Critical Conversations with Stakeholders

In the previous module we discussed that stakeholders are anyone who can affect, or who is impacted by, the issue, project, or system you are focusing on. Once you have identified and have recruited/partnered with stakeholders, you can start to implement your program. In order to start your program or effort off in the best way possible, having fruitful conversations with the right people can help you to identify potential barriers. All stakeholders will have different interests and viewpoints, so having conversations with different individuals or groups will be imperative to your efforts. Some important conversation topics with stakeholders should include:[1]

Potential Barriers

- These barriers could include things such as a lack of feasibility, lack of community/stakeholder buy-in, having an ineffective implementation plan, etc.

Financial Concerns

- You may have a lofty idea about how to improve victim services, but it's extremely important to have open and candid conversations with stakeholders about what is realistic for you to achieve. These conversations can also include economic concerns related to the community in general, which can sometimes bolster the support for your project.

Cultural Concerns

- Including individuals from various backgrounds is important to ensure that a variety of perspectives that reflect the community the organization seeks to serve is represented within the stakeholder group. Involving those from different cultural backgrounds ensures that your programming is culturally sensitive, responsive, and inclusive. Creating opportunities for meaningful engagement with the community is important for the development of relationships and building trust. Meaningful engagement is different for each community, therefore, finding out what meaningful engagement is for the community and its stakeholders will depend on the group.
- Of equal importance is engaging and incorporating survivor voice. Survivors of trauma bring with them unique experiences and perspectives that are to be respected and valued. Building relationships and establishing trust is critical when

engaging survivors because they may have difficulty with trusting those outside of their community and even if they agree to participate, they may not allow themselves to be vulnerable. Engaging a "gatekeeper" to assist in gaining access can be helpful, as gatekeepers are typically trusted members of the community who are responsible for vetting outsiders before allowing them access to the community. Once access has been established, it is essential to demonstrate trustworthiness and to be consistent with your actions and words.

Ideological Concerns

- Another reason for having a diverse group of stakeholders is to capture the different ideological beliefs of the community. When creating and implementing programming, it is important to be aware of the ideological beliefs held by the community because they may become potential barriers. For example, the decision to begin universal screening and assessment for trauma may attract negative attention from those who do not support universal screening. This doesn't mean the programming should be eliminated, however, it would be an issue that requires a broader conversation with stakeholders before, during, and after implementation in an effort to reduce friction or find other ways to alleviate the tension around these types of issues.

These topics should lead to robust discussions about potential barriers and creative ways to mitigate or overcome identified barriers. These are a few considerations to keep in mind when engaging stakeholders:[2]

Be Open to Strategy

- Open and honest communication between you and your stakeholders will lead to the most effective conversations and will assist in the problem-solving process. Building trust within the stakeholder group is critical. A lack of trust within the group can have negative effects on your project.

Relationship Building

- Working to establish common ground and unite your stakeholders around a common purpose can help to not only foster good working relationships, it also is important to have well-established relationships to resolve disagreements or address other issues that arise throughout the project. Hosting regular meetings and including time for face-to-face contact when possible is valuable because it promotes maximum stakeholder engagement.

Managing Challenging Stakeholders

- There may be stakeholders that are perceived as challenging for various reasons, including those who ask for too much or those who are very critical. Being prepared with effective strategies for handling difficult stakeholders is crucial. Being able to say "no" and provide concrete reasons, supported by data or other available information, is one strategy for engaging with a difficult stakeholder.

- Keeping accurate records of every conversations and decision point is highly recommended to capture what was discussed in the event of a disagreement or misunderstanding.
- Getting to know your stakeholders and what they find important is another valuable strategy for dealing with those who are perceived as difficult. Gaining their buy-in early, by specifically asking for their input and incorporating their ideas, when appropriate, can help you to turn a critic into an ally.

Be Consistent

- When having discussions with stakeholders, make sure you are upfront with them instead of telling them what you think they want to hear. It is often necessary to deliver bad news or information that the stakeholders may not like, however, if you present the message in a constructive, honest manner it can be done in a way that does not cause damage to your relationship with the stakeholders. This also prevents surprises, which can damage the trust and relationship you have worked so hard to build.
- Remember that your stakeholders are participating voluntarily. Make sure that their time, commitment, contributions, and perspectives are valued. Ensure that meetings start and end on time and that when appropriate you publically acknowledge their contributions. The more stakeholders feel their contributions are valued, the more likely they are to remain committed to the project.

These are just a few techniques that can be used to build solid relationships with your stakeholders and prevent the loss of someone that brings value to the project.

Additional Resources:

For more information regarding stakeholder engagement and their interests visit:

The Community Toolbox: Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Interests
Association for Project Management: The 10 Commandments of Stakeholder Engagement
The University of Kansas' Community Toolbox

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[1] Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas (2020). Community Toolbox, Chapter 8. Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Interests
[2] Association for Project Management: The 10 Commandments of Stakeholder Engagement