

Working with Community Advisory Panels

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1. Make sure procedures and prerogatives are clear. What gets decided matters less than making sure people know what's been decided.
 2. Preserve the panel's autonomy. You don't need another mouthpiece; you need a credible, well-informed, independent voice.
 3. Avoid extracting promises of confidentiality.
 4. Try not to control the panel – staff it and budget it, but don't make it your board. Agendas, for example, should be set by the panel itself.
 5. Give the panel enough resources – money, staff, etc. A neutral place to meet and a professional facilitator are worthwhile expenditures.
 6. Don't exclude anyone, especially critics. “Snowball” panels with open memberships are better than “Noah's Ark” panels with closed memberships.
 7. If there are too many participants, or too many with spotty attendance, let the panel solve the problem.
 8. If a participant is unruly or discourteous, let the panel and the facilitator cope with the problem.
 9. Don't worry too much if the panel becomes passive and low-energy. Sometimes the mere fact that the door is open is enough.
 10. Don't boast about your panel.
 11. Emphasize informal consultations. Don't let a formal panel become an excuse for less informal contact instead of more.
 12. Remember that good public involvement is informal – even chaotic. Trying to “organize” it may turn it into pro forma consultation at best.
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For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Community Advisory Panels: Corporate Cat Herding (First Quarter 1999) – www.prwatch.org/prwissues/1999Q1/caps.html
- Some knotty dilemmas of public consultation – www.psandman.com/gst2003.htm#trevor
- Putting extremists on a Community Advisory Panel – www.psandman.com/gst2006.htm#theresa

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