



**cubes and ladders:
exploring community engagement**

NEIGHBORHOOD RESILIENCE SERIES

04

Text and research by Marcus Chaffee. Graphics and design by
Fatema Maswood and Lauren Wong.

If you have questions or comments, please email
marcuschaffee@gmail.com, fatemasmaswood@gmail.com or
lcwong@uw.edu.

First edition.
March 2018



Community Engagement



Many government and non-profit groups use “engagement” to work with communities on issues. Sometimes community engagement solves problems. At other times, community engagement creates new problems.

We hope this guide informs and equips you with what you need to make community engagement work for you and those you care about.

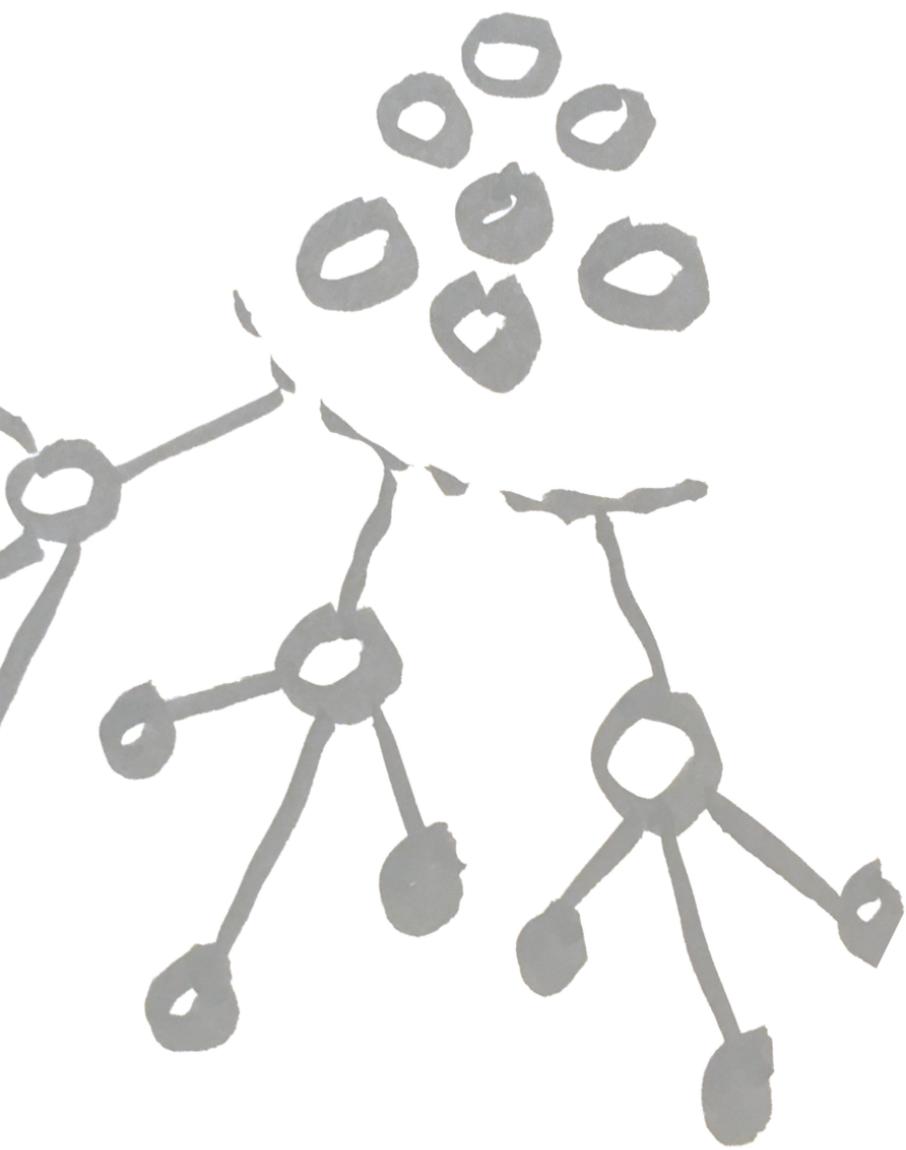
What is Community?

Leaders often talk about community like it is a singular, static thing. **But, community is forever shifting, adapting, and evolving.**

We have membership in communities based upon our **identity**: race, class, immigration status, education level, ability, etc.

We also have community through our **location**: block, neighborhood, city, county, state, nation, etc.

And then, we have an identity that draws all these ideas together.





What is Engagement?

There is no one definition for engagement.

Usually engagement refers to how community members and leaders in government, politics, and non-profits collaborate to make important decisions.

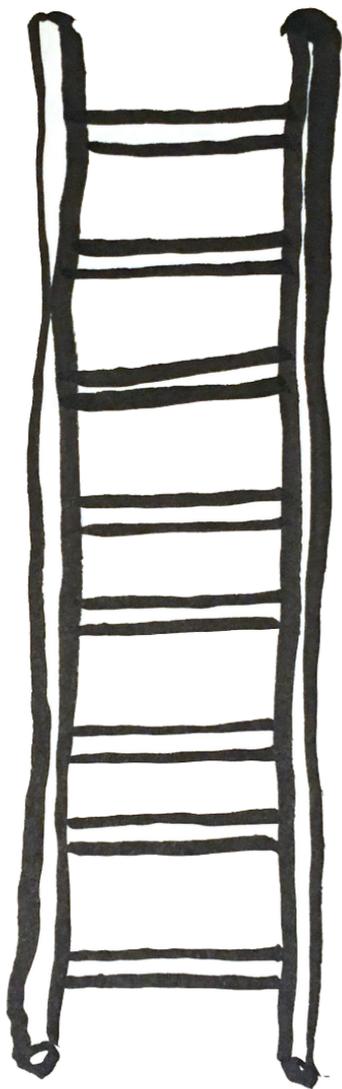
Engagement could be a survey, an “open house,” a website, or a “community workshop.”

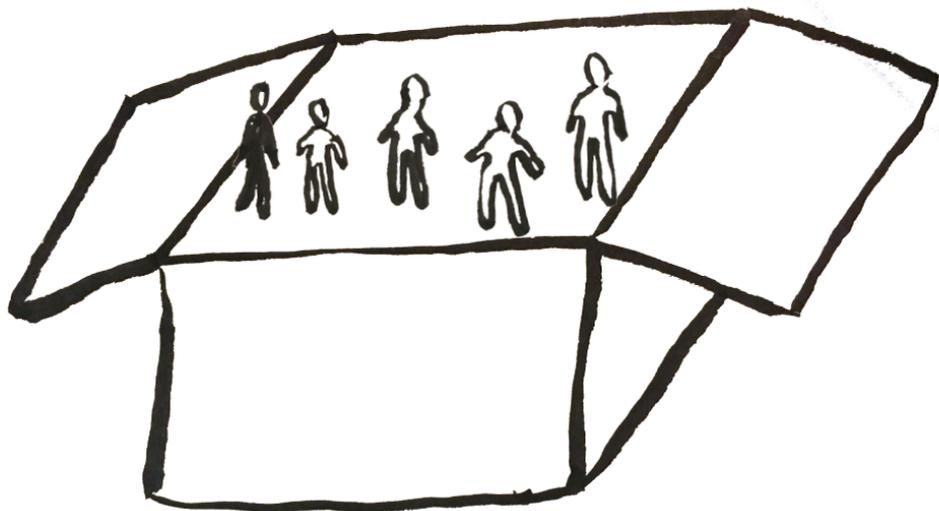
Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

Sherry Arnstein described engagement using a ladder of participation.

The higher you climb on the ladder, the closer you are to influencing decisions in your community.

The lowest rungs on the ladder mean you have the least amount of power to guide decisions.





Fung's Democracy Cube

Another idea is that community engagement is like a cube.

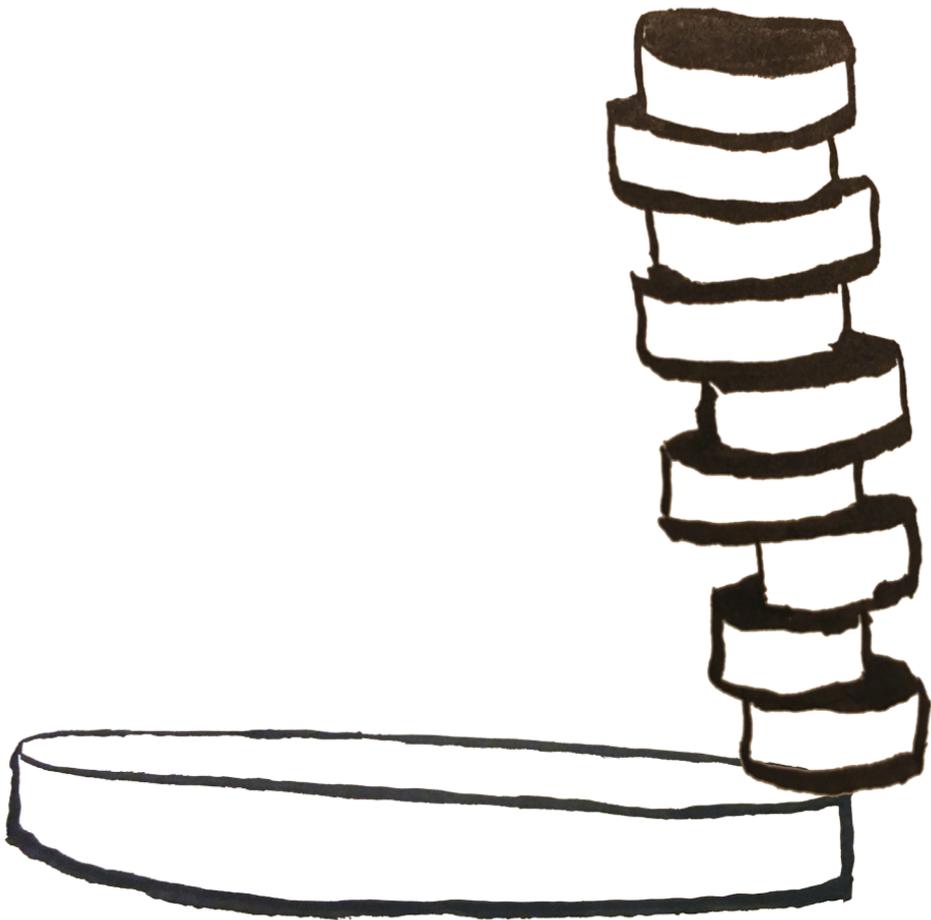
The form changes shape based upon who is participating, what power they have, and how they communicate.

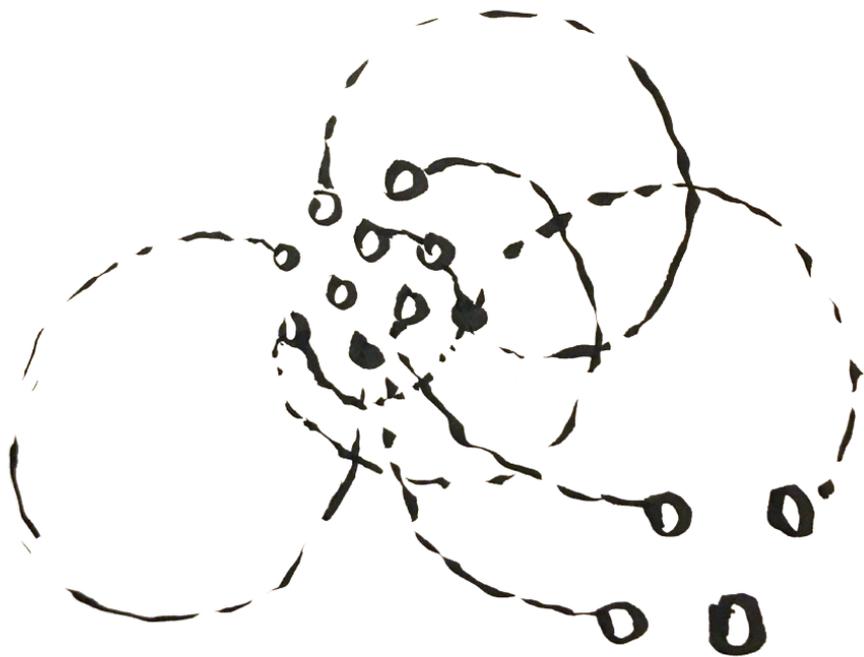
Deep or Wide?

Engagement also changes based upon who is involved and what influence they have.

Narrow and deep participation describes when few people are involved, but they have power to shape the decision.

Wide and shallow participation means a lot of people participate, but the information they share may not be as influential.





~

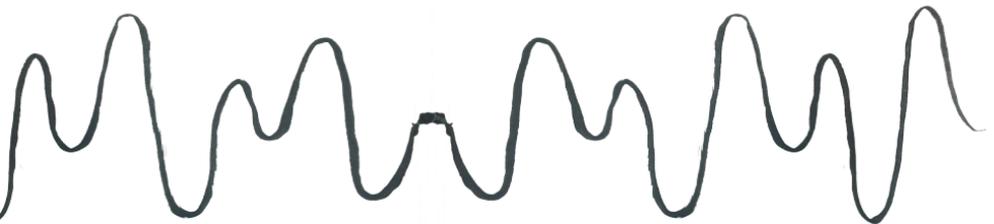
What Time is it?

Engagement can be different based upon timing.

Some engagements are short and specific.

Other engagements are long-term and can vary based upon the changing needs of the leaders and community members.

What is possible and helpful is largely due to how much time is available to make the decision and what stage the decision is in.

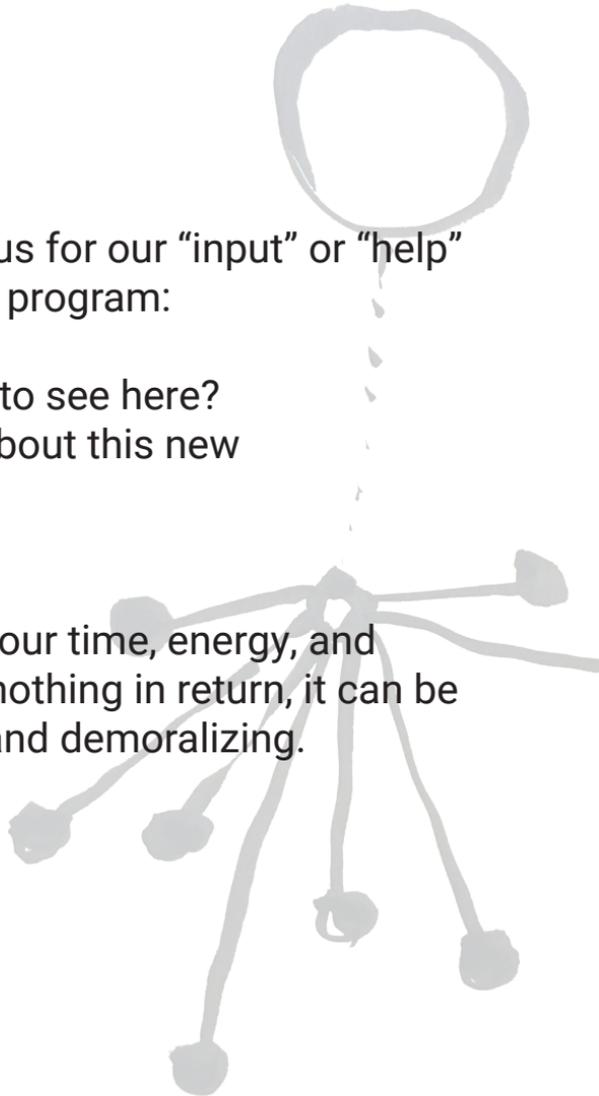


You Decide.

Often leaders ask us for our “input” or “help” in a new project or program:

What do you want to see here?
What do you like about this new development?

But, when we give our time, energy, and experience to get nothing in return, it can be tiring, frustrating, and demoralizing.



Engagement Checklist

Is someone asking for your participation? Ask these questions to help understand how you can best influence the decision.

- What information do you have about the project or program?
- Who is leading the engagement?
- What is the goal for my participation?
- What stage of the process are we in?
- Who is involved in the process?
- What activities are you using to engage people?
- How will a final decision be made?
- How will I know if my participation made a difference?
- What is the long-term plan for community engagement?

Protest as Engagement

If you don't like what you're being asked, you don't have to engage in any particular way.

Lead an engagement effort of your own, or join a local group. Take to the streets, write your councilperson, make art, talk with your friends, support those who are able to be more active...

Do what you can!



CITATIONS

- Arnstein, S (1969) A ladder of citizen participation, AIP Journal, July 214-216
- Cornwall, A (2008) Unpacking 'Participation': models, meanings and practices, Community Development Journal, Vol. 43, No. 3, Special Issue: Participatory Community Development: Transitions and Transformations (July 2008), pp 269- 283, Oxford University Press
- Farrington, J., Bebbington, A., with Wellard, K. and Lewis, D.J. (1993) Reluctant Partners: Non-governmental Organisations, the State and Sustainable Agricultural Development, Routledge, London.
- Fung, Archon (2015) Public Administration Review, © 2015 by The American Society for Public Administration.

