Involving and Engaging Community Members

1. **Understand the Audience to be Engaged**

    *   Understand the target audience's motivations, priorities and potential barriers to taking action. Use that knowledge to draft messages and approaches that will be understood and accepted.

    *   Determine what levels of knowledge and understanding exist in the community. Don't assume to know why (or why not) a community will participate in a project.

2. **Create and Deliver Engaging Messages**

    *   Use a variety of communication methods to avoid audience fatigue.

    *   Design simple messages and deliver them in visual ways to promote understanding. Images resonate with people; use them to tell your story.

    *   Use a visual issue (e.g., *Phragmities*) to identify other issues in the same area (e.g., species at risk).

    *   Draft messages that build a sense of urgency and draw attention.

    *   Be ready to respond to the question "What can I do?"

    *   Brand project signage and over time it will be recognized and understood.

    *   Make engagement fun and fulfilling as no one wants to work during their leisure time.

    *   Actively engage a member of the media in your program or organization.

    *   Realize that social media communication requires monitoring and attention.

    *   Consider who will have the most impact with the audience when making presentations.

    *   Weed out methods or messaging that is not working.

3. **Create Diverse Engagement Opportunities**

    *   Create a range of opportunities to participate, including options for passive donations, individual stewardship, governance involvement, or active participation.

    *   Use personal contact to reach rural and seasonal residents. Go door to door or dock to dock.

    *   Work with faith groups.

    *   Use technology to deliver information in the field (e.g., Invasive Species Reporting app).

    *   Promote interest through live streaming of environmental concerns (e.g., eagles nests, beaches).

    *   Consider webinars as a cost effective option to deliver information or training.

4. **Use Experiential Learning**

    *   Experiential learning provides an opportunity for community members to get actively involved. It also creates a higher level of understanding.

    *   Combine recreational activities with environmental education or technical work such as a canoe day with an interpretative guide and sampling for turbidity and benthic demonstrations.

    *   Provide before/after project site tours to allow people to see the impact of their involvement.

- Offer ecotourism and biodiversity tours. Include municipal councils and senior municipal staff in these events.

- Provide tools for individuals to steward their own properties (e.g., downspout disconnections, rain barrels and rain gauges).

5. **Engage in Citizen Science**

- Using data collected by volunteers can engage community members.

- Data collected by citizen science often requires a training plan to ensure all volunteers followed the same protocol to generate the data. Examples include Environment Canada's Canadian Aquatic Biomonitoring Network (CABIN) or the Ontario Benthos Biomonitoring Network (OBBN).

- Manage the expectations of volunteers about the use and meaning of the data. Be prepared to answer the question "What is the value of my participation?"

- Develop a safety plan so that any concerns are identified, understood and mitigated.

6. **Use Champions**

- Use landowner champions to engage their peers since this is more personal and trusted.

- Partner with like-minded groups to spread your message or to engage in complimentary efforts.

7. **Collaborate and Join**

- Instead of talking to community members that already believe in the issue, seek out those that are unaware or reluctant to get involved or take action.

- Take part in events held by other organizations to achieve greater community awareness and engagement.

- Participate in events that involve your target audience, such as cottage association meetings.

- Seek testimonials from others.

- Join community organizations such a Chamber of Commerce.

8. **Overcome Perceptions**

- Be aware of coffee shop talk and misinformation that might defeat your efforts. Identify how that can be mitigated.

- If community members fear or mistrust a "government or agency", seek a not-for-profit organization or a local community champion with whom to partner.

- Acknowledge that past involvement with an agency or individual can influence current efforts.

- Identify organizational links to issues that may be negatively perceived. Strive to understand those issues.

9. **Resources and Volunteers**

- Show patience and persevere. It may take a long time to secure resources for a project.

- Identify potential resource limitations and barriers when developing a program design.

- Identify times when there is a high demand on the time of volunteers; target the engagement or program outside of those time constraints.

- Understand the importance of celebrating success as a means to prevent donor fatigue.

- Work at finding a core group of dedicated volunteers/donors. Supplement that group by continually engaging new volunteers.

- Create a ladder of progressive involvement to keep volunteers interested.

- It is critical to find resources to maintain communication databases (e.g., email lists) current.

- Funding for basic requirements such as insurance premiums for volunteers can slow an engagement project.

10. Express Gratitude and Build Relationships

- Ensure that community members know that their involvement had an impact on the issue or project. This retains their interest and validates their motives for participating.

- Acknowledge partner organizations and reciprocate the assistance provided by them.