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The Civility Project: Lawrence Focus Group Summary

In July and August of 2011, Consensus Consulting conducted seven focus groups in Lawrence, Kansas. Working with an advisory committee in Lawrence, Consensus agreed to conduct preliminary focus groups to gather ideas and perspectives about civility and public discourse in Lawrence. These focus groups parallel focus groups previously held in Kansas City as part of The Civility Project.

The focus group findings are intended to help the Lawrence advisory committee decide if Lawrence would be a good place to develop principles and ground rules for civil public discourse and pilot test them in a real-life situation. Consensus will also present the findings of our Kansas City and Lawrence focus groups at the Dole Institute in September. More details about the Civility Project and our findings can be found on our website at <http://www.consensusconsultants.com>.

Recruitment of the focus groups

The advisory committee proposed a list of potential focus groups to be included in the initial phase of the project. They also agreed to assist us in recruiting members for the focus groups. Since our agreement was that Consensus would conduct six focus groups, we were not able to complete all of the focus groups requested by the advisory committee, but if the project moves forward, we will continue to add focus groups.

Makeup of focus groups

- Business focus group #1: recruited by Lawrence Chamber of Commerce. 17 participants.
- Business focus group #2: recruited by Lawrence Chamber of Commerce. 14 participants.
- League of Women Voters focus group: recruited by the League of Women Voters. 6 participants.
- School site focus group: Recruited through school site committee list. 4 participants.
- Rural focus group: Recruited by County Extension Service. 1 participant.
- Neighborhood focus groups: recruited by Lawrence Association of Neighborhoods. 7 participants.
- Senior citizens: recruited by Brandon Woods. 6 participants.

Total participants: 51

About this report

This document is a preliminary report intended to give the advisory committee both a sense of the big themes that emerged in the focus groups and a taste of the individual comments. It contains four sections that summarize the key themes. At the end of each section is a sample of the comments we heard on the topics in that section.

- I. What does civility mean to people in Lawrence?**
- II. The climate for public discourse in Lawrence**
 - a. Why people do or do not attend meetings
 - b. An “us against them” theme
 - c. The need to create a shared sense of responsibility
- III. Public meetings in Lawrence: What works, doesn’t work and could work better**
- IV. Some unique perspectives from Lawrence groups**
 - a. Business perspective
 - b. Senior citizen perspective
 - c. Anonymous postings on media websites

I. How Lawrence focus groups define civility

Like focus groups in other communities, focus group participants in Lawrence find it easier to “know it when they see it” than to describe exactly what civility means. But several important themes emerge from their discussions. Basically, civility means treating people with respect. That doesn’t mean people cannot disagree, but it does mean they should respect the person with whom they disagree and recognize that person’s point of view. The participants repeatedly said this means people need to share their perspectives with those with whom they disagree and try to understand one another. The participants agree that conflict will always be present in public discourse, but that they believe there are civil ways of dealing with conflict.

Listening to one another is key to civility. People feel like being heard and listening to others is a key value in our democracy. This value is expressed in many parts of the conversation in Lawrence. People want time to express themselves. They want to sit down with those with

opposing points of view and both hear and be heard. Also, people say that when they are not heard, they are more likely to react with anger, thus becoming less civil.

II. The climate for public discourse in Lawrence

Many focus group participants told us that Lawrence is doing a lot of things right in the way public decisions get made. For one thing, the residents of Lawrence are passionate and willing to take the time to get involved in issues in their community. They said in general this passion is better than the apathy they think is present in other communities. They also take pride in being known as a town that collaborates. Others talked about the small-town feeling that allows people to feel comfortable getting involved and attending meetings. One downside of the generally liberal and open side of Lawrence, participants said, is that the community bends over backwards so far to listen to everyone and hear different voices that decisions don't get made.

For the most part, the Lawrence focus groups echo what we have heard elsewhere about why people attend community meetings. The focus groups participants told us they think people attend meetings, in many cases, out of self defense: out of fear, to protect their own interests or when something affects their pocketbook. But they also cited many examples of people coming out to meetings because an issue aroused their emotions or because they felt passionate about an issue.

An "us against them" theme

A major theme that ran across the focus group discussions is the perception that Lawrence is divided across several "us against them" fault lines. These include: an urban/rural divide and within the rural residents an agricultural/environmental divide; a neighborhood/development divide; and a university/town divide. Although it is not unusual for communities to have stakeholders with differing perspectives, several participants told us that they feel the level of distrust across these divides is greater in Lawrence. Some participants told us that there are rarely structures in place to help those on opposite sides come together to share perspectives and develop trust.

The issue of the university versus the town also permeated the discussions. It is common for us to hear people discuss the role of experts in relation to "average citizens" in public

decision-making. In Lawrence, we heard many comments about the special knowledge that university personnel can bring to the table. “People, professors, get up and sway people with their eloquence,” said one participant. But another suggested that such eloquence can be intimidating to people who are not from an academic environment.

The need to create a sense of shared responsibility

Several participants talked about the need for Lawrence citizens to develop a shared sense of responsibility for the good of the community. They said that Lawrence residents are very good at expressing their own perspectives and listening to one another, but few have a big picture perspective on what is the best decision for the community as a whole. They said they rarely see public officials appeal to this shared sense of responsibility. They would like to see meetings open with a discussion of the big picture impact on the community. They also agree with Kansas City focus groups that there is a need for teaching and modeling “civil” behavior.

Comments

- *I go to a meeting when I have suggestions that I think can represent a viewpoint - the point of view of people who understand what is at stake.*
- *Neighborhoods usually get involved when something directly affects them.*
- *People don't come to neighborhood meetings.*
- *People understand the impact of a hospital, a new building, or public transportation. What brings people out to meetings is when they understand the impact. There have been zoning decisions made, though, when there was a huge impact but nobody there.*
- *At the planning commission we considered a request to create a suburban mall. It drew such a crowd we had to meet at a local school and have police to control the crowd.*
- *I was on the school board and I remember when board room would be flooded, over capacity. Those meetings generally centered around budget and things that had to be compromised and cut. People are touchy when money has to be cut. They're more civil when money is not involved.*

- *Our community is built around lots of silos. The developer silo, the agricultural silo, which includes both the environmental silo and farm family silo.*
- *Another division is people who think Lawrence is the greatest thing on earth and then those who say we can make it better. Some people don't want to hear anything bad. For many years, no matter what decisions were made, we continued to grow. Money to support services continued to grow. That's not the case in the last 5-10 years. People are wondering, what can we do?*
- *In my profession, what we submit and say, we're bound to prove what we are saying is accurate and correct.*
- *Before I left university, we were working on program called civic literacy. By the time people graduate from higher ed, they should understand requirements of responsible citizenship.*
- *I'm embarrassed to have some of our young people watch some of our elected officials. At the beginning, they should set parameters, set rules of engagement, stay on topic. Keep people focused. That will start to educate people. If we understand what the rules are, we will follow them.*
- *We could try following basic rules marriage counselors use, teaching people how to have discourse without conflict.*

III. Public meetings in Lawrence: what works, doesn't work and what could work better

The Lawrence focus groups made many comments similar to what we have heard in Kansas City. The participants in Lawrence tend to be heavily involved in local issues and frequently attend meetings. This gives them a lot of experience with what is working and what could work better. Some of the key themes they discussed are described below.

Give people the time they need to ask questions and share perspectives.

The Lawrence focus groups echoed what we have heard in Kansas City: the greatest frustration people have when they try to get involved in public discourse is they feel they were not heard. What they most want is to come together with people with differing

perspectives, to share their own perspectives and understand why others have different ideas. They understand that it sometimes takes a lot of time for people to discuss issues, but they think it is worth it. They suggest public bodies could build in more time for education and exchanging perspectives, either at meetings or before meetings. They also expressed frustration with time limits on public input at meetings, saying that a two-minute limit only allows them to express what side they are on and not why they think what they think. The most important principle, they said, would be that everyone left the decision-making process feeling they had been heard.

Don't ask people for input when decisions have already been made.

One very strong theme in both Lawrence and Kansas City is the sense that often public bodies or officials have already made up their minds before they seek public input. In part, participants believe this is because public officials are only paying lip service to wanting public input. Another factor is that the public is sometimes only asked to provide input at the late stages of a decision-making process, when the elected officials have already had the time to get educated about the issue and hear various perspectives. This means the public is coming into the discussion after opinions have solidified, and with less information than the elected officials.

Building trust before hard decisions need to be made could prepare Lawrence for more civil discourse.

The focus groups told us they think it is important for people to get involved at the beginning of a decision-making process, so they have time to get educated, examine various perspectives and think the issue through. Some participants suggested that Lawrence doesn't have the "silo-breaking" infrastructure to allow people from different perspectives to work together and build trust. One participant suggested putting more work into strengthening existing organizations.

Allow time for people to get educated about an issue.

Participants said it takes time for citizens to get educated about an issue, and the time for education is rarely built into the decision-making process. Several participants recommended expanding the public involvement process so that people have time to have ask questions and have conversations before a public meeting. They also think that

allowing more time for education would reduce the amount of misinformation and disagreement over facts that often takes place at public meetings.

Meetings that are organized and facilitated are often more productive.

Participants were asked to describe meetings that had worked well, and several described events where a facilitator used a process to lead people through discussion and then decision-making. They described meetings where facilitators encouraged everyone to participate and did not allow anyone to dominate the discussion. One said, “there was a civil meeting because of the structure provided for the meeting.” They also said that having an agenda helped a meeting run more smoothly.

Participants prefer small group meetings to speaking at a podium.

Most participants said they feel uncomfortable speaking before a microphone or at a podium. “It’s intimidating, especially if you’re low-income, coming to the microphone and speaking is intimidating,” one said. This finding is consistent with the Kansas City focus group findings. Even the most educated and experienced people find speaking in front of a microphone intimidating.

Meeting details send a signal about public involvement.

Small details, from the way an agenda is organized to the seating arrangements, affect the tone of public engagement. Participants described public officials as being physically removed from the constituents. They also said that meetings are often held at inconvenient times or that important issues do not get discussed until very late in the evening, meaning some people cannot think as clearly as they could earlier in the day. Another issue the focus groups brought up is the sometimes-complicated rules around who can speak and when. Sometimes citizens who want to make comments don’t understand the rules of how to interact with the public body. One said, “There are feelings among the public about the rules, and the feeling that you have to be a Philadelphia lawyer to understand them. They’re not equipped to argue with a commissioner, so they get defensive and lash out because that’s what they do understand. Taking the mystery out of it helps.” Another view was that when people speak at a podium rather than face-to-face, they may not be as respectful of others. “Going up to

podium causes people to be less civil than sitting across the table.” Another idea for improving input was to allow people to submit online, so that busy parents and working people could have a chance to participate even if they could not attend a meeting.

Agreeing to ground rules at the beginning of a meeting can reduce incivility.

In general, participants like the ideas of ground rules for behavior being set at the beginning of a meeting. One cited an example of a recent very emotional issue, the closing of SRS offices in Lawrence. He said ground rules were agreed to at the beginning of the meeting and that led to the people who were running the meeting being treated with respect. But another said he didn't think uncivil people would agree to ground rules, because they have learned that yelling at a meeting will lead to success. Another suggested that because people are so nice in Kansas, they often don't want to disagree in public, but they will air their opinions in the parking lot. He said the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce instituted the parking lot rule, so that if members disagreed, they could only do it face-to-face and not in a parking lot discussion. The participants also suggested these ground rules:

- Have your facts verified before you present them.
- Don't repeat yourself.
- No personal attacks.
- You can disagree but still respect the other person.

Comments

- *What's the point of all of us spending our time and energy doing this and getting our emotions involved, when ultimately the decision has already been made? I'm feeling it's pointless to go through this whole process.*
- *Most of these meetings, it seems the decisions are already made. We're asked to show up to give our input, and they didn't want to know our opinion and they already had their minds made up. They had someone from the district there. Every time we expressed a concern somebody was there to say why it wasn't a problem. I have a lot on my plate. I'm*

a business owner. I don't need to sit here night after night when you're not listening and don't seem to care about what I'm saying.

- *What's key is the communication that is well before the decision point. It's the process of engaging people from the beginning. If you don't, it's irrelevant once you're at the end and people are polarized. Having issues aired and discussed openly before you get to the particular point where you have the ordinance you want to pass or decision you want to make is important. What you get is the best chance at having people who don't agree with you not sabotage the process. They may understand that even if they disagree, the overall good is considered.*
- *The public needs to be heard at the planning and visioning stage. You don't want to be opposing something. You need to be part of a discussion laying out what we will allow, but it seems there are all these filings for changes to deviate from the plan.*
- *The people calling the meeting already have their game plan in order. It's probably already been decided. You go there thinking you can effect a change but the cards are stacked against you.*
- *People came to the meeting and we did strategic planning. We put pieces of paper on the wall and had a back-and-forth conversation where everybody was heard. People were able to put their stake in and say what their interests were and their priorities. We had the discussion and talked it out. It was a long meeting.*
- *The project went through with no objections because the guy went to everyone in the neighborhood to find out their concerns. It took a lot of time – he spent a couple of months going door to door showing the plan.*
- *Where those things go well, you have a moderator who conducts the meeting with flip charts, writing down what you've gotten in conversation. It takes a strong moderator to keep something going like that.*
- *The commissioners sit up high and you feel like you are bowing to them when you have to hand up something.*
- *At one site council, the principal really brings questions to the group that she earnestly wants to hear the answers to. She provides articles for us to read and discuss before the meeting, and they might even cause us to deal with controversial topics, and she provides an environment where it's okay for people to disagree.*

- *We make decisions based on who's loudest at the end. We make an exception to what should be the rule. It shows that it's what you have to have to do, be loud. We see that over and over.*
- *The public and neighborhoods are given five minutes to speak at the plan commission, but the applicant gets a half hour to speak. The applicant can speak after the public to discount what the public has said. We don't think it is fair how the time is allotted between the parties.*
- *We find out on Thursday night when something is going to be presented on Monday at the plan commission. We are working better with them now, but often we don't know what is on the agenda and so have a short amount of time to do the research and then we only get three minutes to talk about it.*
- *In some instances, the process isn't linked towards discussion. It's toward making a statement for your idea but there isn't discussion or a dialogue. All the discussion takes place at the coffee shop or one-on-one. At meetings you don't see a dialogue. You don't get a chance to find out why they feel the way they do.*
- *If you have 50 people making a statement for a minute, that is not dialogue. I don't feel like I've been heard. I've made my statement and you know what side I'm on but I haven't had a chance to say why I'm on that side*
- *It's hard to believe that the five-minute rule isn't about crowd control as much as anything.*

IV. Some unique perspectives in the Lawrence groups

Most of the important themes from the Lawrence focus groups mirror the Kansas City focus groups findings. However, we met with several cohort groups in Lawrence that we have not addressed in the past, so we are reporting these findings in this section.

The unique business perspective

The Lawrence Chamber of Commerce assisted us by inviting those on its email list to participate in our focus groups. Due to the response, Consensus conducted two focus groups to accommodate some of the more than 75 people who asked to be allowed to share their opinions. These were the first two focus groups Consensus has conducted with

business people, and a number of similar themes as well as some unique issues emerged from the two discussions.

Lawrence business people spoke repeatedly of a group of Lawrence residents who seem to them to be anti-business or anti-profit. While they feel the business community, city and county often work well together to bring in new development or business, they feel that certain groups and individuals want to kill such development. The business owners feel they are strengthening the community by providing funding for amenities, yet they often feel attacked. Several mentioned having bad experiences expressing their pro-business opinions and said they have been reluctant to express opinions because they fear retribution. The group also talked about the efforts Tom Kern made to bring together different factions concerned with economic development. While participants thought that was a valid effort, some said there were business people in Lawrence who did not want to engage in conversation with those who they saw as opponents.

Business people who have served on public bodies such as the school board said that in their work environment, they are often required to make quick decisions. But when they serve on a public body, the decision making process can be much different: slower and messier.

Unique senior citizen perspective

Another unique perspective in our Lawrence findings came from a focus group of senior citizens. Several said that they are still interested contributing ideas and opinions to public discussions, but they are somewhat limited because meetings are often held at night and transportation can be a limiting factor. One of the residents who lives at Brandon Woods, a senior living and retirement community, said she feels disconnected from the outside world. Another said he had hoped to avoid politics by moving into a retirement community, but found they still exist.

Anonymous postings on media websites

Although the Kansas City focus groups touched upon the topic of anonymous postings on media websites, several of the Lawrence groups added greater detail to the discussion.

Generally, they agreed that allowing people to post comments anonymously leads to greater incivility. They believe that the tone of incivility is set on these websites and then creeps into face-to-face discourse. Public officials who were in the focus groups said they had experienced personal attacks in these anonymous postings, and some said it makes them less inclined to want to be involved in public office.

We asked participants how they would improve the system. Every single participant agreed that anonymous postings should not be allowed. They suggested that online discussions need to have ground rules just like face-to-face discussions. One of the ground rules they suggested was that facts presented in forums would have to be fact-checked. Others said that instead of using the feedback area to criticize public officials or decisions, they would like to see them used to create conversations where stakeholders could become more educated and asked public officials to answer questions.

Comments

- *People fear having anything about their organization printed in the paper because they may be attacked, even if they did nothing wrong.*
- *On personal attacks, my experience of that is when I read the Journal-World blog and I am absolutely astounded by the vicious attacks. It's terrible what people say. It's back and forth and you don't know who they are. I cannot believe it's a part of our public life.*
- *People who are posting are isolated, and they don't interact face-to-face. Maybe they're parts of groups who are retired, elderly, disabled, unemployed – I don't know the demographics – but what I find to be frustrating is that it has changed what news is so where incivility comes into a newspaper. You can expect newspaper editors to be extraordinarily opinionated. But that was on the editorial page. The reporters stuck to the facts. The moment you let people comment on articles, how do you know what is and isn't factual? You don't.*