

Lessons about Community Liaisons

Why a community liaison? A “community liaison” is a community member who acts as a bridge between an organization and the community it serves. In other words, a community liaison is both the employee of an organization and a resident of the community that the organization in question seeks to serve or engage with. Liaising between an organization and a community can mean very different things depending on the organization, the needs of the community, and the types of services or/and community-based programs being offered. However, often, a community liaison’s responsibilities include facilitating communication, helping to assess community members’ needs, helping to build trust and fostering positive relationships between an organization and a community. Skills critical to a community liaison’s ability to bridge the gap between an organization and a community are cultural competency, deep community knowledge, some language skills, and the ability to navigate diverse, and even conflicting, perspectives to promote meaningful engagement.

A. What did we learn?

ARTZ in the Neighborhood, an arts-based and community-centered project developed and implemented by ARTZ Philadelphia, recruited two community liaisons to help with the launch of some of its initiatives. Below is an overview of some of the main lessons that ARTZ learned about working with community liaisons.

1. identify and recruit people in the community to serve as liaisons between you, the advisory boards, other members in your organization, and the community at large;
2. leverage your partnership(s) with community organizations to identify people to serve as community liaisons;
3. allow plenty of time and countless opportunities to earn the trust of your community liaisons;
4. provide community liaisons time and support to define and understand their roles and responsibilities as community “insiders” and employees of your organization;
5. build and institute the capacity to not only learn from community liaisons, but also to integrate those lessons in all aspects of planning, designing, and implementing of projects and activities;

B. How we learned?

1. The launch of ARTZ in the Neighborhood was made possible in Hunting Park and the northwest/LaSalle region, in large part, because of the two people brought in as community liaisons. They were both longtime residents, dedicated, and respected members of their respective communities. It was critical for both projects—the one in the Hunting Park section, and the other in the northwest LaSalle region—that the two community liaisons also believed in ARTZ in the Neighborhood’s potential to have a positive impact in their neighbors’ lives. In fact, an important lesson here is that the success of arts-based community-centered projects rely heavily on an organization’s ability to identify, recruit and

retain community “insiders” who are committed to seeing their neighborhood grow, and who are also believers in the vision and mission of the organization in question.

2. One community liaison was recruited through ARTZ’s partnership with Esperanza, a faith-based and “Hispanic-serving” organization that has been serving the Hunting Park section of Philadelphia for more than 30 years. Likewise, the other community liaison joined ARTZ because of the organization’s relationship with the LaSalle University Art Museum, located in the northwest/Logan region. The lesson here is that the best way to identify and recruit committed and reliable people to serve as community liaisons is by leveraging the organization’s relationships with community partners. Organizations and institutions serving a community already have a history with the neighborhood that they’re located in, and often deep-rooted or meaningful connections with the people affiliated with them or who benefit from their services.
3. However, fostering the trust of community liaisons requires more than an organization’s relationships with community partners. In other words, finding and developing good partnerships with community organizations or institutions does not automatically lead to trusting relationships with community liaisons. This is evidenced in the stark contrast between the levels and type of involvement or engagement between the community liaison from Hunting Park and the one from the northwest/LaSalle section. The community liaison from Hunting Park assumed the role of community “insider” and ARTZ’s employee fully and somewhat organically. There didn’t seem to be any tension between their commitments to Hunting Park and liaising or helping to bridge the gap between ARTZ and the community. Partnering with Esperanza, a trusted “flagship” institution that has been fighting against “poverty” and other social ills in Hunting Park for decades, likely played a role. It made it easier for the community liaison from Hunting Park to view or think of their participation in ARTZ in the Neighborhood as an extension or continuation of the vision and hopes they have for their own community.

The dynamic between community liaison assigned to the northwest/LaSalle project and ARTZ was very different. For one, the northwest advisory group did not seem to have a similar sense of communal identity and purpose as did the Hunting Park group. Moreover, the community liaison, a long-time resident of the northwest/LaSalle region, added during an interview that she did not “see LaSalle as part of the community,” despite the fact that she was an alumna of the University, served on a community engagement committee for the University, and had been recommended to ARTZ by university faculty in various departments. Some of the reasons had to do with existing, and seemingly worsening, tensions that existed between LaSalle University and its surrounding neighborhoods. It is

important to note that this community liaison, regardless of her initial distrust of LaSalle as ARTZ's community partner, initiated and facilitated several very productive ARTZ in the Neighborhood projects (e.g. Life After Dementia FB group specifically for care partners of color, virtual resource workshops for care partners during the pandemic streamed on FB Live). However, the community liaison's commitment to her community development early on was not in complete alignment with ARTZ's vision and mission. Her perceived responsibilities as a community member and liaison for ARTZ were, if not in conflict, in competition. The lesson here is that an organization's choice of community partners can dramatically improve or hinder its ability to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with its community liaisons.

4. Another lesson related to cultivating trust is providing community liaisons time and support to define and embrace their roles and responsibilities as community "insiders" and employees of your organization. As mentioned above, the community liaison from Hunting Park didn't seem to experience any tension between those two roles. Part of the reason may have been ARTZ's choice of Esperanza as a community partner. However, another potential reason is the clearly defined set of responsibilities that the Hunting Park community liaison performed on a regular basis. She assumed the role of translator at nearly every online or in-person meeting. She was also responsible for translating content for most artifacts, arts projects created as a part of ARTZ in the Neighborhood, and for most email communications. Moreover, the community liaison from Hunting Park was also responsible for checking in on community members and reminding them of upcoming events or meetings—this was somewhat of a byproduct of COVID-19 and its isolating impact. These tasks and responsibilities were not only clearly defined, but, for the community liaison, performing them had a direct impact on Hunting Park residents' ability to benefit from ARTZ in the Neighborhood. Performing those tasks on a regular basis also helped ARTZ realize part of its mission to provide community-centered and community-led programming to Hunting Park.

As mentioned earlier, the trust between ARTZ and the community liaison from the northwest/LaSalle section never seemed to fully develop or never had a solid enough foundation. As a result of this, a community liaison who started as seemingly very committed to ARTZ's mission, and who lobbied to and eventually did join the organization's board of trustees—becoming the board's Constituent Advocate, responsible for bringing the lived experience of constituents in her community back to the board—began distancing herself from the role of a bridge. Liaising between ARTZ and the northwest/LaSalle community became at best, inconsistent or unclear. The community liaison did lead events, or initiatives sponsored or supported by ARTZ (e.g. Life After Dementia Facebook group for

care partners of color). However, those events did not seem to help ARTZ establish or strengthen its relationship to the northwest/LaSalle community.

5. The final lesson is the critical importance of building and instituting an organization's capacity to not only learn from community liaisons, but also to integrate the learning in all aspects of planning, designing, and implementing of projects and activities. This is obviously a very challenging, and even daunting, organizational undertaking. One that requires an organization to subscribe and commit to very deliberative, always responsive, and flexible decision-making processes. ARTZ worked with two community liaisons with very different personalities, experiences, leadership skills and interests, and also varying conceptions of what it means to "bridge" the gap between the organization that employed them and their respective communities. This means that ARTZ had to learn how to institute ways to bridge or reduce the community-organization gap that are congruent with and reflective of two differing conceptions, formulations, and embodiments of the idea of liaising.

As far as the community liaison from Hunting Park, ARTZ learned that it had to adopt a more expansive and somewhat non-traditional view of leadership. The person in this role was more comfortable serving as a confidant or a compassionate listening ear to other community members affiliated with ARTZ in the Neighborhood. They excelled in one-on-one interactions or connections (as opposed to leading group meetings, initiatives, or projects); they gravitated towards and ultimately assumed something close to a caregiving role to others in need. As mentioned before, the community liaison from Hunting Park settled in the role of translator for meetings and other events almost immediately after joining ARTZ. Many of the Hunting Park advisory board members were Spanish speakers or not as fluent or comfortable communicating in English. So, the community liaison's facility with English and Spanish met a need in the community. Likewise, many community members who participated in the Hunting Park's project were not comfortable with electronic communications or had access to reliable internet access. There again, the community liaison's comfort with being caregiver and with the role of a confidant helped ARTZ keep the community together, even during the early and isolating months of COVID-19. There were significant organizational changes brought about by COVID-19. One of those changes was the fact that the community liaison was spending a significant amount of time 'checking-in' by phone or emails. ARTZ's institution of this shift in the community liaison's role had an immediate and enduring impact on the Hunting Park's group. It helped this community keep alive the bond and support system they've spent a couple of years building.

The community liaison from the northwest/LaSalle region saw and evolved their role very differently. They really excelled in the leadership aspects of the role. As mentioned before, they asked to and did join ARTZ's board of trustees and became the board's Constituent Advocate. They also appeared in extensive promotional content for ARTZ's funding and advocacy campaigns. They were

much more comfortable with the idea of leading initiatives and projects. However, her involvement and engagement seemed to ebb and flow dramatically, seemingly due in part to the personal tolls taken by serving as the primary care partner for her mother living with dementia and for her older siblings while they wrestled with chronic illness; the traumatic impacts of COVID and the devastating events that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. While T. became a vital and valued contributor to the ARTZ Board and a powerful teacher to ARTZ leadership, when compared to the integration of the community liaison in Hunting Park, the main distinction may have been a lack of a clearly defined set of responsibilities and ARTZ's difficulty in figuring out ways to integrate or include T's unique skillsets and vision for the northwest/LaSalle community in the organizational mission of the project.