sexuality
• Wealth and income disparity/gap between the practitioners and the public
• Immigration issues hamper outreach efforts
• Increasing the community’s understanding of the need for early childhood services
• How to break traditional modes of operation, collaborate and redefine our goals
• Internal work on cultural competence
• Systems needing to learn to listen to and handle feedback from the community
• Community members not being seen as experts
• Lack of trust for innovation
• Need to tie engagement to social change
• Programs and initiatives not asking community what they need/want
• How to start targeting resources rather than doing things for all the county
• Building community trust of the system
• Work on increasing the diversity in the leadership circles
• Work on alignment of goals and services

4. Feelings About the Convening
Summary: Many leaders expressed concern about the upcoming convening. Some were uncomfortable with how the convening was introduced and communicated. Others questioned whether the convening would have an impact given the lack of trust among key leaders and the history of some leaders dominating conversations and blocking progress. While everyone expressed a desire to have honest dialogue, many questioned whether this would be possible.

• Skepticism about it being successful
• Questioning if there is the will to have the tough conversations
• Concern about a small group dominating the discussions
• Concern that people will dwell in the past and not move on
• There is a lack of trust that will be difficult to change
• Concern that discussions will stay insular within a particular group
• Absence of private sector participation could limit the strength of the discussions
• Confusion about why this convening is happening

5. Productive Outcomes for the Convening
Summary: A strong theme was the desire to create an environment where tough discussions could happen, the “elephants in the room” could be discussed, and relationships and trust could be built and re-built. In addition, most wanted to explore what it would mean to align their efforts with others. Leaders interviewed expressed a desire to work collaboratively toward the greater social good; create a common vision of what is possible in X Location; and agree on shared strategies to implement.

• Figuring out how to have a frank and open conversation about ISM’s and the way they impact our work
• Confront the belief that poverty will always be among us
• Define what equity is
• Reduce tensions
• Greater understanding of our organizational limitations
• Having a conversation about the greater good
• Discuss why we collaborate and to what end?
• Forming partnerships to help mitigate the dynamic of winners and losers
• Honest dialogue
• Create a vision for what could be
• Collaborate more fully
• Go from crossed arms to open arms
• Increase trust
• Build relationship
• Recognize what lacking trust is doing to us
• Sustainability 20 years from now
• A way to talk about race that makes people comfortable
• Empower people to improve their own conditions
• Aligning contributions so that each effort fits together
- Honest discussion about the impact of our work
- See the impact of each of our efforts and for all of us to stretch to accommodate each initiative
- An honest conversation about what’s happening
- Weaving together our collective goals
- Input and intentionality about transforming leadership

Analysis

The leaders interviewed represented a diverse set of experiences and perspectives about X Location. On the one hand, some shared views were expressed such as the common understanding of “nice”, the common belief that X Location is a very giving community, and the idea that there are “elephants in the living room” that have not been discussed. On the other hand, leaders described a very different X Location depending on their location in relationship to power and privilege or their racial/cultural background. Some leaders questioned whether the will really existed to share power with communities of color and create true access to economic and educational opportunities. We heard several contradictions such as some people stating that in X Location people collaborate well while others said their experience is one of isolation.

All leaders interviewed appeared eager to share their stories and experiences and all seemed to share openly and authentically when answering the questions. This was a tremendous help in assessing how the group defined the challenges in X Location and the readiness of the group to take up issues of equity. The listening campaign helped us see the nature of relationships between these leaders and revealed that while a common vision, shared goals and aligned, collaborative work is desired, the conditions for this kind of work were not yet in place. In addition, we were able to identify key stuck points and obstacles that appear to be in the way of some leaders working together toward a shared goal. Finally, the listening campaign served to build relationships between the outside resource (National Equity Project) and the participants of the convening. The Project staff attempted to convey a deep respect for the work that leaders are engaged in and a willingness to listen to and value people’s stories and experiences. In this way, we believe we were able to create an agenda that honored the priorities and desires of the participants.

Implications

This section has been removed due to the personal nature of its content.