

Exercise: POWER LADDER

In-Person Exercise Facilitator's Guide



[VIEW INTRODUCTORY / INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO HERE](#)

CONCEPT: Community catalysts can exponentially increase their impact by investing time and resources toward mobilizing, connecting and supporting the leadership, skills and solutions of ordinary community members and their associations. In many cases, those experiencing an issue or living in a community are the best equipped to lead its transformation. This focus often results in more effective solutions, unlocked resources, increased agency and action within neighborhoods, and improved relationships between organizations and their communities.

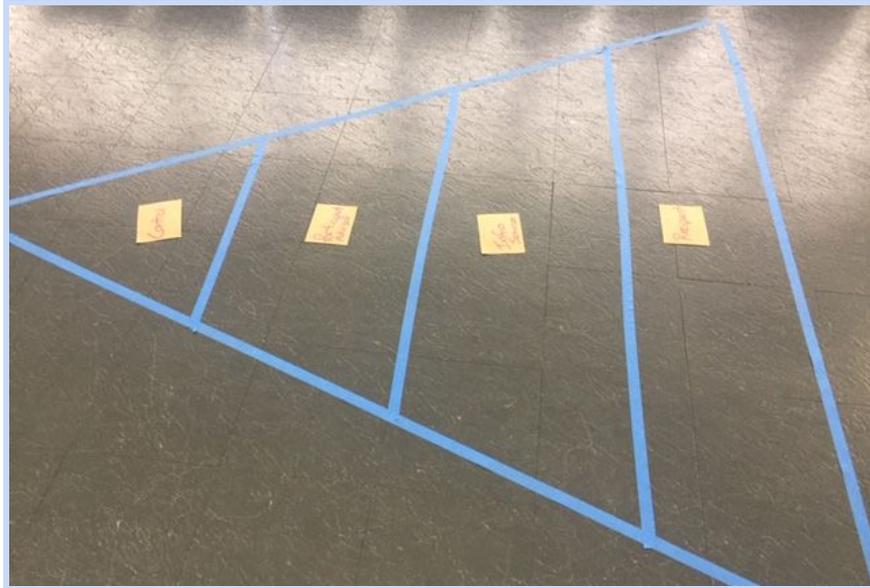
PURPOSE: This interactive exercise can (a) create clarity for you and for others working on your project around the current role of residents in your project(s), (b) reveal strategic opportunities for strengthening that role in ways that make sense for your project, organization and community capacities & context, and (c) surface valuable insights and data around how this role has shifted from the beginning of your project.

FORMAT OPTIONS: We have found this exercise useful in two contexts:

1. **'Desk review'** - When people who work for or lead (board members, key volunteers) look at what their organization, coalition, or group is engaged in and how it might work to support residents or "target population" members move up the ladder. (See [Desk Review worksheet](#).) **Time: 15-30 min**
2. **'Community review'** - When this is done in a community meeting to reveal where the community has power and where it wants to and might focus on expanding its power. This always raises the question and needs the discussion of, "How can the agencies/institutions that are often charged with running a program lead by stepping back?" **Time: 30-60 min**

Note: *If you don't yet have relationships with residents who can join a "Community Review," you can hold this exercise with project and organizational staff and organizational stakeholders. Once you have engaged more deeply with residents, we recommend holding this process again with them to include their perspectives and expertise in your strategic thinking about the power residents hold in your work.*

PREPARATION



Materials needed:

- *Index cards or large sticky notes*
- *Markers*
- *A clear floor or wall space where blue tape & note-cards / sticky notes can be placed*
- *Powerpoint / Display of Power Ladder Image with definitions (see page 3)*

To Prepare:

1. Put index cards on each table. (3-4 per participant)
2. Prepare 4 'role of residents' index cards by writing "Receive" on one, "Inform" on one, "Advise" on one and "Control" on one.
3. On the floor in the back of the room, use blue tape to make a pyramid with four levels (see pic).
4. Place 1 of the 4 index cards describing the roles in each level in the same order as the power ladder. "Receive" on the bottom, then "Inform" then "Advise" and then "Control" on top.

EXERCISE

1. IDENTIFY PROGRAMS

Before showing participants the slide of the power ladder, **ask them to think of 3-4 programs, initiatives or activities they conduct with residents.** (“Target population” works well with some groups who focus on youth, parents, people with disability labels, etc. But for most IMLS projects, “neighbors” or “residents” is probably is the most useful term).

Ask participants to write down the name of the programs, initiatives, or activities they conduct on the index cards at their table - one program per card. Use thick markers so it’s easy to see from a little bit of a distance.



2. TOUR LADDER + Define “Rungs”

Once everyone has done that, **show the power ladder slide and describe the variable roles residents play** in different areas of our community life. Sometimes we are in the ER or at a restaurant and are happy to be recipients of someone else’s service!

Ask folks to call out places in their communities, “Where most residents are recipients — garbage pick up, water and sewer, schools, etc.?”

Then describe and do the same for the other levels...

- **When are residents information sources?** - surveys, public comment at government meetings, etc.?
- **When are residents advisors / advocates?** - advisory committees, PTAs, neighborhood councils to city government, etc.?
- **When are residents in control and/ or make decisions** - most associations, some participatory budgeting processes, voting, block parties, mini-grant programs, tool sharing, community gardens, etc.?

3. SNAPSHOT of NOW: “Where are we currently?”

After everyone seems to understand the differences, ask them to walk over to the floor pyramid you have made and **place their role / program cards in the pyramid** according to the role residents play in that program. After everyone had placed their cards, stand around the pyramid.

Pick a couple cards from each level and ask the person who wrote it to describe that role or program and why they put it at that level.



After discussing a couple at each level, **ask the group for their impressions of how the cards are distributed.** The group may choose to redistribute based on discussion.



* **Take a photo!** ...to capture this, or see if someone from the group would like to take on the role of “documenter” for each stage of the ladder the group creates. Be sure all cards are legible and take close-ups if necessary so that anyone who was not at the exercise will know which cards are where, and what they say.

4. GOING FORWARD: “Where / how to move people UP the ladder?”

Then ask where would residents ideally be on the ladder, and what it would take to move some of the cards UP the ladder.

Participants then re-organize the power ladder to it’s “ideal,” placing cards where they’d like to see them while discussing ways to make this happen. Work with the group as needed to reach consensus on the ideal ladder placement.

Not all roles or programs should move up - if I need an ambulance I don’t want to have to gather my neighbors, Greg and Tim, around to discuss whether I need it or not, which hospital I should go to, etc. I want some experts to have figured that out.

** Take a photo*

NOTES ON THIS STEP:

Context & Variation: It is important to recognize **context**. In many rural areas fire and ambulance service are voluntary and are appropriately in the resident control level. In urban areas that is usually not such a good idea.

Filters: One of the filters you can apply to this exercise is “**resident engagement.**” People tend to engage where they have agency. So if I am looking for engagement there are two ‘hot spots’ on this ladder:

1. Where people are already in the upper levels of the power ladder, and
2. Where a program or project is moving up from a level

In both cases, the issue of agency is alive and therefore those involved are more likely to meaningfully engage.

5. REFLECTION: “Where were we before?”

Once everyone is satisfied with how the cards are distributed, **ask what is different now from when they began the project or program.**

Have the group then discuss where the cards /roles would have been when the project began, and re-position cards accordingly. Check in to make sure everyone is in agreement about card placement.

** Take a photo*

ADDITIONAL NOTES & RESOURCES

SUPPLEMENTAL EXERCISE ITEMS:

- [Power Ladder Slide](#)
- [Resident Power Ladder “Desk Version”](#)
- [Ladder Section Labels](#)
- [Photos of “in-person” exercise](#)

MORE RESOURCES ON RESIDENT POWER & LEADERSHIP

- [“From Input to Ownership: How Nonprofits Can Engage with the People They Serve to Carry Out Their Missions”](#) (Bridgespan Group)
- [When People Care Enough to Act, Chapter 3 and 4](#) / [Purchase Book](#) (Mike Green)
- [“Off the Roundabout”](#) / [“Bridging the Gap: Expert to Alongsider”](#) (Cormac Russell, Nurture Development)
- [Strategies for Institutions as Servants](#) (Mike Green)
- [Shift: Participant-Centered Rubric](#) (Denver Foundation)
- [Index of Community Engagement Techniques](#) (Tamarack Institute)