

Who Should Have the Final Say in Community Decision-making: Learning from Pilots, Pastors and Guards

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Many institutions, agencies, governments and companies seek to develop effective relationships with the neighborhoods or small towns that they serve. Often, these desirable relationships are called co-production, collaboration, cooperation, etc. The “co” in each of these definitions implies a parity of power, influence, or authority. However, in almost every case, institutions, agencies, governments and companies rarely achieve actual parity in their relationship. The institutions have money, technology and expertise that inevitably results in dis-parity. And usually, in a legal sense, whatever the “co” may be, it is the institution that has the legal final say. Therefore, “co” activities are almost always an unbalanced relationship.

How might a balance with parity be achieved? There are some interesting examples of authoritative experts, professionals and administrators whose role is necessarily in alignment and parity with the interests of those they serve.

Consider the airline pilot. She or he have great power, technology and expertise that none of their passengers share. Nonetheless, the pilots interests are in absolute alignment with their passengers because the passengers fate will be their fate.

Another example is the pastoral principle of Reverend John Perkins who founded the nationally influential Christian Community Development Association. It was his premise that the necessary precursor to a legitimate pastorate is that the pastor lives in the neighborhood where most of the parishioners live. Therefore, the pastor will have intensely accurate information about the local community and will live with the neighbors in experiencing the neighborhood reality.

Another example was a rule developed by Dr. Jerome Miller who directed the Massachusetts Department of Juvenile Corrections in the 1970's. The most severe punishment in the system was sending young people to isolation cells. If an authority in a local reformatory sent a youthful inmate into isolation, Miller required the authority to spend several hours of each day in isolation with the inmate. The effect was to quickly change policy in terms of isolation.

In each case, the authority/expert personally experienced the consequence of her/his decisions and actions. In these cases, the “co” resulted in a parity of interests unequaled by the usual imbalance in co-production, collaboration, cooperation.

The reality is that very few people who have institutional authority are prepared to establish a local relationship where the consequence of their decisions will be the same as those they serve. Therefore, who should have the final say in “co-decision-making?” Should it be those who must live with a co-decision? Or those who do not? One way to resolve this dilemma is to stipulate, at the outset of the co-decision-making process, that those who must live with the decision have the final say or a veto. With this authority, they can act as citizen rather than supplicants or clients. And when the final authority of citizens acts as a counter balance to the money, technology and expertise of institutional authorities, the substance of the final decision will also change. As citizens learn that they have real power, “co” will now mean that they can be creators, designers, analysts, planners and implementers. And they will learn that the people across the table are their servants – public and not-for-profit.