Kip Holley

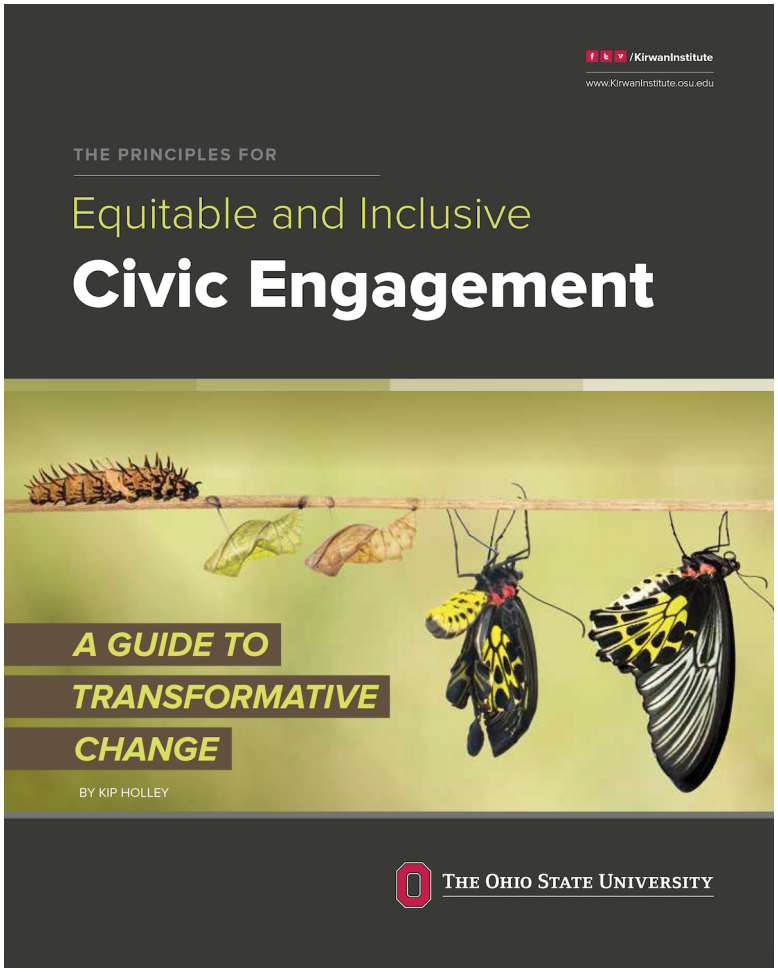
Dwight “Kip” Holley is a researcher, civic engagement specialist, and community advocate at Ohio State University’s **Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity** who has worked on a variety of civic-engagement projects in cities and communities across the United States. His work on community engagement, social capital, and civic leadership synthesizes research from domains as

diverse as social psychology, political science, and economics to describe how racially charged narratives produce inequities in community life. Holley has authored or contributed to a number of reports and publications, including ***The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement: A Guide to Transformative Change***, and he regularly leads workshops and presentations on civic engagement for communities, organizations, and public institutions.

Interview by Stephen Abbott

Q: Let's start with *The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Engagement*. In the report, you write that "civic engagement is more than just a set of practices; it is also a set of conditions," and that "the civic-engagement environment is not only informed by what we practice, but by *how we are positioned in our communities*." Can you define "civic-engagement environment"? And why is the practice of engagement inseparable from its larger cultural, political, or socioeconomic context?

When we refer to the civic-engagement environment at the Kirwan Institute, we're referring to the existing contexts under which people engage in community decision-making, which can include everything from the setting of an event to the issue under discussion. But more importantly, the civic-engagement environment also encompasses the various cultural frames, legal constraints, and access to influence that are ever-present in our community interactions above and beyond any individual engagement event.



As Kip Holley writes, "*The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement* invites community leaders, policymakers, planners, and community developers to share in Kirwan's collective knowledge and experience with promoting equitable civic engagement and community development. We hope to see more community dialogue that reflects the diverse voices in our communities, considers the assets of traditionally marginalized or underrepresented community members, and contributes to sustainable, diverse, equitable and healthy communities. We can use the assets and power inherent in our people and communities to bring about justice, opportunity, and effective democracy for all." Source: The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University

So different elements such as the implicit or explicit rules governing how people can engage in the community, who is empowered to set the agenda or establish expectations for engagement, and the ideas and preconceptions that people hold about other people or community challenges all act in ways that are similar to how characteristics such as temperature, terrain, and humidity affect an ecosystem.

What this means is that our engagement activities can never be separated from the environment in which they take place. To continue the analogy, the distinct characteristics of the ecosystems in, let's say, the Central Coast area of California or the Everglades in southern Florida would make the experience of camping much different even if all other aspects of the activity were the same.

Environmental characteristics can make a community setting more or less able to empower people of color, and others with marginalized identities, so that they can play a meaningful role in community decision-making.

If engagements are developed with an expectation that the contributions and challenges raised by marginalized populations are less valid, or if the general rules and guidelines that shape the activity produce barriers to engagement for these populations, then our engagement activities will continue to marginalize them regardless of the organizer's specific desire not to do so.

Q: As American cities and towns become increasingly demographically diverse, conventional forms of community engagement—such as the public hearing, town hall, or school-board meeting—don't readily accommodate alternative modes of engagement, which can then contribute to the further disenfranchisement and marginalization of many cultural groups. Why do you think that public institutions need to embrace more flexible and co-creative modes of engagement?

The most obvious answer is that our public institutions need to be changeable because our communities are always changing. Besides the significant demographic changes that many of our communities are undergoing, changes in technology, different generational conceptions of engagement, or the role of institutions, cultural groups, or corporate interests in our communities all necessitate constant revision.

The changing demographic makeup of American communities also highlights the fact that our engagement environments and assumptions were largely and historically designed by and for professional, upper-middle-class, white, hetero men, and as such they haven't been designed for people who engage in community decision-making differently.

Around the world, for example, people engage in community decision-making in ways that are different on any number of structural and contextual levels—and when they come to the United States, they bring those ways with them. In fact, that process of integrating these various styles of engagement into our communities is how we developed our current ideas about community engagement.

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As has always been the case, our communities tend to work better when we can use new knowledge to expand ideas of engagement in ways that ensure everyone can have a strong voice in a context that’s welcoming, inclusive, and familiar. Here in Columbus, Ohio, for instance, a local church with a heavy community focus hosted an event designed to raise awareness about infant mortality. The church is seen as a **third place**—a place where community members feel comfortable gathering—and so many people attend, or they at least have a positive feeling about the church, and people from all faiths feel welcome.

I’ve also seen people utilize different practices such as making a **Land Acknowledgement Statement** before a meeting or making use of meditation or mindfulness techniques that have their origins in Buddhist traditions. The important thing is not only that these traditions were included, but that they were included because engagement participants and organizers could see their intrinsic value.

Q: Let’s unpack that a bit more. Many people think of engagement as a technical process or set of steps that can be implemented to achieve an objective. But the most effective forms of engagement generally require far more than a sound process—they require fundamental changes in self-understanding, beliefs, values, or identity, for example. Where have you seen technical approaches to engagement go wrong? And what needs to happen when communities or organizations are simply unprepared to address issues of power, privilege, or prejudice?

There’s a story that I like to tell about a community association that was interested in attracting more young people to give their insights on crime in the community. The group made use of some best practices for reaching out to youth of color that they had learned about from research and from similar local organizations. And it worked: they ended up getting a lot of young people of color at the meeting. For most of these kids, it was the first time that anyone had asked them to be a part of anything, and about a dozen of them came to the meeting excited to share.

But when the meeting started, the woman who had been instrumental in inviting the youth stood up and welcomed them by noting that she was glad that they were there because she felt that most of the crime was due to "young people not having enough to do." In that moment, you could see all of the young people's faces just drop. I don't think any of them said much during the meeting and they never came back again. Now, this woman didn't mean any harm—in fact, she meant to be welcoming—but because she hadn't done the right self-reflection work, all of the practices that she and the association used couldn't work as intended.

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Aside from that, some practices may work well in one setting or with certain populations, but not work well in other settings or with different populations. This is particularly true when dealing with issues of institutional discrimination, racial and cultural bias, or specific regional connotations that may be known to some participants but not to others. Most importantly, merely adopting the superficial characteristics of a certain practice doesn't always lead to the same outcomes.

In terms of equitable and inclusive engagement, the best practices work because they lead to transformative, self-reflective experiences among the participants, which then produce a greater understanding of the value of people from different walks of life—and a greater understanding of the structures that tend to subvert that value. This kind of learning can happen in myriad ways, and it's generally more impactful to start with a desire to understand oneself and one's neighbors, and then create a process around that, rather than look to someone else's process.

Q: You've written about an element of engagement that I feel isn't as widely discussed as it should be. In American culture, efficiency is often seen as a universal virtue—that is, people tend to believe that saving time or money is always a good thing. But evidence suggests that when efficiency is emphasized over empowerment in engagement work, community members—especially those who are already disadvantaged—typically lose voice and influence. Why do the benefits of efficiency rarely outweigh the costs, and why should we intentionally build *inefficiency* into our civic-engagement work?

We’re not very good at understanding the value of community engagement because we haven’t come up with a good way to quantify it. Time, money, and effort are more easily quantified, and so efficiency tends to be prioritized because these qualities can be measured. Yet I would argue that efforts to maximize the efficiency of time, money, and effort can lead to the inefficient use of other resources, mainly in the form of community wisdom, knowledge, and social relationships—or what we call social capital.

Social capital is a term used to describe the benefits we derive from social connections. Sometimes, these benefits might be learning a new cooking technique from a friend or having a neighbor that you can trust to babysit your child when you have to work late. But social capital can also describe the collective knowledge, wisdom, and effort that we can bring to our community challenges.

Since 2013, the Kirwan Institute has published a semi-annual summary of the latest research on implicit bias called *State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review*. The 2017 edition (featured above) explores the multifaceted ways in which unconscious associations can create unintended outcomes in every dimension of human social life. Each year, the publication highlights selections academic literature and research in fields as diverse as criminal justice, healthcare, employment, education, and housing, and highlights emerging strategies for mitigating implicit-bias. Source: The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University.

Social capital is important because these resources are vital when making community decisions that are relevant and meaningful to all community members. The resources of social capital are also essential for creating the kind of buy-in needed for long-term community action.

In *The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement*, we talk about the necessity for mutual accountability and community empowerment in making long-term change in communities—particularly in communities of color. Those characteristics are derived from the development of existing leadership capacity and from network-building and trust-building. If we are inefficient about how we use and replenish these resources, the community changes that we've poured our time, money, and effort into will most likely take more time and money and effort to maintain or restart in the long run. People are more likely to put their own resources into something that they've helped build, so over the long-term an investment in people ultimately makes our community initiatives more efficient going forward.

Q: Power can be expressed in countless ways, such as in the language we use, the narratives we accept, or the roles that we assign to different individuals or groups. How can these subtle and often unconscious power dynamics undermine engagement work? And how can local leaders, organizers, and practitioners use symbols, metaphors, or rituals to establish more equitable power dynamics?

I feel that people often have difficulty talking about power in relationships, particularly when it's tied to wider inequities in a society or organization. Relational power is the kind of power that people rarely consciously ask for, and therefore it's sometimes difficult to understand consciously. At the same time, we tend to find ourselves reacting to it because certain objects, symbols, or signifiers are associated with different traits—for example, the clothing someone wears may be associated with wealth or poverty—and people tend to be really good at reading those subtle cultural signifiers, even if we are endeavoring to treat everyone the same.

This dynamic also extends to traits that we've been taught to assign to different social identities, such as race, gender, or sexual orientation—the perception of these traits depends on the associations that we've developed through our experiences and interactions. Often it just presents as a gut feeling or an "instinct," but studies have shown just how much these feelings ultimately influence our decision-making.

One study showed that both white and non-white participants showed implicit bias in response to white leadership, regardless of their explicit ideas, which pointed to the important role of social messages that relate whiteness with leadership as an influencing factor in these biases. Something like that could have important implications for power dynamics in community engagement. If we're not conscious about these biases, or how and who we entrust community power to, we may end up reifying unequal power dynamics.

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It can also be difficult to understand and truly appreciate those times when our identities bring us deference or the benefit of the doubt. It’s rarely obvious because it so often shows up in subtle ways. For instance, there have been plenty of times when I’ve been traveling with women who were my supervisors, and yet I’ve been mistaken for the person in charge just by default. Or if we’re engaging in small talk with another group, people will immediately begin asking me questions about our institute, rather than the more senior women that I’m with.

I’ve also seen entire rooms of community members intimidated into silence by institutional partners who tend to use jargony language, rather than speaking more plainly. In addition, the metaphors that people use or the stories they tell may reveal stereotypical beliefs, just as objects can symbolize political or cultural ideas that people may have strong feelings about or reactions to. All these things can communicate ideas about an agenda-setter’s views on the validity or legitimacy of different people, ideas, and experiences.

Sometimes people who feel disempowered by language or objects—but who can’t quite place why they feel that way in the moment—are usually reluctant to bring it up later, perhaps because they’re afraid that it might make them sound weak. So it’s important when someone has the power to set the agenda for an engagement activity that they create an atmosphere where they are surfacing these issues from the start, and where it’s okay for those who might otherwise not feel empowered to speak up and address those challenges, too.

I’d say that the most important thing that practitioners can do is to be dedicated to surfacing the issue of power and making that practice an indispensable part of the engagement process—regardless of the context or who’s involved. There are a lot of techniques for accomplishing this goal, such as doing check-ins, leaving open space in the agenda, or using various tools that allow people to respond anonymously. It’s also helpful to surface the idea of social power within our own organizations as a regular standing practice. Power dynamics are always present, so there’s always an opportunity to notice them, understand how they impact our relationships, and find ways to create more authentic and equitable relationships in light of them.

Q: This interview is only supposed to be five questions, but I have to ask one more. I feel that one of the most important principles of civic engagement you describe is *honoring dissent and embracing protest*. It just seems like this principle is the most difficult for many institutional leaders to understand and embrace. Why is the acceptance—and even encouragement—of dissent so vital in engagement work? And why does the avoidance of conflict tend to produce or intensify the very conflicts institutional leaders are trying to avoid?

Conflict is difficult to handle for most people. I feel that many professional disciplines, including many in the community-development field, do a poor job of addressing the necessity of conflict in community relationships. So most people sort of learn to deal with it on the fly, but rarely in healthy or productive ways. In many cases, practitioners—and even whole institutions—will look for ways to avoid conflict at any cost, while others will look for ways to blunt opposition with some type of power or pressure. But none of those methods really make the central conflicts go away—they just reappear again or manifest in other ways.

One of my favorite quotes is by the author and community-engagement consultant **Peter Block**: "If people can't say no, then their yes is meaningless." I think that statement has two meanings. First, just pointing out the plain fact that the absence of "no" doesn't equal enthusiastic consent is vitally important, but also that the lack of such consent will eventually cause problems for keeping people on board and engaged in the long run.

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Second, people and communities will always find a way to express their authentic selves. When civil-rights activists were unable to end segregation through legal or regulatory means, they turned to boycotts and protests. When young people feel unheard or unrepresented by existing artistic structures, for example, they invariably create new ones to express their truths. As momentarily satisfying as it may be to avoid conflict, blunting difficult conversations through one channel merely means they get expressed through another.

In terms of community engagement, the lasting consequence of conflict avoidance is often a less-trusting relationship with the community as a whole. The actions that are taken to avoid conflict often include some sort of behavior that ultimately damages relationships and trust, even if it wasn't intended. It might be the punitive use of power, some sort of deception, or simply ignoring or minimizing someone's viewpoint or concern. The lasting effect of these behaviors is often an intensification of the conflict or the creation of new conflicts. When Kirwan enters a community and engages with community members who are reluctant to join some new initiative, they usually share experiences and stories along these lines.

What we've found is that the attempt to avoid conflict—no matter how well-meaning—almost always creates more conflicts because those attempts often undermine community trust and goodwill. This isn't to say that conflict must always be addressed in the moment—it just needs to be addressed in as timely a manner as possible. There are many healthy and equitable ways to address conflict, but even these techniques tend to require a level of discomfort as people negotiate new terms for approaching and dealing with the conflict.

So discomfort, at some point, is inevitable.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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