

## A RECIPE FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

How to move beyond one-off transactions to establish stronger local connections and partnerships

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### THE CALL TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

For many of us, the call to action to improve health and well-being is clear and almost intrinsic. For others it comes in the form of a bumper sticker reminding us to “be the change” or [perhaps a paradigm-shifting TEDTalk](#). It is often so powerful that it moves us to roll up our sleeves to take on what can seem like insurmountable odds. But rarely do we take the time to consider what it means to be a true agent of change in our communities — let alone whether our actions will actually help our cause.

In most challenging situations, we can turn to experts for advice and guidance. But when it comes to choosing professionals to work with, whose knowledge is being privileged as expertise and why?

Founded on the principles of racial equity and justice, [The Justice Collective \(TJC\)](#) seeks to challenge assumptions, disrupt current practices and amplify marginalized voices. These efforts are rooted in the truth that communities we often seek to *help* already have an existing wealth of knowledge and [expert lived experiences](#) with important issues we may not have even known to look for. This experience and perspective is critical to the success of change initiatives — whether we seek to expand our knowledge base, improve service delivery, or more meaningfully connect and engage with our communities.

**It's no secret that conventional relationships among healthcare organizations, patients and community service providers tend to err more toward the transactional.** There's a need; we can fill it; transaction complete. This approach may address a single issue at one particular moment in time, but it does nothing to capture the whole picture or drive toward more effective, sustainable solutions. Making matters worse, the practice can lead to superficial engagement or tokenization — where community feedback is just a box to be checked, without genuine interest in listening to and incorporating what is learned. And it leaves little room to consider the consequences of present-day and historical inequities individuals in our communities are subjected to.

**True partnership and engagement with communities requires organizations to move beyond transactional relationships.** We need to dig deeper and understand that the issues we frequently set out to “fix” do not exist in a vacuum. These challenges and needs are oftentimes rooted in longstanding, painful historical context — forcing difficult conversations around topics that many of us would rather avoid in order to keep the peace. For example, we avoid talking explicitly about the role systemic racism plays in our work and in our communities. And we do this despite known links between racism and overall community health, coupled with its ever-present influence on how we think, act and feel.

**Transactional approaches tend to ignore systemic challenges and rarely provide long-term solutions, let alone advance broader efforts to create a more equitable world.** So at TJC, we encourage partners to be open to the discomfort. Because in that discomfort, there is incredible opportunity for growth.



### ABOUT THE JUSTICE COLLECTIVE

The mission of the The Justice Collective (TJC) is to transform organizations, companies, and communities by centering equity and dismantling white supremacy culture and systems.

A proud Health Leads partner, TJC leverages collective expertise and networks to support strategic initiatives, organizational development and nurturing leadership.

## KEY QUESTIONS BEFORE WE BEGIN

Any initiative that hopes to engage more intentionally and meaningfully with communities must begin by considering a few essential questions:

1

### Are we fully prepared to start this work?

Enthusiasm can propel us forward, ready to right the wrongs of the world. But do we fully understand the scope of the work ahead, or even our place within it? Before we launch a change initiative, we need to be clear on the talents, biases, knowledge and privileges we show up with — as well as the potential power dynamics at play.

2

### Who falls into our definition of community?

We need to determine who we see as the community. Is the community patients or clients? Local residents? Others who are invested in or impacted by the organization's work? Once the "who" is answered, we then need to establish the "how many" by defining the scope or reach of our proposed work. These questions may seem like a no-brainer, but many change initiatives begin without a clearly defined community in mind.

3

### Do we truly understand the community's needs?

Too often we start with a preconceived notion of the challenge we want to tackle and bring it to the community. Instead, we should begin by asking the community to describe their most prevalent needs — and acknowledge that these needs do not exist in a vacuum. It is important to consider the broader historical context, including the specific role of racial inequity and structural barriers, that has created the conditions we seek to remedy.

4

### How will we ensure the right voices are at the table?

Community engagement is about ensuring that those most impacted by challenges have a say in designing and implementing solutions. This involves making sure that we not only keep the defined community informed — but that they are empowered by directly participating in the decision-making process. That means real consultation and collaboration around proposed solutions and implementation.



## RESOURCES FOR ALLIES

Once we examine our own role and readiness, define our community and its needs, and ensure the right stakeholders are engaged, we can thoughtfully move forward as allies. Of course, this is an ongoing internal process, and we must periodically check in with ourselves and recalibrate as we grow and gain more knowledge. Fortunately, we are supported by thought leaders and organizations that are helping to define what it means to truly be in service to — and with — the community. Among them:



### RACIAL EQUITY TOOLS

[Racial Equity Tools](#) provides learning resources to help individuals and organizations center racial equity in their work. They provide a host of strategies and practices to specifically support civic and community engagement initiatives.



### BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

[The Building Movement Project](#) is a free, public resource that provides current research, tools and training materials to help organizations uplift and center the people they are in service to. Their [Nonprofits Integrating Community Engagement](#) (NICE) guide covers topics from understanding readiness and constituent engagement, to partnering with communities and collaboration for collective impact.

## GUIDANCE TO SUPPORT STRONGER CONNECTIONS

There's no shortage of research and advice available on the subjects of creating change and maximizing impact. But when it comes to fostering the kind of meaningful community engagement that leads to long-term, systemic change, we shouldn't lose sight of the foundational insight and resources that are immediately available to guide our work.



### Center on Storytelling

Storytelling is among the oldest and most accessible traditions we have. Stories can be used to find and build community, create space for shared understanding and healing, and tap into resilience, courage and hope in ways that celebrate the individual. We all just want to be seen and heard, and stories are a simple and effective tool to foster meaningful community engagement.



When trying to get a group to open up and connect, organizations typically turn to standard (and often bemoaned) icebreakers. Instead, consider taking a more creative approach! A TJC colleague and mentor taught us that culture shares are a wonderful way to build trust within the group that also allows people to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable. The University of Minnesota's ['I Am From'](#) activity is a thoughtful and often meaningful culture-sharing example that helps guide groups into a more introspective space. When participants reach into sense memory to share their experiences of where they are from, it builds greater collective trust and sense of belonging, which deepens the partnership.



## GUIDANCE TO SUPPORT CONNECTIONS (CONT.)



### Elevate Impacted Voices

Centering on storytelling also means elevating voices that may often be silenced or overlooked, but who are often the most impacted by an intervention or system-level change. Amplifying these experiences can support the development of successful approaches that improve health and well-being. For example, when working with [a Health Leads collective impact effort in the Bay Area](#), TJC curated a panel of individuals who had experienced harm from the housing crisis — the focus of the initiative. We held space for their stories and continually drew on this expert lived experience in decision-making processes.



Similarly, [a New York WIC pilot initiative led by community health workers](#) collected women's stories that were integral to identifying barriers to access that could be addressed through a statewide update of key policies and practices. Lifting up the voices of those who are directly impacted is one of the most simple and fruitful paths to develop empathy and foster the kinds of conversations that are needed to develop long-term, sustainable solutions.



### Leverage Existing Community Assets to Drive Solutions

When organizations seek solutions to known problems, we focus too often on what is lacking rather than what is there. At TJC, we take [an assets-based approach](#) that immediately flips the concept of “needs assessment” on its head. We encourage partners to actively explore the hidden talents, resources, skills, relationships, tools and techniques that already exist within the community — or even among the staff you work with.



This can be as simple as asking individuals and allied groups what they bring to the table. For example, in the Bay Area, we asked participants to enumerate their assets as individuals and as a cohort — and then continually reflected on these assets as action agendas were developed and decided upon. This becomes such an empowering and abundant foundation to build from, and inevitably helps to spark conversations that lead to substantive problem solving.



### Partner with Community Members Who Already Do this Work

Sometimes the spirit of competition that motivates us simultaneously hampers the level of [collaboration and trust](#) that is needed to advance solutions and liberation. Competition can be healthy, but it can also constrain partnerships that are most beneficial to the people we serve. When utilizing an assets-based approach, it is important that we ask ourselves key questions: Who is already doing this work? Are they connected to the community in different ways than we are? How can we partner and combine resources to maximize our impact in the community?



At TJC, we encourage partners to first look to the community to identify organizations and organizers that are already on the ground and engaged on the issue at hand. Why reinvent the wheel when collaboration and partnership with longstanding community stakeholders will no doubt yield better results?



## BAND-AID VS HEALING

Most organizations dedicated to improving health and well-being seek to foster change in their communities. But we rarely apply that change mentality to our own policies and practices. It is incredibly important to reflect on whether our strategies and tactics — which have often been in place for many years — are, in fact, working. Sure we may move the dial on a few key measures. But that doesn't necessarily mean we fully understand the spirit in which we are doing things, let alone whether there might be a better, more effective, community-centered approach. In the end, we must ask ourselves: Do we aim to be a band-aid, or be a part of something that actually heals?

There is incredible potential for growth and new knowledge when we treat the communities we serve as *partners*, as opposed to *recipients* of services. By respecting the dignity and personhood of every individual — and empowering through meaningful community engagement — we stand to significantly improve the impact of our change initiatives.



Looking for additional resources and templates to support your community engagement efforts? Visit [our Network Resource Library](#) to find the latest in tools, guidance and best practices!

### ABOUT THE NETWORK

The Health Leads Network is a community of healthcare practitioners and caregivers who are taking action to address essential needs within our organizations. Network members work in a wide range of health system roles and settings — but share a commitment both to drive improvement initiatives on the ground, and to advance health equity in their communities.

The Network was created to bring action-oriented practitioners together to collaborate, share and learn from each other. We translate critical front-line experience into tangible tools, guidance and learning opportunities — all designed to support members in advancing the integration of essential needs into community-led health initiatives.

Learn more at [healthleadsusa.org/network](https://healthleadsusa.org/network) — or email [network@healthleadsusa.org](mailto:network@healthleadsusa.org) for additional information.