Centering Voices of Those Most Impacted in Health Equity Efforts

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. - Lilla Watson

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What does "centering voices" mean?

Uplifting, trusting, and valuing the lived experiences of the people most impacted by the issue(s) and inequity(ies) you want to address. This includes working towards approaches where those that are most impacted are a part of leading, identifying solutions, setting priorities, creating policy agendas, and shifting narrative.

Sustaining efforts to center voices requires individual, organizational, and collective reflection on how inequities came to be and are maintained. Shared actions then need to be identified and implemented to disrupt the reproduction of inequities and their impacts. Individuals and organizations are all at different places and all of those places have opportunities to begin this work.

Inequities include a wide range of identities and social factors, including but not limited to, race and ethnicity, where you live, such as rural or urban communities, income and other economic conditions, access to infrastructure, investment and resources, occupation, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, ability-status, age, as well as historical and current experiences of trauma and adversity. Efforts aiming to address inequity need to be mindful of local contexts as approaches will need to be tailored to histories, culture, available infrastructure and assets.

Principles of Centering Voices of Those Most Impacted

1. Centering Voices affirms the lived experience of the individual(s) most impacted by the issue(s), and does not dismiss those experiences for statistics or theories
2. Centering Voices affirms lived experience as a credible form of evidence
3. Centering Voices must recognize the unique challenges that those impacted may go through, and strive to reduce barriers for participation and leadership
4. Centering Voices and perspectives leads to the empowerment of marginalized communities and not just the empowerment of individuals
5. Centering Voices demands compassion
6. Centering Voices opposes the usage of tokenization of those most impacted, and challenges the practice of burdening one or a few individuals to speak on behalf of groups and recommends meaningful roles and positions for those most impacted
7. Centering Voices requires acknowledging common experiences across groups while honoring that all individuals hold multiple, intersecting identities and have unique life experiences
8. Centering Voices requires active listening
9. Centering Voices requires engagement of folks with lived experience, with the types of inequities previously described, across a spectrum of roles, including as community members and as experts who have a body of work or study AND also lived experiences. This means bringing in keynotes, expert statisticians, technical assistance consultants, etc. who are members of most impacted communities
10. Centering Voices requires changing not just *who* is engaged, but *how* work is done by prioritizing theories, methodologies and approaches that center the most marginalized (e.g. feminist, racial justice, anti-racist, place-based/tailored, anti-sexism, economic justice, etc.). Efforts can't just have folks experiencing inequity present with the same bad approaches and politics, and think that will change outcomes.

11. Centering Voices requires deep understanding of structural factors and power, including but not limited to, an analysis of class and poverty, economies and occupations, race, gender, and place including rural and urban contexts
12. Centering Voices requires addressing power and power imbalance
13. Centering Voices demands resources and long term commitment
14. Centering Voices requires action. Start from where you are. Recognize where you may have struggled and also your assets. Be transparent with your intentions and commitment. Set shared goals. Determine how you will build upon relationships and manage tension. Be prepared to learn.

What can it look like?

- Assuring meaningful participation and leadership of those most impacted in meetings and efforts that directly involve their stories, issues, or livelihood
- Honoring histories, culture, language and literacy levels
- Creating and investing in leadership roles and paths of development to enhance leadership of those most impacted by health inequity
- Long term investments in people
- Reducing barriers of entry to meetings & conferences. Examples include adjusting meeting hours and locations, providing childcare, and other services [transportation options, such as rideshare and bus tickets, call-in options, food, etc.]
- Providing stipends to value the time of those impacted. If you are paid to be there, why shouldn't folks with lived experiences be compensated?
- Naming and working to address past and current power imbalances
- Cultivating spaces where folks can communicate openly about concerns, feelings and thoughts without fear of retaliation
- Considering new/different ways of engaging people
- Meaningfully listening to impacted people/marginalized communities when they share their perspective, for example when they tell you flyers/billboards are not reaching certain communities
- Being willing to put money and investments towards events which support community partners' work, such as issue awareness or reducing stigma

This document was created by the Centering Voices Workgroup, one of six health equity priorities identified during the 2017 Healthiest State Agenda Setting Convening facilitated by the UW Population Health Institute MATCH Group. Community-based organizations and groups lead the writing process of these principles. Contact: Paula Tran Inzeo, ptran@wisc.edu

The Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities from PolicyLink and the Kirwan Institute provide additional useful information on:
- *The benefits of Community Engagement*
- *Guidelines for Meaningful Community Engagement*
- *Frequently Asked Questions*

Additional Online Tools
Margins to the Center
Rules for Allies