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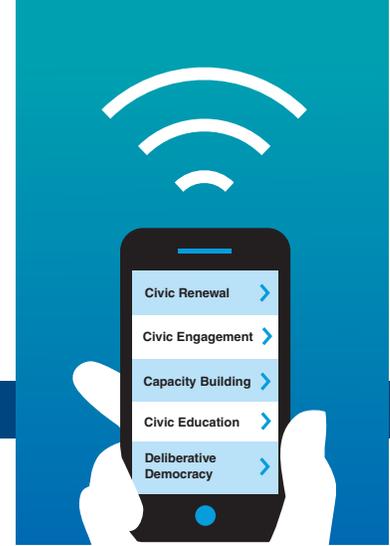
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From Both Sides Now: A Field Report from New Orleans

What happens when a community advocate becomes a government bureaucrat?

Lucas Díaz

Making the switch from working as a community advocate to working as a government bureaucrat is never easy, particularly if one isn't interested in a long-term government career. That's where I found myself when I agreed to join newly elected Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu to direct the launching of the City of New Orleans' first-ever Neighborhood Engagement Office (NEO) in 2011. I had no idea that I was signing up for one of the most rewarding and challenging jobs of my life.

From Both Sides Now

At the time, public satisfaction in local government was at an all-time low, with widespread belief that all local government was inept and corrupt. As a community advocate, I struggled to convince fellow advocates to build substantive, meaningful relationships with government decision makers. Even when couched in the best possible light, partnership seemed to imply a certain not-so-ethical coziness that smacked of negative self-service. My community-organizing training told me that it could be possible to work with local government based on mutual understanding, even in a place with such a storied history of corruption as New Orleans.

My short tenure as director of the mayor's Neighborhood Engagement Office would have its hiccups, setbacks, and no short amount of contention, but through it all I pursued one singular agenda—get the community and local government to speak a common language focused on public participation.

My short tenure as director of the mayor's Neighborhood Engagement Office would have its hiccups, setbacks, and no short amount of contention, but through it all I pursued one singular agenda—get the community and local government to speak a common language focused on public participation. I pursued this not so much as a government bureaucrat, but more so as a community advocate working in a governmental role.

Prior to Mayor Landrieu's tenure, the concept and language of effective public participation received little attention in local government. Community members understood the concept better than government officials. When the local community spoke of public participation, they wanted to have a say in decision making. When local government spoke of public participation, however, they wanted peaceful public meetings. One side wanted more involvement in decision making; the other side didn't even recognize the possibility of community-informed decision making.

A meaningful relationship between community and government would never be possible if both sides continued to speak past each other. And yet, how does one go about changing what appears to be a cultural way of engaging? Both community and government were so accustomed to speaking at each other in New Orleans in a particular way that it appeared cultural. The historically ineffective way of engaging each other seemed to be coded in the very DNA of New Orleanians. But how does one grapple with obsolete DNA coding?

As a middle manager with virtually no power inside city hall's bureaucracy, I could do little to change this culture. To be sure, I often felt completely powerless. However, my training as an organizer taught me to build relationships, which I did within city hall and in the community. I strategized and sought opportunities where the office could work with other departments directly, and I instructed my team to build direct relationships with our nearly 200 neighborhood associations across the city. Of

course, I also began my singular campaign to convince the mayor that the city needed a guiding framework for public participation.

In doing my work, I tried to stay clear of hot-button issues that could derail the efforts of the NEO. Such issues could potentially make the very idea of public participation seem caustic—and subsequently make it an untouchable area for government attention. For example, during my time in city hall, a local nonprofit was promoting a community-based citizen participation plan for land use. The mayor was not interested in the structural model being offered by the nonprofit, which resulted in tense relations between city hall and people who supported the community-based land-use plan. The concepts behind effective public participation, which I championed, are applicable when addressing a broad range of public problems, including land use, public health, and transportation, to name a few. However, because land-use decision-making structures were a hot topic, dialogue between residents and government was difficult. Many residents were already focused in on specific structural recommendations (such as the creation of decentralized, district-based land-use agencies) and saw such structural changes as solutions to deeper engagement problems. Advocates invested in a structural answer to public participation challenges came to believe that simply changing to nongovernment structures would solve the communication disconnect. The Neighborhood Engagement Office, on the other hand, was trying to encourage attention to the deeper conversation about how we should engage each other and what that conversation should look like. Although the structural recommendations were important, building relationships was even more important so we could work together over time to address the many problems we faced.

Despite a charged environment, I moved ahead with shifting public partici-

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pation conversations away from specific structural solutions and toward dialogue between government and residents that would ultimately help address a myriad of problems the city faced. By fall 2011, an opportunity to apply effective public participation concepts in government presented itself.

A frustrated capital projects unit, seeing our office as a technical support service, asked us to help them with what seemed to them a never-ending barrage of community confrontation. This department was responsible for moving public capital projects (playgrounds, fire stations, recreation centers) from predesign to construction. In 2011, the department had nearly 200 projects on its agenda. Their mandate was to complete all projects before the mayor's first four-year term ended in 2014. However, many projects were stalled because of community discontent.

Our office was able to diagnose that community distrust and government participation practices were at the heart of the issues that plagued the situation. Despite the department's willingness to hear from the community on its projects, it consistently experienced emotionally charged and unfriendly meetings with the general public. We took the opportunity to address the distrust as a symptom of faulty participation practices. We designed an improved public participation plan that was specific to their decision-making process, trained the staff, and informed neighborhood leaders, all with the intention of changing how residents and government workers engaged with each other. The plan allowed our office to educate both sides on effective public participation, as well as implement practices that yielded positive benefits.

Unlike the heated meetings the capital projects department previously experienced, the department was able to quickly build trust with the community it served, giving our office immediate proof that old habits and practices could



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change with buy-in to shared language and understanding. Success with this department provided leverage for other similar efforts, and more important, it enabled our office to move forward with a plan to bring the concepts and language of effective public participation forward in a broader sense.

I used this leverage to my advantage and developed the City of New Orleans Neighborhood Participation Plan (City NPP) by April 2012, which served as a guide for using effective public participation practices, with the hope of yielding culture change in public engagement. Published in November 2012, the New Orleans City NPP was nothing more than a concept-defining document designed to guide both the community's and city hall's use and understanding of effective public participation practices.

Each time the mayor spoke of leveling the playing field for neighborhoods so they could build partnerships with local government, I felt that this could only happen if both sides did a better job of hearing and understanding each other. Unfortunately, not unlike many cities, government-speak and community-speak

do not align well. Neither party hears the other, and neither party fully comprehends the context informing each other's language and claims. In order to arrive at effective public participation, common understanding must first be established. But even this is not enough if done only on a case-by-case basis. What will suffice is an intentional, consistent effort.

My strategy then, very early on, was to have city hall and the community intentionally embrace a common language of effective public participation. Only through this intentional work could a culture of mutually beneficial dialogue and practice grow. Without it, the same patterns of deep distrust that had stymied city growth and development in previous decades would remain active, no matter the number of participation, transparency, or accountability initiatives installed. Today, I've returned to my work as a community advocate. I have higher hopes for both sides learning to work together. There's still a long way to go, but at least we've begun to talk with each other.

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