Transparency

Providing a full and honest accounting of all facts, information, and context essential to ensuring an informed and equitable decision-making process

Transparency Defined

The principle of *transparency* in organizing, engagement and equity work refers to the full and honest accounting of all facts, information, and context essential to ensuring an informed and equitable decision-making process. In practice, the principle of transparency also applies to the intentions and conduct of leaders, organizers, and facilitators, including whether they encourage or suppress criticism and dissenting viewpoints, whether they share or conceal unflattering information and conflicts of interest, and whether they acknowledge or disregard their own motivations and biases.

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see **HOW PRINCIPLES WORK** →

Transparency Strategies

This section describes a selection of representative transparency strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Acknowledging history and past injustice**
2. **Recognizing cultural differences and biases**
3. **Acknowledging mistakes and taking responsibility**
4. **Allowing all perspectives to be heard**
5. **Explaining the process and establishing clear expectations**
6. **Providing full and open access to essential information**
7. **Communicating quickly, proactively, and thoroughly**
8. **Disclosing funding sources and conflicts of interest**

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1. Acknowledging history and past injustice

When the history of a community is unknown, overlooked, or ignored, it can introduce a variety of potential problems in organizing, engagement, and equity work. For example, the anger, frustration, or legitimate grievances of community members may be minimized or dismissed if leaders, organizers, and facilitators are unaware of the experiences that contributed to—and that can explain and justify—those feelings.

- Past injustices—whether it's experiences with broken promises, institutional mistreatment, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, or political corruption—can shape a community's perception of current problems and challenges, and they can also diminish the hopefulness and optimism that motivate people to become involved in a problem-solving process.
- In organizing, engagement, and equity work, acknowledging and discussing community history—especially when members of the community have suffered from injustice, neglect, abuse, or trauma—could be a first step toward establishing the baseline level of transparency and trust required for a productive dialogue, process, or campaign.
- Local leaders, organizers, and facilitators can, for example, host discussions on historical texts and films, provide opportunities for participants to share their personal stories and family histories, and contextualize community issues and problems by developing a more informed understanding of past events and decisions that contributed to current tensions, conflicts, or problems.

2. Recognizing cultural differences and biases

Creating opportunities for participants to openly discuss cultural differences—and to acknowledge, learn about, and reflect on both implicit and explicit forms of bias—is another important form of transparency in organizing, engagement, and equity work. Transparently and respectfully discussing cultural differences and biases related to race, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities can help to promote more honest conversations that build connections, trust, and a greater sense of solidarity among diverse participants.

- Acknowledging and confronting differences in race, culture, or identity can be emotionally difficult for some community members, in part because explicit discussions of difference tend to be avoided in most social and professional contexts. Consequently, people may feel uncomfortable, anxious, or fearful, and some may even become defensive or hostile because they feel threatened. Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can recognize that some participants may have no experience acknowledging or confronting cultural difference, and that people often need to feel safe before they will express vulnerability or share their perspectives in a group setting.
- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can also model honest and respectful conversations by, for example, discussing their own cultural backgrounds; how their upbringing, race, or

identity has shaped their view of the world and of others; how they learned to recognize and understand their own biases; and how the dynamics of cultural difference and implicit bias typically play out in or influence a group decision-making process.

- Modeling transparent and respectful discussions of cross-cultural differences and bias can help community members become more comfortable, confident, and culturally self-aware in diverse groups, which can help to reduce harmful assumptions, negative interactions, social tensions, and other factors that undermine an inclusive dialogue or process.
- Facilitators can also use moments of explicit bias in group settings—such as a participant expressing prejudicial opinions on race or making inappropriate or demeaning comments related to someone's gender or identity—as opportunities for participants to name, discuss, and learn about bias and how it affects others.

3. Acknowledging mistakes and taking responsibility

Public officials, school administrators, elected representatives, and others in positions of power and authority often feel pressure to avoid any admission of oversight, error, or fault, whether it's due to their own actions, the actions of their predecessors, or actions taken by the organizations they represent.

- In many cases, this hesitancy to admit mistakes or responsibility is an attempt to avoid exposure to legal liabilities that stem from admitting fault (leaders may even be acting in accordance with the expressed instructions of lawyers) or to evade the political and professional ramifications of negative publicity and media attention. Yet avoiding admissions of fault or dodging responsibility—particularly in the cases of outright wrongdoing or misconduct—can undermine trust in public institutions and damage the credibility of local leaders.
- In organizing, engagement, and equity work, leaders can build—or rebuild—trust and credibility by openly acknowledging past mistakes and any harm that might have been caused in the community.
- Even when legal concerns may limit a district or school's ability to discuss certain topics, administrators can still explain those limitations, assure the community that appropriate actions will be taken, and then provide a full and transparent accounting once a situation has been resolved.
- When public institutions avoid admissions of fault or fail to take appropriate responsibility, community leaders working outside of those institutions can organize students, families, and other stakeholders to push for greater accountability and transparency.

4. Allowing all perspectives to be heard

Creating opportunities for all members of a community or group to express their views, needs,

concerns, and priorities is a cornerstone of effective organizing, engagement, and equity work. In fact, a public institution, organizing campaign, or community decision-making process cannot be considered truly transparent if important voices and perspectives are overlooked, ignored, disregarded, dismissed, or belittled.

- Transparent organizations and processes do not attempt to stifle, suppress, or silence criticism or dissent—and especially when criticism and dissent are justified, well-reasoned, and evidence-based. While expressions of criticism and dissent can produce tense interactions and uncomfortable group situations, particularly if participants are angry or confrontational, understanding the concerns and motivations of community members is essential to effective organizing, engagement, and equity work.
- In practice, transparency may require local leaders, organizers, and facilitators to resist the impulse to become defensive or hostile when they are criticized or contradicted. Leaders can create spaces and opportunities for dissenting viewpoints to be openly expressed and discussed, and participants should be able to express disagreement or unpopular viewpoints without fearing that they will suffer social or professional consequences, such as retaliation and retribution.
- One of the most effective transparency strategies is building diversity of voice and representation into a system, campaign, or process by making it a standard or required practice. For example, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can ensure that all leadership teams and committees include representatives from relevant stakeholder groups, or that important activities and decision-making processes are collaboratively planned and facilitated with diverse stakeholder involvement.

5. Explaining the process and establishing clear expectations

Transparency can also be applied as an intentional facilitation strategy—a practice that is sometimes called "transparent facilitation." For example, facilitators can explain their facilitation philosophy to participants and why they may facilitate in certain ways. Facilitators can also explain why a certain process is being used, how decisions were made, and what organizers hope or expect the process will achieve. If community participants don't understand how a process works, if they don't know why their involvement is important, or if options and obligations have not been clearly explained to them, for example, they are more likely to respond with confusion or frustration.

- One standard facilitation practice is to explain how a process will work at the outset, which ensures that participants know what to expect, which can reduce the chances that participants will become confused, anxious, or frustrated because they don't understand what they are being asked to do or why they are being asked to do it.
- Transparent approaches to facilitation are especially important when participants lack power, authority, or control in a given situation; when they might have been ignored,

demeaned, or humiliated by authority figures in the past; or when they've had no previous experience with a particular process. When power dynamics are unequal and left unaddressed, participants may be hesitant to disagree with authority figures, question the goals or intentions of a process, or challenge dominant viewpoints or narratives.

- Facilitators can also allow themselves to be vulnerable by, for example, sharing an emotionally difficult personal story or by admitting when they don't know the answer to a question. When facilitators show vulnerability, it often helps participants feel more comfortable being vulnerable themselves.
- At the outset of an organizing or engagement process, one of the most important expectations to clarify is who will have power over which decisions. If community members believe they are being asked to participate in a collaborative decision-making process, for example, but administrators only want their input on decisions they intend to make without community involvement, this mismatch of expectations can produce frustration, anger, and other emotions that can damage trust and undermine a process. Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can clearly explain what they are asking of the community, and precisely what role they envision community members will play in a leadership or decision-making process. Being transparent about power—including who has it and how it will be shared or not shared—should always be a fundamental consideration in organizing, engagement, and equity work.

→ **For a related discussion, see the [Facilitation Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity**

6. Providing full and open access to essential information

One of the foundations of transparency is open access to essential information, especially information that a community needs to understand how their public institutions operate and perform. Many federal, state, and municipal laws and regulations require government agencies and publicly funded programs to comply with transparency policies.

- To establish a baseline level of transparency, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can collect, organize, and share the essential information a community needs to understand a public issue or make informed decisions in an organizing or engagement process.
- Transparency not only requires that information be publicly available, however—it must also be easy for diverse community members to find and understand, especially for community members who may not have internet access, own a smartphone, or have the education, professional background, or language abilities needed to decode complicated statistics, administrative documents, or professional jargon.
- Transparency often requires information to be appropriately contextualized, given that some forms of information (such as a school's graduation rate for a single year) cannot be

fully understood unless that information is presented as part of a larger community- or systems-level analysis (such as presenting a graduation rate in the context of a multi-year trend that shows rates for different student groups alongside comparisons to county, state, and national averages).

- In organizing, engagement, and equity work, one fundamental contextualizing strategy is framing personal interests and concerns in terms of larger systems-level causes and patterns. For example, parent concerns about their children being unfairly suspended or expelled can be evaluated in the context of historical trends in disciplinary rates, the disproportionate enforcement of disciplinary policies for different student groups, and the long-term consequences for students, families, and communities when significant numbers of students are suspended or expelled from school.

- Transparency also requires leaders, organizers, and facilitators to not withhold or suppress important information, even if it's embarrassing to an individual or organization. Any presentation of information will not be genuinely transparent if it obscures, misleads, or manipulates community members. Because the natural human impulse to omit, conceal, or censor potentially embarrassing information is strong, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should consider adopting standard policies, procedures, and practices—before they are needed to address a specific situation—that establish clear transparency guidelines for organizations, campaigns, and groups. For example, districts could adopt transparency policies and guidelines that would not allow school administrators to censor student newspapers for factual and accurate reporting or shut down a student-organized protest simply because these activities could potentially be embarrassing to the administration.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Accessibility Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

7. Communicating quickly, proactively, and thoroughly

Genuine transparency is proactive, meaning that leaders, organizers, and facilitators share essential information when it becomes available, not just in response to specific requests or demands from the community. Because the community may not know what information is available or relevant on any given issue, organizations, groups, and public institutions are not being fully transparent when they expect the community to seek out information, and then rationalize the withholding of important information by claiming the community never asked for it.

- Leaders in positions of power or authority can avoid unilaterally determining which information will or will not be shared with the community, particularly when a selective presentation of information may advantage certain interests, agendas, and narratives over others. For example, district and school administrators often want their schools to be perceived positively in the community, and yet this understandable inclination can

nevertheless bias information-sharing decisions. In transparent organizations or processes, both positive and negative information is shared with the public or with participants, and information-sharing decisions are not made exclusively by those in power who might be inclined to withhold information that could be unfavorable to their interests.

- Swift and responsive communication is another feature of organizational transparency and transparent leadership, particularly in the event of a crisis or when the potential is high for misinformation to spread in a community. Even if some facts are not yet available when a crisis is unfolding, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can share the information they have and follow up with additional information as soon as it's available.

- Another essential element of transparency is keeping the community informed about the progress and outcomes of a process or initiative, especially when community members have been involved. For example, schools routinely survey staff, students, and families, and yet they often neglect to share the resulting survey data and findings with either respondents or the larger community. Similarly, districts may ask community members to participate in a strategic planning process, but then fail to keep them informed about the district's progress on implementing the final plan. If community members are asked for their viewpoints, time, or other contributions, leaders should keep them involved and informed as the process unfolds.

8. Disclosing funding sources and conflicts of interest

Transparency requires leaders, organizers, and facilitators to disclose sources of funding and any existing or potential conflicts of interest. Even when conflicts of interests are only perceived conflicts, or if they are only inadvertently left undisclosed, it can call transparency into question; undermine confidence in a leader, leadership team, or process; and negatively impact the credibility or effectiveness of organizing, engagement, and equity work.

- Participants should know where funding is coming from—especially when it comes from private sources such as for-profit companies, philanthropic foundations, or special-interest groups and campaigns—and whether funders have any specific interests, objectives, expectations, or conditions attached to the funding.

- Transparency also requires a full accounting of any direct or indirect conflicts of interest, including both financial and non-financial motivations that might unduly influence someone's motivations, judgment, or decisions in ways that could put personal gain above the interests of the community. Conflicts of interest might include, for example, the expectation of financial compensation, professional advancement, or favorable treatment—for oneself, one's family, or one's friends and associates—in exchange for a particular action or outcome.

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