



## The Cycle of Community Engagement

*Adam Fletcher*

After studying more than 3,000 engagement activities in communities and working in the field of community development for more than two decades, I found a series of patterns emerge. One pattern I've identified is the following Cycle.

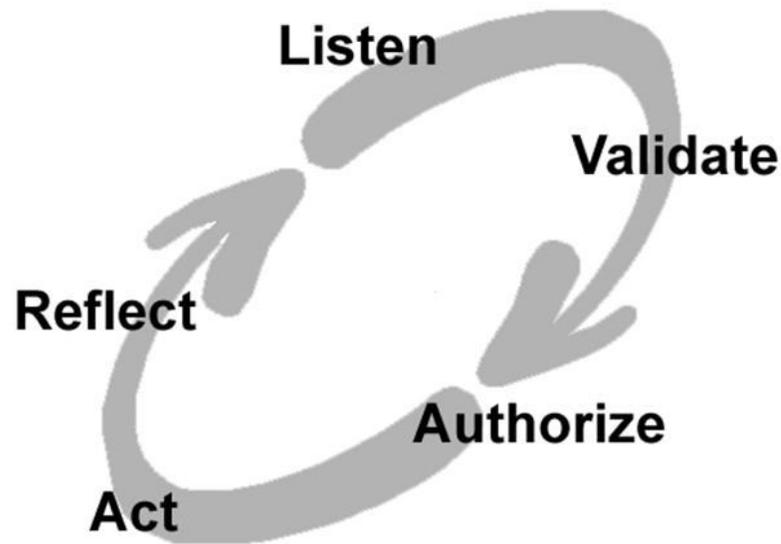
The Cycle of Community Engagement emerges almost anytime people say they feel an activity is meaningful. It can be intentional or coincidental, but as I've taught more people about the Cycle, more people report more success in engaging others.

Through my years of implementing and examining others' implementation of this Cycle, I've discovered a few things:

- *Motivation.* Engaging people without a cause is pointless. The greatest purpose we can have is the social good, but whatever you're seeking to do, let people know the purpose.
- *Repetition.* Going through all the steps once with intention leads to folks becoming engaged; going through it several times builds engagement, along with trust and respect.
- *Meaning.* Activities have to be meaningful to be engaging. When working through the Cycle, understand that people will be used to meaningfulness and won't settle for less afterwards.

The following is meant to be a clear process anyone can use to engage people throughout our communities. The most important consideration is that engaging anyone is more than simply hearing, checking-in, or talking to them. Engagement requires a commitment to *movement*, and this Cycle shows how that can happen.

## *The Cycle of Community Engagement*



### Explore the Cycle

1. **Listen.** You know the drill: You're at your desk one day, working away at an important project when someone comes up to you really excited, saying, "Hey, listen to this..." You tilt your head a little, and maybe lean towards them, but you keep doing whatever you were. You're not really listening, are you? You might be hearing them talk, and *you might even understand what they're saying – but you're not really thinking about it or feeling it.*

That's the difference between listening and hearing, and that's where engagement starts—when people have an actively engaged audience to listen to their ideas, opinions, experiences, knowledge, and/or actions. However, listening is just the first step; engagement requires more.

2. **Validate.** You've heard people say it, and you might have said it yourself: "Oh, that's really nice." We try to say "nice" in just the right way, but to many people it seems insincere. We think we are doing the "right thing" by encouraging others move forward, but in our heads we really thinking

about the time we fell flat on our face from the same approach.

Instead of hiding our true thoughts, *it is our job to honestly validate what people say or do by honestly reacting to it*, how we sincerely feel or think about it. If we think something will fail, we should say so. Validation means disagreeing – or agreeing – as we honestly believe, and respecting others enough to explain why and search for alternatives, if appropriate.

3. **Authorize.** Authority is an awesome word that can be intimidating for many people. *However, without authority, many actions are just a hollow cries in loud arguments.*

By building the skills people need to become active we can provide practical steps towards actual empowerment, instead of just words. As well as the skills, we must involve people in activities that are actually powerful, purposeful, and rewarding. As they apply their new skills to practical action, individuals gain the authority to make a difference.

4. **Act.** Engagement does not just *happen* – it must be *actively* worked towards. Taking action requires people to work together to make the space, place, and ability for change. Action can– and should– look different everywhere: from identifying the challenge, researching the issue, planning for action, training for effectiveness, reflection on the process, to celebrating the outcomes, engagement is a totally flexible tool – but it's purpose is not.

The purpose of engagement is always to create, support, and sustain powerful, purposeful, and meaningful communities for everyone to belong to. *An important caution: action is usually seen as the most important step.* However, this makes positive outcomes the most important thing. Unfortunately, for many issues, positive outcomes rarely come, or if they do, not as immediately as people would like. For many people, the next step can be the most important component of engagement.

5. **Reflect.** Reflection may be the most important ongoing step to engaging anyone. When people critically evaluate and

analyze their communities, learning becomes a vibrant, intricate, and powerful tool for change.

*Reflection activities used should be appropriate for diverse participants* – writing, acting, creating collages, and building activities are all good examples. Once your group has finished reflecting, incorporate those lessons into the next listening activity, to support a cyclical approach to engagement.

Individually, these steps may currently happen throughout communities. However, when they do happen it is rare that they are connected with community development and less likely still, connected with one another. The connection of all the steps in this Cycle is what makes partnerships between community members meaningful, effective, and sustainable.

*Find more tools from CommonAction at [commonaction.org](http://commonaction.org).*

### **About the Author**

Adam Fletcher is a speaker, researcher, and writer who has worked with more than 300 communities across the United States and Canada to promote community engagement. He has trained thousands of community workers around the world, and has keynoted at dozens of conferences. He has also written more than 25 publications for communities, K-12 schools, nonprofits and government agencies. Learn more about him at [adamfletcher.net](http://adamfletcher.net).