

## *Engaging the Community in Developing Ends*

*Adapted from The Aspen Group*

- **The primary purpose of engaging in an Ends discussion is to gather information from the community about the community's values. It is establishing on-going dialogue.** It is not to provide an opportunity for the group to unload its issues on the board. There are ample opportunities for the latter to be accomplished without allowing a very positive, informative conversation to degenerate into a gripe session.
- **The board should determine the major components for any Ends session, including:**
  - identification and invitation to participants;
  - meeting format (large group, focus group, etc);
  - location and timing;
  - determining the questions to be asked;
  - welcoming, conducting and ending the meeting;
  - ensuring all appropriate physical arrangements are made;
  - ensuring participants receive appropriate follow-up.
- In determining individuals or groups for Ends discussions, the board should **decide whose opinions would be informative** to the board. Some boards start internally with staff, then go outside to various groups whose opinions are important to the board's work.
- Any people who are invited should receive **personal written invitations from the board with a response card attached.** Some boards **attach a list of all people who have been invited;** this shows each invitee that he or she is among a select small group and will be missed if he or she fails to accept. Appropriate follow-up via telephone may also be necessary.
- **In deciding engagement strategies,** the board should decide whether it wants to have small, informal give-and-take discussions with a relatively small homogeneous group (rotary, business, students, etc), or whether it wants to hear from larger, more diverse groups. This will depend on many factors, including the need to get broad input fast from many people as opposed to gathering more in-depth information from identifiable groups over a longer period of time.
- **We always suggest that the full board participate in all discussions,** if possible. In some large organizations it may be necessary, at least in part, to divide the load to get the job done. However, when less than the full board hears what is being said, something is lost when the discussion is translated to the whole board.
- Some boards choose to divide into groups to conduct discussions because of the size and complexity of the organization or community the board serves. In such case, **we always recommend that at least two members participate in each meeting.** This offers the advantage of four or more ears and can validate what each member hears, as well as lighten the load for any one member.
- **Limit the number of questions posed to five or six.** This should allow for reasonable give-and-take and for follow-up, probing questions to be asked. We cannot overstate the **importance of carefully designed questions.** Good questions lead to good answers.
- If the board decides to hold focus group conversations with several small groups on the same topic, **ask the same questions of each group.** This allows the board to compare what it has heard from each group and to see similarities as well as differences.

- **After each session, quickly debrief what you have heard.** After having heard from a number of groups, the board should schedule a debriefing session to allow it **to get a picture of the main points it has heard** and decide if further action is needed prior to revising the Ends.
- **Settle on a schedule that adds minimal additional work to its agenda.** If community meetings can be appended to the regular board meeting or to some other event, days and evenings can be saved.
- **Each community meeting should be not less than 60 minutes, and not more than 90 minutes in length.** It is difficult to get much done in less than 60 minutes, and people are less productive if the meeting lasts longer than 90 minutes. Start and end on time.