New England Town Meetings: The governance of inclusion

Rachel Happe 1/10/2021

Democracy, they say, is a team sport; done well, it requires every citizen to take ownership of their rights and responsibilities to society. It creates a community of equals.

As the daughter of a New England Congregational minister, I got to witness self-government first hand. My father, who seemed to be the head of the church actually served at the behest of the congregation – and could be hired and fired by it. I remember being fascinated with the power dynamics as a child and went on to study politics.

My career has spanned government, management consulting, and executive roles. For the past decade I have run The Community Roundtable, a small consulting firm that researches and applies community-centric governance models at commercial and non-profit organizations.

Communities – like Andover or Congregational churches – operate democratically, giving each member equal access and opportunity to determine its rules, priorities, and output. Each individual's engagement determines their influence, power, and leadership roles. The role of management is to ensure the environment is optimized for the community's aspirations and needs.

In the physical world, community models are time-intensive and slow. Communities are complex and difficult to manage, even plodding. Add to that the 21st century lifestyle and it's difficult to engage people. It is faster and easier to have a smaller set of representatives make decisions. However, a small set of leaders consolidates power and removes equal access and opportunity for individuals to lead. It ultimately depresses constructive engagement even more, leaving people to complain while absolving them of the responsibility to act. Ultimately it divides the culture into leaders and followers, creating co-dependent culture rather than a culture of equals.

Town-meeting processes create a culture of equity, inclusion, and empowerment when objectives and boundaries are clear and well-moderated. The challenge is making this governance model work in a world where few people have time to participate in physical meetings or even have interest because the barrier to participation seems high due to lack of experience with the process and social discomfort.

From a decade of research (State of Community Management), I know that the highest performing communities have the following attributes: articulated shared purpose and shared value statements, measurable strategies for engagement, multiple leadership/advocacy groups, and community management staff. These high performing communities see, on average, over 50% of their members engaged on a monthly basis.

By using technology in specific parts of the town meeting process, Andover can make it easy for people to engage – and by offering easy ways to engage more people will familiarize themselves with the process and become more comfortable with the social dynamic, making them more likely to engage more – and more likely to attend in person meetings.

Town Meeting Governance			Town Council Governance	
Pro	Con		Pro	Con
tl;dr creates a culture of equity, buy-in, and self-efficacy	tl;dr initial involvement is hard and it takes a lot of time and resources		tl;dr short-term efficiency benefits	tl;dr long-term, hard to recover losses including reduced engagement, buy-in, and responsibility
- Equitable access - Creates a culture of equity and inclusion - Puts the onus and opportunity on each individual to decide their role - Less complaining - Less pressure on a small set of individuals to represent everyone's interests	- Time and resource intensive done with only in-person meetings - High barrier for engagement, especially for those who don't know the process or the people involved		- Quicker, more efficient decision making - Cleaner and requires less explanation and discussion - Absolves citizens from being involved	- Depresses meaningful engagement - Increases complaints when there is no personal investment - Absolves citizens from being involved - Creates a divided culture of leaders and followers