



STRATEGIC CONVENINGS: THE SECRET SAUCE IN COLLABORATIONS ACROSS DEPARTMENTS AND LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

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The Forum for Youth Investment is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan "action tank," combining thought leadership on youth development, youth policy, cross-system/cross-sector partnerships and developmental youth practice with on-the-ground training, technical assistance and supports. A trusted resource for policymakers, advocates, researchers and program professionals, the Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, connections and tools they need to create greater opportunities and outcomes for young people. The core work of the Forum is helping leaders, organizations, partnerships and systems – at the local, state and national levels – assess, improve and align their practices and policies.

Introduction

Through various local, state, and Federal agencies, government bodies in the United States offer services for the public. However, few of the seemingly intractable challenges facing families and communities across the country can be solved by a single agency or level of government. Nor can such challenges be solved by government alone. Success requires multiple agencies representing all levels of government working together in a collective, strategic effort that includes nonprofit and private-sector partners as well. In 1981, President Reagan established the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency to "ensure coordinated relationships between Federal, state, and local government agencies." Over the last nearly 40 years, policymakers have attempted a range of reforms seeking to better align efforts across agency lines, across levels of government, and across sectors to make them more efficient and effective. Such efforts are sometimes referred to as using a "community-centered approach" since they seek to reorganize Federal government to help places (neighborhoods, communities, cities, counties, etc.) in a comprehensive, coherent fashion, rather than forcing places to reorganize their efforts to fit within specific, fragmented Federal programs.

As we found in [*Transforming Government, Transforming Communities: Strengthening the Federal Workforce to Help Communities Implement Place-Based Initiatives*](#), successful community-centered solutions require fundamentally changing the relationship between Federal officials and local leaders, as well as breaking down silos between a range of public, nonprofit, and private agencies. That report outlines the competencies needed for frontline Federal staff to help communities implement community-centered initiatives, strategies to help the Federal workforce develop such competencies, and policy conditions that enable community-centered approaches to succeed.

This paper builds on that report by focusing on one activity in particular: convenings that bring together multiple Federal, state, and/or local staff spanning multiple departments and agencies, in order to solve coordination problems in delivering services to the American people. We focus here because, as we found in the *Transforming Government, Transforming Communities* report, Federal staff, partners, grantees, designees, and technical assistance providers indicated that strategic convenings "have been one of the most helpful activities to identify roadblocks, bust silos, and catalyze interagency collaboration in ways that would have been extremely difficult to do otherwise." At the same time, such convenings "can be hard for the Federal government to fund. And orchestrating a visit with multiple Federal agencies at the same time poses extra challenges." Even so, the "subsequent benefits which ensued—for both the Federal staff and the distressed community—suggest that they are well worth the required time, effort, and funding."

Such convenings have numerous benefits. Through planning and executing these meetings, staff across all levels of government build common trust and understanding. Federal staff get to see the ways in which numerous Federal programs interact with state and local programs in a community, and how each program fits into a larger picture of community transformation. They can uncover new ways of aligning efforts and working together—both across agencies and across levels of government—to simplify and improve program implementation on the ground. They can also get out in front of emerging opportunities and challenges that communities are facing, so as to provide assistance when and where it can do the most good. With stronger connections across agencies and levels of government come stronger programs and better results. This paper takes a closer look at what it takes to orchestrate such convenings to be game-changing experiences.

Methodology

This paper is not intended to be a formal research project. Instead it is designed to capture and begin to codify the perspectives of people deeply involved in helping to orchestrate convenings that span government agencies and levels. Such perspectives may provide valuable insights into lessons learned and potential best practices. Moreover, this paper aims to share these perspectives with those not yet deeply involved in this work, in order that they might have a starting point to begin to develop their own convenings.

We began this work by identifying Federal agencies that have been involved in related convenings and then inviting representatives from the following agencies to serve as an unofficial planning team: the Department of Education, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Agriculture, and the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

In order to select the featured convenings in this paper, we first solicited recommendations from planning team members, who in turn asked staff across a wide range of agencies that have been engaged in community-focused work. We then selected three convenings based on the following factors: the level and range of agencies involved; the type, size, date, and location of the convening; initiatives to which the convening was tied; and whether the focus was local, regional, or national.

For each of the three selected convenings, we conducted desk research, reviewing all materials available online (such as newspaper accounts, reports, and published documents). We then conducted telephone interviews with key planners and a sample of participants at each convening, making sure to interview federal, regional, and local representatives from different offices in order to secure a nuanced perspective of participants' and planners' experiences. We asked informants questions on topics that ranged from logistics (e.g., "How did you approach scheduling group calls?") to impressions (e.g., "What did you think of the follow-up after the convening?") to outcomes (e.g., "How did this meeting help you to better execute your role as a Federal staffer?"). During these interviews, we compiled extensive notes in order

to compare the experiences of each informant, so that we could detect and highlight common themes and experiences. We acquired materials from each convening, often from interviewees, such as activity sheets, agendas, and planning records, that helped to round out our understanding of how each convening was planned and executed. We then synthesized these materials to form the first draft of the paper. Finally, we solicited informal feedback from the planning team and incorporated it into the final version of the paper.

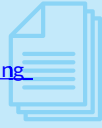
Convenings

The three convenings we studied are described below. Taken together, they represent valuable diversity in content, goals, geography, attendance, format, and more. At the same time, each convening offers a great example of community-centered partnership that brought people together to address a specific challenge, met its objectives, built knowledge, and created connections.

Creative Placemaking Training was a three-day event co-hosted by the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in February 2017. With the NEA supporting creativity and the arts through state, local, and Federal partnerships, and the DRA supporting regional economic opportunity in the eight-state Delta region, these two agencies came together to learn about and begin to use "creative placemaking"—a planning technique that leverages creativity and culture to spur community development—as a tool for Delta regional development. The NEA and the DRA integrated artistic and economic progress—an interesting example of cross-topic collaboration. This convening also offered a look at the unique challenges and opportunities of hosting an event in a rural community. One element of particular interest was the innovative ways in which its breakout sessions were structured. Rather than a typical breakout session format with a series of presenters on a panel followed by Q&A, this convening's breakouts were working sessions that tackled shared tasks such as mapping cultural assets and identifying ways to measure the success and impact of creative placemaking.

Creative Placemaking Training Resources:

Agenda: http://forumfyi.org/files/creative_placemaking_training_nea.pdf



Everyone Plays a Role in Suicide Prevention: Turning Strategy into Action was held in Chicago in June 2013. It was coordinated by the Region V Office of HHS's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (both located in Chicago), along with other Federal offices. Hosted by SAMHSA, it received the HHS Innovates People's Choice Award. The convening focused on facilitating local, regional, and national action on a national strategy based on the Surgeon General's report to the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention.

This cross-sectoral convening engaged people across the country to get the message—the rates, causes, and consequences of suicide, and the imperative of suicide prevention—out to as many people as possible. It offered tangible tasks in order to create concrete outcomes post-convening. One of the elements we were particularly interested in learning about was the way in which this convening used a unique “echo site” model: a live, interactive webcast by HHS broadcast to more than 100 in-person echo sites, immediately followed by interactive discussions at each site to develop a suicide prevention action plan to be implemented in each community.

Everyone Plays a Role in Suicide Prevention Resources:

Agenda: http://forumfyi.org/files/everyone_plays_a_role_in_suicide_prevention_turning_strategy_into_action.pdf

Video Broadcast Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXMFexq43OM>

Background Story and Information: <https://www.hhs.gov/idealab/2010/01/21/jeffs-story>

Echo Site Materials and Further Resources: <http://blog.samhsa.gov/2014/05/29/suicide-prevention-whats-your-role/#.WbxIHlp96Hq>



The Philadelphia/Camden Promise Zone and Performance Partnership Pilot Convening was a three-day event held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Camden, New Jersey, in September 2016. It brought together communities participating in two federal initiatives: Promise Zones (high-poverty communities where the federal government partners with local leaders to increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investment, reduce violent crime, enhance public health, and address other priorities identified by the community) and Performance Partnership Pilots, or P3s (areas that have committed to achieving significant improvements in education, employment, and other key outcomes for low-income young people ages 14–24 who are homeless, in foster care, involved in the justice system, or not working nor enrolled in an educational institution, by pooling funds from multiple Federal streams). This convening was coordinated by the U.S. Department of Education and HUD, with support from Jobs for the Future, and hosted by the Camden and Philadelphia Promise Zones as well as the Camden and Philadelphia regional HUD offices. The convening was designed to highlight the youth workforce development efforts underway in Philadelphia and the family literacy work of Camden, both topics of interest and priority for Promise Zone partnerships and P3 communities across the country. Meeting goals included developing a peer network across the 22 Promise Zones and 9 P3 communities represented, sharing challenges and exploring solutions related to youth workforce development and family literacy, and identifying additional technical assistance needs and peer networking opportunities. Young adults and subject matter experts were integrated into the agenda, which included time for community participants to reflect on their local priorities and efforts with peers.

As one of the first peer networking opportunities made available to Promise Zones and P3 communities, the convening generated interest that was greater than initially anticipated. As a result, it grew in size and scope, creating challenges and opportunities for the planning team and hosts. Leaders and staff from the local and federal levels of government in Philadelphia and Camden worked together to co-design a robust agenda, share resources, and host 70 of their Promise Zone and P3 peers. Building on this convening, attendees from Promise Zones and P3 communities established an ongoing peer exchange group for collaboration and resource sharing, and Department of Education officials used participant

feedback to develop working groups focused on fiscal mapping and alignment of local education goals and activities.

Philadelphia/Camden Promise Zone Resources:

Agenda: http://forumfyi.org/files/philadelphia_camden_promise_zone_convening.pdf



Additional Convenings



While we did not cover them in this report, the following convenings were also identified as potential sources of best practices and lessons learned.

National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, 2010. A network of communities and Federal agencies worked together, shared information, and built local capacity to prevent and reduce youth violence.

Inland Empire Technical Assistance Workshop, 2014. Federal representatives gathered to hear from community organizations about what they needed and made great strides at the convening itself toward providing those things. The event offered unique on-site resources, such as “planning placemats,” for turning ideas into action.

Helping Communities Together: The HUD Place-Based Convening with Philanthropy, 2015. Building on recent conversations led by philanthropy and academia, and reflecting on recent place-based efforts, the Office of International and Philanthropic Innovation at HUD convened philanthropic stakeholders for a workshop on December 2, 2015, to learn from and build on those efforts undertaken by philanthropy, research institutions, HUD, and other stakeholders. The convening report is available here: [strong in terms of resources and collaboration among many Federal partners because it was hosted by the Federal Partners Committee on Women and Trauma.](#)

Oglala Lakota Veterans Opportunity Workshop, 2016. This event showcased business, employment, and homeownership opportunities for Oglala Lakota veterans and shared information about Federal, state, and tribal veterans’ benefits at a resource fair. It offers a good example of a targeted tribal convening with staff from many different Federal agencies.

Delivering Outcomes with Communities Training and Resource Fair, 2016. This convening equipped participants with tools to navigate Federal government and local community resources, and most of all, to partner effectively, with an emphasis on Federal provision of resources.

South Carolina Lowcountry Promise Zone Broadband Workshop, 2016. Offering a specific topic and goal, this convening gathered knowledge and resources for setting up a specific service (broadband access) across the Promise Zone.

Competencies to Support Community-Centered Solutions

Transforming Government, Transforming Communities: Strengthening the Federal Workforce to Help Communities Implement Place-Based Initiatives identified a set of competencies that Federal staff need in order to support community-centered solutions. These same competencies are critical to the development of convenings that successfully bring together multiple Federal, state, and/or local staff spanning multiple departments and agencies in service of a common set of goals. They include the following:

Providing innovative leadership: Federal staff should harbor a creative, growth-oriented mindset. They should be able to envision and implement creative solutions that go beyond compliance. In addition, they should be able to collaborate creatively with colleagues across department and agency boundaries.

Working within the Federal structure: Federal officials should help communities navigate the multitude of Federal agencies, offices, programs, grants, and services while still encouraging them to be as creative and effective with their funding as possible. In doing so, Federal staff should be able to create, maintain, and grow their relationships and networks across and within Federal agencies so as to support local needs in an efficient and informed way.

Working with communities: Federal staff should embody the principle of partnership, not prescription. Communities often know best—about their own challenges, programs, and solutions—so Federal staff members must listen to and understand the local perspective. One interviewee expressed it this way: “Every community is different and will have different ideas about what it wants to do and how to implement it.” By asking questions of the community, Federal staff can discern how to accomplish things in that community while demonstrating respect for its members.

Communication and interpersonal skills: A Federal employee who supports partnership programs should be a “people person,” able to communicate effectively with various stakeholders and audiences, especially across various levels of government and action. One key aspect of this type of communication is the ability to facilitate inclusive, interactive, and effective group discussions. Another is the ability to share content and community knowledge with Federal colleagues in a way that is both contextualized and understandable.

Other skills: Given the nature of regional partnership work, it is useful for staff to have an understanding of a wide range of intertwined issues alongside a deeper expertise in the primary topic at hand. Additionally, it is useful for Federal staff members to understand and be able to use data in order to make informed decisions and drive results.

Lessons Learned and Promising Practices

Among federal staff and the states and localities with which they interact, [Transforming Government](#), [Transforming Communities](#) found a universal desire for relationships founded on collaboration, mutual respect, and a desire to learn and improve. Viewed in this context, one indication of the success of an interagency convening that connects multiple levels of government is the extent to which it has embodied, enabled, and fostered such relationships through its planning process, structure, and follow-up.

Planning Process

The process of planning a convening can be a real-time opportunity to forge new types of working relationships between and among the Federal and local staff who are collaborating to host the event. Interviews with Federal, state, and local leaders who helped plan the events we studied revealed a number of potential best practices: secure sufficient staffing; form a planning team that represents all key stakeholders; create a shared meeting prospectus that outlines goals, expectations, and constraints; avoid scope creep and major changes late in the process; and get input from participants in advance.

Secure sufficient staffing for both planning and logistics.

Orchestrating events that help reshape working relationships between staff from multiple Federal agencies and their state and local counterparts requires a significant amount of staff time. These types of convenings require a lot more work than a traditional conference. Handling the logistics of the planning team alone is a large and vital task. As one official noted, “I led planning calls, coordinated logistics, identified subject matter experts, conducted outreach to invited communities, followed up with communities, turned in travel reimbursement requests.... At the end of the day, I was a jack-of-all-trades.” If planners genuinely intend to create new types of working relationships, doing so takes considerably more time than simply assembling a panel and an audience. It is important for Federal officials who are organizing such

an event to be accessible throughout the process to the state and local officials with whom they will convene. As one person noted, “Having a person who can schedule all of those calls and meetings is crucial! It’s a game-changer.” It can also take staff time to create and help the planning team manage the use of one or more online platforms for collaboration. When possible, one full-time equivalent staff member should be allocated to planning the convening for at least three months (and ideally longer). As one planner noted, “Who wouldn’t always love to have more time? But we really did need it.”

Form a planning team that represents and empowers all key stakeholders.

Perhaps more than any other factor, the planning team will likely dictate the success of the convening. It should feature a range of stakeholders, including Federal staff from each related agency and their state and local counterparts, as well as those handling the convening logistics. When possible, the planning team should feature people of different ages and from different cultures, in order both to reflect the meeting attendee demographics and to offer a range of perspectives. If planners intend to rely on information technology (IT) and other advanced technology (such as the HHS echo-site event), it is wise to include an IT manager on the planning team as well.

“I was clear with the local officials up front that I don’t know what is happening on the ground firsthand, so please let me know if I am stepping on toes,” said one federal official. Empowering local stakeholders helps ensure deep partnerships across levels of government. As one Federal official noted, “Giving people ownership of things, both in planning and executing, gives people buy-in and ownership; it shows them that you have faith in them, and that you’re all in it together.”

Having such diversity among the planners is also essential to reflect a wide range of perspectives.

For example, a Federal member of a planning team we spoke with was effusive about the expansion of a convening’s goals throughout the planning process, excited about the potential for the event to achieve even more than was originally envisioned. At the same time, a

local member of the same planning team experienced the change differently, concerned that the complexity of what felt to this individual like a “moving target” would undercut the team’s ability to execute the event effectively. Here, one process looked quite different to two separate people, based on context. It is important that a planning team seek out, acknowledge, and address diverse opinions and reactions so that the convening can best serve all parties involved.

Interviewees also shared ideas for how to identify local leaders to serve on the planning team. They recommended starting by including Federal staff in regional field offices, but they were clear that doing so would not be sufficient to provide the local perspective. Instead, Federal field staff should be asked to identify key local leaders to join the planning team directly. If a Federal agency does not have a regional presence, it could reach out to other agencies that do. “I started the conversation with another Federal agency in order to get all the right people involved,” said one Federal official. “That agency has people on the ground, and they were key.” Some pushed even one layer further, by asking the local leaders identified by Federal field staff who *they* would recommend asking to join the planning team. “In terms of whom to involve in the planning,” recounted one federal official, “I went to the local gatekeepers, and they helped me bring in other local players.”

Create a shared meeting prospectus that outlines goals, expectations, and constraints.

Several interviewees recommended developing a written description of the convening’s goals, expectations, and constraints at the outset. Such a written description can help set expectations and hold planners accountable to the original intent of the convening. For example, for the Creative Placemaking convening, the NEA and DRA cosigned a memorandum of agreement specifying that the DRA would handle logistics and the NEA would provide content and invite guest speakers.

Even across just the few convenings we studied, we found a wide variety of possible goals for an event, such as these:

- Educating Federal officials about local efforts
- Educating local officials about Federal efforts or

resources

- Creating opportunities for multiple places to learn from each other
- Aligning strategy across multiple levels of government
- Aligning funding sources across multiple levels of government
- Giving offices new tools to further their work
- Furthering a national strategy by equipping and mobilizing localities
- Hosting working sessions for localities to craft plans for their work
- Hosting working sessions for multiple Federal agencies to craft plans for their work
- Hosting working sessions for Federal agencies and their state and local counterparts to forge joint plans

Planners may be tempted to say an event should try to achieve many, if not all, of these types of goals to ensure that there is “something for everyone.” But our interviews suggest that such an approach risks diluting the ability of an event to deliver on any of the goals. A better approach may be for the planning team to do the hard work up front to narrow the scope down to one or two goals that they will hold themselves accountable for achieving.

That being said, whenever possible, events should include goals that are valuable to both the local and Federal participants. Indeed, it appears that convenings that do so may be particularly effective. But in situations in which that is not possible—such as convenings that are designed to give grantees an opportunity to have candid discussions without Federal funders in the room—it is particularly important that this understanding be clear and transparent from the start of the process, as well as agreed to by all stakeholders in advance. For example, as one local planner noted, if the primary goal of a particular convening is “cross-pollination” between federal and local participants, as opposed to educating the Federal participants, “we need to be really clear about that” so everyone has a common

set of expectations about the goals of the event early in the planning process.

The meeting prospectus should also be explicit about the expectations for each individual's or agency's role in the planning process. Clarifying roles and expectations will boost efficiency (since everyone knows what they should be doing), accountability (since individuals are accountable to the team to accomplish their part), and trust (by eliminating false expectations that will only be disappointed).

In particular, it is important to be explicit about funding from the outset—what funding will be needed, who is providing the funding, and what constraints there are around how such funding can and cannot be used. Several interviewees noted that Federal constraints related to using funding for food and beverages, event venues, and travel costs should be made clear to the local partners up front and in writing. Likewise, the prospectus should be explicit about what local partners will be expected to contribute, in terms of both funding and in-kind support (for example, providing free meeting space for the event). When these shared understandings are not clear from the start, they can cause significant tension, frustration, or distrust. As one planner noted, “When money has to come out of the community pot, it often feels like it could probably have been better used somewhere in that community.” On the other hand, when everyone starts on the same page, it can create a positive esprit de corps, with Federal and local planners working together to come up with creative solutions to orchestrating a great event despite Federal and local constraints, while staying within budget.

Be vigilant about scope creep and major changes late in the process.

A meeting prospectus can also help prevent “scope creep,” in which the goals and core meeting activities change significantly during the planning process without full consideration of all related ramifications. Considering the fluid and multifaceted nature of community-based initiatives, and the number of partners involved in bringing together Federal, state, and/or local government officials spanning multiple departments and agencies, it comes as

little surprise that the partners, goals, and activities can change over time. But that same multifaceted nature also makes such changes problematic. For example, one staffer noted, “People started realizing that the convening was going to be awesome—so we opened up registration. But then it snowballed, and all of a sudden a ton of parties with a ton of interests were on the list, and now we had this whole other animal.”

Any big change, especially late in the planning process, can have unforeseen repercussions. Crafting a meeting prospectus early in the planning process can help ensure that everyone has the same understanding of goals and activities. It can also make it clear that any big changes should be made only with full buy-in from all members of the planning team.

Get input from meeting participants in advance.

A number of the planners we spoke to suggested asking the participants what they want to get out of the convening. This can be done through surveys, conference calls, or individual calls. If surveys don't garner a robust response, individual outreach may prove helpful. The act of asking shows participants that the planners value their input, and it leads to better-designed events.

We heard from meeting participants that when participant input was not adequately solicited beforehand, the agenda didn't quite hit the mark. For instance, one respondent would have liked to be asked to propose subject matter experts and keynote presenters for the convening. In this case, participants were disappointed that planners had largely chosen experts from the local communities. “If you're hearing from your colleagues who are doing this work,” one interviewee explained, “you're probably already pretty engaged with them.” However, in other cases, interviewees noted that they did want to present to their peers. As one interviewee noted, there are times in which “you are ahead of the curve,” and so “you are the person who's going to present.” Learning how much interest the audience will have in hearing from national or local presenters is one of many reasons it is helpful to check in with meeting participants during the planning process.

As may be evident even from these few examples, the advice planners receive can be contradictory. But such contradiction can be helpful in clarifying the purpose of the

event and how it is described, if the planning committee can work through and reconcile the differences.

Members of the planning team should also be aware of different communication norms across geographies, generations, and groups. Different communication norms might include varied conversation patterns, expected response times, and more. By recognizing different styles, members of the planning team can demonstrate a level of attention that may encourage more trust and collaboration from the outset.

Structure of the Event

How the event itself is structured is the most significant factor that determines its success in forging new types of working relationships between and among the assembled Federal and local staff from multiple departments and agencies. Interviews with Federal, state, and local leaders who helped plan the events we studied revealed a number of potential best practices: use both content experts and context experts; build in time for substantive introductions; provide just enough framing information in the least amount of time; use group activities rather than speeches, and use creative, fresh formats; structure Federal participation as listening first, talking second; include site visits, with facilitated reflection time, when possible; build in one-on-one time with Federal representatives; use collaborative seating formats; and consider place and space in redefining what it means to have a community-centered convening.

Use both “content experts” and “context experts.”

When planning speakers for the convening, it can sometimes be helpful to strike a balance between national experts who can speak to the topic(s) at hand, such as youth employment, and experts who can speak about the local context, describing the unique attributes and realities that shape the way efforts are playing out in a particular community. Doing so also provides a way to feature people other than the “usual suspects” who often find themselves on the speaking circuit. As one planner noted, “We talk a lot about bringing the *right* people—not always the *same* people.” A number of the planners we interviewed noted

that what helped them most was to hear from people working directly in communities about what they were doing to tackle challenges, and then to brainstorm together and exchange creative solutions.

It is also often important to include speakers from the population that is being discussed at the meeting.

We have heard the rallying cry “Nothing about us without us” used to criticize meetings that, for example, discuss youth policies without including any young people among the speakers. Moreover, when such speakers are included, they can often be attendees’ favorite part of the event. For instance, planners of the Promise Zone / P3 convening noted the importance of including youth from Philadelphia’s PowerCorps program, who provided a unique perspective about the importance of community-centered programming.

Build in time for substantive introductions.

Participants attend convenings not only for the content, but also for the relationships that they build. Our informants underscored the importance of solid and memorable introductions. As one member of a planning team put it, “We should have done more to give people a sense of who all was in the room. We did share a contact list, and hoped people would do more connecting with each other.” Good introductions set the stage for genuine connections throughout the entire convening. “It was the ability to interact informally that was the most beneficial. Just getting to meet people,” an interviewee commented. Taking the time to forge connections between local and federal officials can lead to the most important outcome of an event.

Provide just enough framing information in the least amount of time.

When scheduling presentations, planners should try to keep them as brief as possible. Presentations can be helpful for setting context; as one interviewee noted, people in the room may not know all the relevant things happening in their own community, let alone at the regional or Federal level. However, too much time spent on presentations

will tip the convening away from an engaging session and toward a typical conference filled with presentations and panels.

Use group activities rather than speeches, and use creative, fresh formats.

Often, the best way to create these relationship-building opportunities is through activities, rather than panels, speeches, or presentations. In addition to building relationships, group activities are useful for getting to work on tackling the challenges that inspired the convening in the first place. The best activities are geared toward both relationship building and problem solving. A few formats planners mentioned included creative introductions, case study exercises, worksheets, and even artistic activities. One type of worksheet described by an interviewee was a problem-solving “place mat” that charted the challenge at hand and offered templates to get people outlining solutions in a tangible medium. Interviewees also said worksheets were helpful in getting attendees to accomplish a concrete task together or take targeted and substantive notes. Since worksheets lay out end products to be achieved, they are often more productive than blank notepads. One artistic activity that participants at the Creative Placemaking convening loved was drawing their favorite community, incorporating various aspects. “This activity immediately opened my eyes to why creative placemaking is so important to the work that we do,” affirmed one interviewee.

Technology can also be your friend. Consider using it in innovative ways to connect information and people—from online tools for activities and engagement, to platforms like Twitter and Instagram that use hashtags to connect many posts to one topic, to Google Drive to organize and disseminate materials.

Structure Federal participation as listening first, talking second.

Federal staff members should not simply sit back and listen; they also should not simply show up, present, and leave. Just as it is vital to hear from communities during the planning stages, it is also important to build in enough

time for Federal staff to hear from communities during the convening itself. One interviewee reflected, “I would have liked to give communities more time to talk about their individual work.” As communities present the work that they are doing, Federal staff should be listening and thinking of ways to support this work—because at the end of the day, that’s what many of these convenings are about. They can offer an opportunity for Federal staff members to engage in substantive discussion with local stakeholders, with the ultimate goal of better supporting local work.

Include site visits, with facilitated reflection time, when possible.

A number of interviewees stressed the importance of including visits to local organizations as part of the convening, even though the logistics can be complicated. Due to their logistical complexity, as well as the possible strain on the local organizations to be visited, it is important to include a section in the meeting prospectus that is dedicated to site visits. Planners should use this section to outline specific plans for the site visit—including logistics and goals for the visit—and should be sure to solicit input from the organizations that will be visited. By devoting intentional planning attention to site visits, the planning team can ensure that they are mutually beneficial aspects of a community-centered convening.

Interviewees noted that building in time for group reflection after a site visit can be just as important as the visit itself. The planning team should look for ways to build in structured time for discussion and debriefing, as well as activities that will harness lessons learned from the visit and channel them into action plans and other tangible outcomes.

Build in one-on-one time with Federal representatives.

Interviewees noted that one-on-one meetings between a Federal and a local official are often the most helpful part of the event. For instance, one convening participant lamented that there was not enough one-on-one time for local officials to ask a Federal liaison targeted questions or solicit specific advice. Often, local officials are eager to hear from Federal officials about resources,

funding opportunities, and best practices. In turn, it is also important for Federal officials to hear from local representatives about what's working and what's not in their communities. These meetings could be set up as "office hours," in which participants could sign up for time with specific individuals, or as "speed dating" sessions, in which participants could have brief meetings with a rotating set of officials. Another option is for federal officials to make themselves available before and after daily programming—through such meetings in the community setting, federal officials can better understand and appreciate the context in which community work happens.

Use collaborative seating formats.

When setting up a room to foster collaboration, round tables or hollow square configurations are best. Classroom and auditorium seating can hinder the type of working relationships that the event is attempting to stimulate.

Consider place and space in redefining what it means to have a community-centered convening.

As the nature of community-centered work continues to evolve, convenings are less about mini-conferences in hotels and more about working *in* the community as much as possible. While meeting a community in its own space may be more difficult logistically, going into the community is one of the most important aspects of community-focused work. At the same time, given the nature of place-focused work, this often means meeting in a place where there are limited options for hotels, restaurants, and other amenities.

A number of planners noted that having to leave the facility to get lunch precludes any programming during the lunch period; moreover, participants often do not return to the event after leaving for lunch. Try to find ways to give participants access to food, beverages, and coffee without their leaving the meeting area. As one participant noted, "Don't create opportunities for people to break away—create opportunities for people to come together and stay together."

In the absence of on-site restaurants, some planners arranged local catering. When funds were not available to provide food to participants, some planners found ways to let them order and pay for their lunch, and have it delivered to the meeting site. (As noted above, since there are complexities about who can legally pay for what, it is important for these logistics to be included in the event prospectus.)

Follow-Up after the Event

Convenings can plant seeds for new types of working relationships across agencies and levels of government. As one Federal employee put it, "I get very attached. Once I create that trust, I want that site to know that I am there for them, whatever that might be." Likewise, a local participant noted that "the convening opened the door to all types of contact and conversation and collaboration, not just related to creative placemaking." However, the fruits of the labor can be reaped only with timely and effective follow-up. A number of respondents expressed the importance of making sure that the event is not "one-and-done." Once planning is completed, conference organizers should remind participants of the convening's goals, as well as expected outcomes for participants as individuals and as community representatives.

Participants noted that follow-up can include sharing resources, information, and stories about how they've progressed after the convening; continuing to learn from each other; and sharing feedback in order to improve future convenings. Convening planners should make available to participants resources and tools for building on established networks and relationships. Such tools could include contact information and short professional descriptions of each participant, guidance on forming and sustaining a task force, or suggested next steps. Best practices may include the following:

- Having an online space where communities, participants, and facilitators can upload and store resources and materials from the convening and after the convening (such as Dropbox, Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, or SharePoint)
- Building in initial reflection time at the end of

the agenda for the convening, as well as having a follow-up call scheduled before the convening even begins

- Sending handwritten thank-you notes, which go a long way toward maintaining the relationships built at a convening
- Developing list servers and working group networks for participants
- Assigning interns to support the creation and use of these online platforms, forums, and list servers

For example, as a follow-up to one of the convenings we studied, Federal staff took the time to synthesize their notes in order to identify key takeaways. Then they followed up with each partner. They went on to interview each grantee/designee about its goals and topic areas of focus, and wrote up a one-page report on each community. Finally, based on the interviews, they identified common areas of interest and launched a series of webinars to address them. Additionally, they created “affinity groups,” such as a tribal group and a rural group, in which peers could share information, resources, and solutions to similar challenges.

Conclusion

While administrations change and priorities may shift, one thing is certain: community-centered solutions must continue. It is up to staff across all levels of government to decide how they can best work together to support communities via collaborative networks, streamlined funding, synthesized programs, and more. Convenings offer a path for government staff to better support communities by providing a chance to share tactics and tools, but more important, to build relationships and trust. Staff across all levels of government whom we interviewed for this paper and who were involved in the planning or execution of these gatherings expressed common themes based on their involvement.

The act of planning a convening is just as important as the convening itself. The planning process offers a chance

to build trust and establish lasting relationships, and therefore the planners should take every step possible to make sure that this happens. These steps include ensuring that all stakeholders are represented and heard, creating a shared outline of expectations and goals, and gathering input from participants in advance.

The convening itself offers a crucial opportunity for local staff to be heard and valued by state and Federal staff. In order to ensure that this happens, a community-centered convening should be intentional about the activities that it chooses and how it structures time. One-on-one meetings are vital at this stage of the game.

The follow-up after a convening presents a chance to transform an event into a lasting, beneficial network. Rather than allowing such a gathering to be a one-and-done event, productive follow-up after the convening can seal the deal on the relationships built and the knowledge-sharing networks established.

Overall, community-centered convenings are a crucial step toward a more democratic system of support for people working to strengthen the places they call home. Through intentional planning, execution, and follow-up, individuals involved in such convenings will play an invaluable role in supporting productive community-centered work.



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