



Equity Matters



Multicultural Engagement in the Public Sector: Opening Solutions and Opportunities by Keeping the Promise of Our Social Contract

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

Thank you to the organizing committee and to the community members in this room who work to fulfill the promise of, and to strengthen, our social contract by devoting their lives to public service—and, to the importance of diversity and multiculturalism. I am honored to have this opportunity to be part of your discourse today, and want to share **three core perspectives** on ideas that will not be new to you, but warrant overt declaration: namely, that **multicultural engagement matters, approach matters** and **culture matters**.

Multicultural Engagement Matters: It is an Asset, Not a Cost

First off, let me admit to something fundamental: I believe in the public sector. I believe that we have a social contract. The promise of this idea—that we are better together—relies upon a sector that is of and for the people. And while the theory and concept are much more idealistic than any reality we have achieved in our nation's 236-year experiment, it is through the public sector that this promise

advances. It is the public sector that must strive to ensure a playing field that is fair—to each of us today, and between one generation and the next. For those for whom it works, public service provides clean food, water and air, safe ways to get around, knowledge and skills to help ourselves and others, as well as sustainable access to resources that feed our bodies and economy—and to places and ideas that feed our souls. But fundamental to the promise of the public sector is multicultural relevance and engagement, which for me is all about equity. Who is healthy enough to learn and work, who can play in a field safe from toxins, who has proximity to good jobs and good schools, who has access to healthy food, who has a voice in how their community develops—are all determinants of who has opportunity and of how much. And increasing this opportunity by ensuring *we*, as the public sector, truly represent and serve the entire polis, is the only way to fulfill our social contract.

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So the work you do, and that we all must do, to bring a multicultural approach to every endeavor, is needed because:

- It's the **right** thing to do—to live up to our core promise as a democracy, as *a* people, and as people.
- It's the **needed** thing to do as the public sector, to maintain our legitimacy and relevance, and to fulfill our promise of representing, protecting and advancing the *public* interest.
- And it's the **smart** thing to do in a society that has vexing issues that need solutions and changing opportunities, which are only seized through innovation—neither of which can be achieved by ignoring or excluding significant parts of our population from helping.

Our problems today need **shared responsibility and community action vs. institutional power** of the past to solve them. Just think about our clean water issue. Over 30 years ago, our rivers were in trouble with many too polluted to drink from, swim in, or eat a fish you caught from. The problem was industrial polluters—about 100,000 big pipes from factories dumping dangerous stuff into our rivers. The solution was an institutional enforcement model; we passed the Clean Water Act and had inspectors confirm that 100,000 pipes were shut down. But 30 years later, our rivers are as bad or worse. Fifty percent of the river-miles in America today are too polluted to drink from, swim in, or eat a fish you caught from them. And the problem is not industrial pipes, but all of us. Population and impervious surface growth have translated to every action we take. For instance, stepping on the brakes or fertilizing the lawn sends pollutants downstream and eventually into our rivers. And no institutional or enforcement model can control what 300 million+ people do every day. Only shared responsibility and community

action can. And the same is true if we want to address the chronic disease and obesity health crisis, or climate change. In order to have a shared responsibility—and community action—approach to solving problems, we also must be able to engage everyone, demonstrate relevance, and create shared ownership for the solutions.

And it is not just about solving problems; we also need shared ownership *to seize opportunity*. We live in an innovation economy where knowledge and human capital are replacing natural resources and economic capital as the drivers. We are constraining innovation when we do not fully engage our community. Whether we are excluding innovation by keeping 12 million undocumented people in the shadows, or denying a quality education to entire segments of our youth, the result is the same: we lose out on ideas, creativity, skills, and the wisdom of many perspectives.

It also matters that we think of and act upon multicultural engagement as a **lens for us all** rather than as a silo or delegated responsibility. With great respect to everyone in this room who focuses on this work, and names it in their job titles, official roles or service listings (which are needed and important for this work to advance)—multicultural engagement cannot be authentic and ultimately effective if it is a sidebar, special initiative or responsibility of an office or coordinator. Rather, it is a lens through which *all* public sector work at *all* stages must be approached. Are we all leaving our assumptions at the door—ensuring voices are at the table, understanding and respecting cultural context, and embracing that the process, outcome and culture will be different when we succeed? This work is not a box we check off, analogous to holding the required public engagement hearing but still implementing

the plan as conceived, regardless of what we learned. It is authentic engagement that by virtue of having diverse voices in the room, new options considered, and new opportunities for solutions emerge—and will likely change the plan and the implementation. It will be more effective and different. As my colleague Maria Elena always says, “expect to succeed, and be prepared that success will mean change.”

Not Only Does the Multicultural Engagement Matter, the Approach Matters—So Let Me Share Some Lessons Learned

My partners and I have been committed to the power of multicultural engagement since our founding nearly 24 years ago. We have had a full-time, multicultural communication and engagement practice for over 15 years. Several years ago, we stepped back to ask, what have we learned from the efforts that worked and the efforts that failed? What principles could we distill for effective multicultural engagement? I would like to share three of the eight principles we identified with you. (All eight are in our article “Relevancy, Relationships and Results”, which you can download from our website (<http://www.metgroup.com/content/index.php?pid=220>)—but today, I am going to focus on three).

First, Understand Cultural Context—Do Your Homework

The goal of any engagement is creating shared understanding. As you all know, various cultural groups have unique ways of perceiving, organizing and relating to information. They may have different needs, values, motivators and behaviors. The norm for one group may not necessarily be relevant or appropriate for another group. The more we learn about the specific communities we

want to engage, the more specific and effective our engagement and work together can be.

When working to understand cultural context, we constantly remind ourselves to: **Define desired stakeholders as specifically as possible, and be aware of norms, traditions, historical experiences, and other cultural nuances that are unique to stakeholders.** Recognizing that major differences often exist within ethnic, racial and cultural groups is important. Respecting nuance by seeing factors such as age, education, reading level, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic area, and others, helps us better understand the decision drivers of stakeholders. For example, many ethnic and racial communities are made up of people in different stages of acculturation to U.S. society. Some individuals may be recent arrivals to this country or first-generation. Others may have been here for generations or may have arrived as small children. As a result, they may have very different perspectives. A good example is the outreach of **Public Libraries** to Latino users: as libraries in the U.S. were seeing underrepresentation of the Latino community in their users and a lack of impact in their focused marketing, they engaged with community leaders, conducted outreach, and learned that Public Libraries in cultural context for many immigrants from Central America did not mean “PUBLIC”—but required official credentials. The marketing messages from libraries were being ignored because libraries were seen as not being *for ME*. Libraries changed the message from “read/research/attend a lecture/etc., at your public library” to “the library *is for you* and can deliver things that you care about.” Right here in the Northwest, for over two decades **MCL** has focused on understanding community needs and cultural context at a neighborhood level—and has adjusted their collections, programs, staffing and community engagement accordingly. They are

recognized nationally as the most-used library in America. And while that may be partially because it rains so much that all Portlanders spend a lot of time with books, it is mainly because they have invested in understanding cultural context and ensuring our libraries are relevant to everyone.

A great national example is the National HIV/AIDS prevention campaign funded by the CDC.

They were seeing disproportionate infection rates of young African American men and other communities of color, and invested in deeply engaging the impacted communities to understand the cultural context in which the campaign and the issues of HIV/AIDS were perceived. They discovered that the messenger (the government), the medium (primarily advertising), and the message were challenged due to historical experience. With the switch to community-based nonprofits and peers as the messengers, and an increase of direct engagement as the medium, they were respecting cultural context. But moving from a “health-threat” frame (get tested or you could die or kill somebody else) to a “respect” frame (they say you are not going to stop AIDS: *You Know Different*) that was driven by members of the impacted community, they moved the needle on results (increasing testing and retrieval by 120 percent in diverse regions of the U.S.).

Second, Build Ownership—Engage. Don’t Just Involve.

We need to identify opportunities for leadership roles for members of the community, and engage them as decision-makers and owners of strategy. We must all ensure that our efforts are not superficially “involving” people for the sake of being able to say that input was received from community members. Rather, we must listen to and act upon advice, and build programs where all partners describe them as “ours” and ask how “we” are going to succeed.

When working to build ownership, we constantly remind ourselves to: **make sure there are seats at the table for shared decision-making and shared authority.** This engagement may take many forms, depending upon the program and government entity. Whether ownership is built as a coalition, a steering committee, an advisory group, seats on a council or commission, or leadership of a working group, the shared responsibility that the process creates will result in much more effective and successful multicultural engagement. For example, when the Congressionally established Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council was being formed, the memory of the Columbus 500th (the dancing-on-the-graves-of-our-ancestors celebration) was fresh—and reminded organizers to engage tribal leaders in the creation of the board, the strategy and the programs for L & C. The choice to hold a “Commemoration” (not a celebration) resulted in a partnership of 19 federal agencies, over 20 states and 38 sovereign tribes—and one of the most successful educational and cultural heritage projects in the last 30 years. The choice to focus on the themes of multicultural perspectives and understanding, and environmental stewardship and learning, resulted in the commemoration garnering much greater media, online and direct participation than anticipated.

Anticipate Change—Be Prepared to Succeed

If done correctly, over time the application of a multicultural perspective to an organization’s work creates organizational change. Organizations move from a monoculture perspective that does not acknowledge differences to one that values, utilizes and engages diverse perspectives. Bringing new people into the process, especially those from a cultural group that has not been previously engaged—be they elected leaders, staff,

volunteers, clients or community partners—will naturally change the dynamics of our organizations. It may impact how consensus is built, how meetings are managed, and how decisions are made. It may impact how a program is designed or how a communication campaign is planned and executed. When committing to multicultural engagement, we must answer the questions: “Are we prepared to succeed?” and “Are we ready for change?”

When working to embrace change, we must constantly remind ourselves to: **recognize that our process and approaches to the work will change.** Having new people at the table who may hold a different worldview than our own requires a welcoming environment and a demonstrated openness to “more-than-one-way” of thinking and doing. And as programs, initiatives and the organization change, it is critical to support these changes with capacity-building for staff and elected leaders while being intentional in our recruitment, retention and training. In addition, it is important to strengthen internal and external communication programs to regularly update stakeholders—and to document new ways of operating, learnings, community feedback, impact and results. This work is a journey and sharing the story builds engagement, mitigates that we will not have perfection, and keeps us accountable for continuous improvement. A great example of success and change that comes with it can be seen in one of the nation’s largest nonprofits, the YMCA of the USA. Their work on *Welcoming Hispanic Families* quickly moved from a marketing-driven initiative to fundamental shifts at local Y’s in programming, communication, billing structures (accepting cash payments rather than assuming families without a bank account needed scholarships), and much more. It is working—and it is a journey with leaders at the Y recognizing they still have work to do.

And Finally, I Want to Share My Third Perspective: Culture Matters—Rights Are Not Enough

As public sector employees and leaders, often much of our focus and work is about establishing policies and practices that codify and protect rights. This is critical work, and much of the progress we have seen over the last 150 years would not be possible without it. However, unless we shift core cultural expectations and accepted norms, and address underlying stigmas that drive attitudes and behaviors, we will not substantially change the lived experience of people experiencing disparity, and thus will not succeed in our equity goals. In business, they say “culture eats strategy for breakfast”—and in the public discourse, I would argue that “culture eats policy for breakfast.”

Many progressive social entrepreneurs (myself included) shudder at the term culture wars. It brings up frames of self-righteousness, sanctimonious behavior, hypocritical definitions of morality, and inappropriate impositions of religious or political values frames upon others. However, by focusing so much on policy-based changes to rights, we inadvertently cede the work and power of values-based culture change to those who would reduce the very rights for which we fight. I am not arguing that we need a culture war arms race. I am arguing that focusing on changing rights, as critical as it is—without focusing on changing culture—will not succeed in establishing the lasting social change and equitable multicultural community we desire and need.

Over the last two decades, we have seen real progress in ensuring basic rights based upon sexual orientation. From fair workplace and public accommodation laws to gay marriage laws and the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, advocates for equity have won significant

victories that make a real difference. At the same time, many of these basic rights are readily used as political wedge issues and/or placed on the ballot for repeal. Let's think about this: the rights of a group of Americans are used as political bait, and it is seen as par for the course.

Another example is the millions of undocumented Americans who live in the shadows; most of whom work, pay taxes, and contribute to our communities and economy. Not only are we stalled on creating pathways to their citizenship, but in state after state, ballot initiatives have taken away rights and, in this political landscape, it has become accepted to demonize immigrants. The fight for changes in enforcement, naturalization and other policies is critical, as is the need to move our cultural expectation toward one that values immigrants and immigration.

And, of course, in recent months the highly politicized debate regarding covering contraception has sparked a resurgence of stereotypes and sexist frames that accuse women of being "sluts," and worse, if they speak out for basic reproductive health and anything but abstinence as birth control. While the sexual revolution, Title IX, and other policy and practice changes have broken many a glass ceiling, it is clear our culture still harbors gender bias and stigma.

To some degree, what we need is to clarify the finish line. Victory is not being afforded rights and codifying tolerance; rather, it is shifting the culture to value, respect and appreciate both the rights and the being of people. If we can do so successfully, we positively impact both people's lived experiences—and create a more resilient base and broader political support for policies that sustainably protect rights and improve communities.

So, What Can We All Do?

As public sector leaders who are often at the front lines and in the strategy huddles driving community action, we must advance culture change by **Understanding Stigma, Connecting with Values, and Investing in Relationships.**

Understand Stigma

Core to cultural expectations are our underlying perspectives, biases and beliefs. Often in issues of rights, where a group is experiencing disparity, stigma is the fuel that allows for cultural norms that perpetuate this disparity. Take for example the gay rights movement, and how triggering the stigma surrounding gays, children and gay parenting is often used in ads and campaigns that oppose everything from fair workplace laws to marriage equality. By identifying, seeking to understand, and working to address underlying stigma, we can de-mystify it and remove its power.

Connect with Values

Culture change is a longer road and, as its goal is more lasting than changing policy, requires connecting with people's closely held values. You can influence a particular vote or decision by pushing a hot-button issue, but to shift the normative expectations of a community, you need to demonstrate connection to values. So much of the immigration reform narrative has been driven around frames that position immigrants as illegals or cheats with the desired response of criminalization, forcing employers and educators to be enforcers, and driving increased deportation. Yet, we also have the opportunity to look at the majority of immigrants as family providers, hard workers, and aspirants to the American Dream. Advocates for progressive immigration reform can connect to the broader-held values of keeping families together, working hard, and helping those in danger or need. We can build a new consensus around immigration that goes beyond

partisanship by engaging faith, business, and law enforcement communities through shared values.

Invest in Relationships

To counter stigma and connect with values requires trusted relationships. Stigma is not dissolved in a 30-second spot. People do not engage in a values discussion with their televisions.

We create openings to explore, discuss, question, and reconsider our cultural frames when we connect to people we trust. It is this power of relationships that is the lingua franca of culture change. Our home state of Oregon has been a testing battleground for anti-gay ballot measures since the 1980s, which is why Basic Rights Oregon made the hard choice to forgo a ballot measure this year, and made a significant investment in conducting deep grassroots outreach and supporting gays and straights who stand for marriage equality. They are helping people engage in dialogue with their friends, family and communities about the importance of marriage equality, separate from advocating for a specific bill. They are investing in building relationships and changing the culture first to create fertile ground for policy changes that will last.

Ultimately, We Must Impact Both Policy and Culture to Create an Equitable Community

The question of policy and culture change is not a zero-sum game, but rather, a both/and proposition. The key is that the externalities of the political process (legislative, administrative and initiative)—combined with the horse-race focus of media on issues—drives attention and resources to the immediate, rights-based policy fights. Too often, investment in cultural change, and work to shift the normative expectations of our communities, are left to

some halcyon or mythic future time. We must make that time now—and as public sector champions for equity, we must ask ourselves at every turn, how are we both fighting for rights and transforming culture? We must dedicate ourselves to building a culture in Oregon that fulfills the social contract for everyone and ensures we all benefit from the strength of a truly multicultural and equitable community.

Thank you.



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