

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

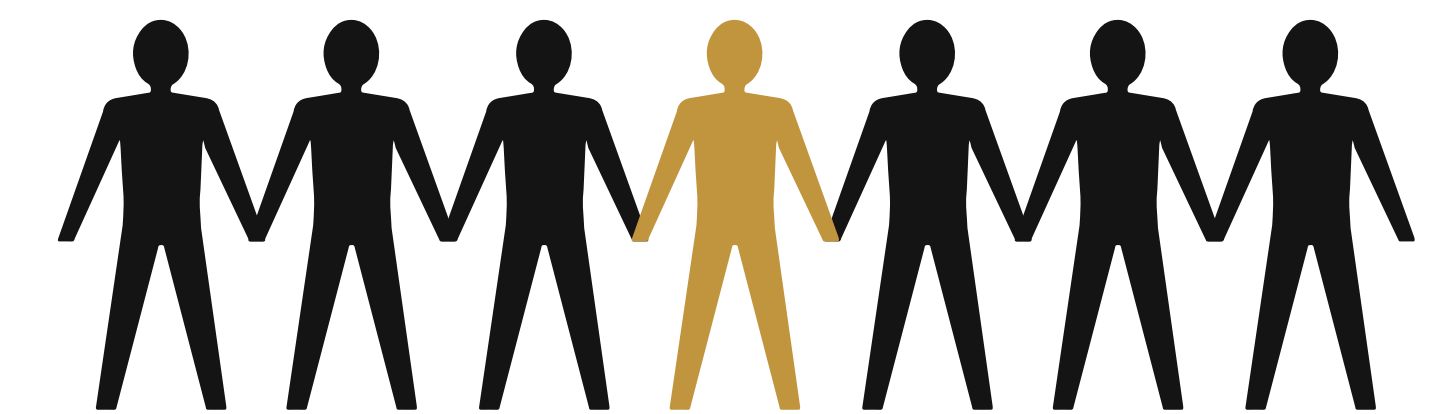
DEVELOP TRUST

Relationship development and maintenance sits at the core of any successful civic engagement strategy. Through your work, you have the power to transform communities, but in order for you to make your greatest impact and receive overwhelming community buy-in, you must serve as a trusted partner in helping the impacted community realize their full potential. Again, the key word here is trust, and it is not difficult to ascertain if done with respect, an open mind, patience and honesty. In the South, people are driven and often moved to action by their relationships and that action is determined by the role social action groups and organizations play in their lives. As you present your mission and purpose to community members, they may seem hesitant at first but consider this apprehension the result of a long history of broken promises from institutions and government entities who are required to serve them. Being an active participant in the lives of those assumed to have little interest in the civic trajectory of their community takes work, but is rewarding when you are welcomed with open arms by a community who cares very deeply about their future. Start your approach with the assumption that regardless of the community's status, its residents can and want to transform their community and their own lives for the better. Below, we'll explore proven ways you can build trust with any community you are looking to support.



Ask Questions & Listen

We can't stress this point enough. Listening is a key component to hearing the community. Be intentional with the questions you pose when learning more about the community, and be prepared to hold genuine space for people to share their stories or responses. Whether you host a listening session, focus group or survey a targeted area with deep canvassing - understanding the concerns and needs of the community is your ultimate goal. For example, your organization may be working on preparing your legislative priorities for the upcoming year's legislative session and you decide to canvass a district's residents on their thoughts on expanding Medicaid. However, you find in your canvass results that education cuts are deeply affecting educational outcomes for school-aged children. Now knowing this, you can more confidently pivot your legislative strategy, work with the legislator(s) who represent the community and have a better frame of reference to discuss an issue that actually affects the people.



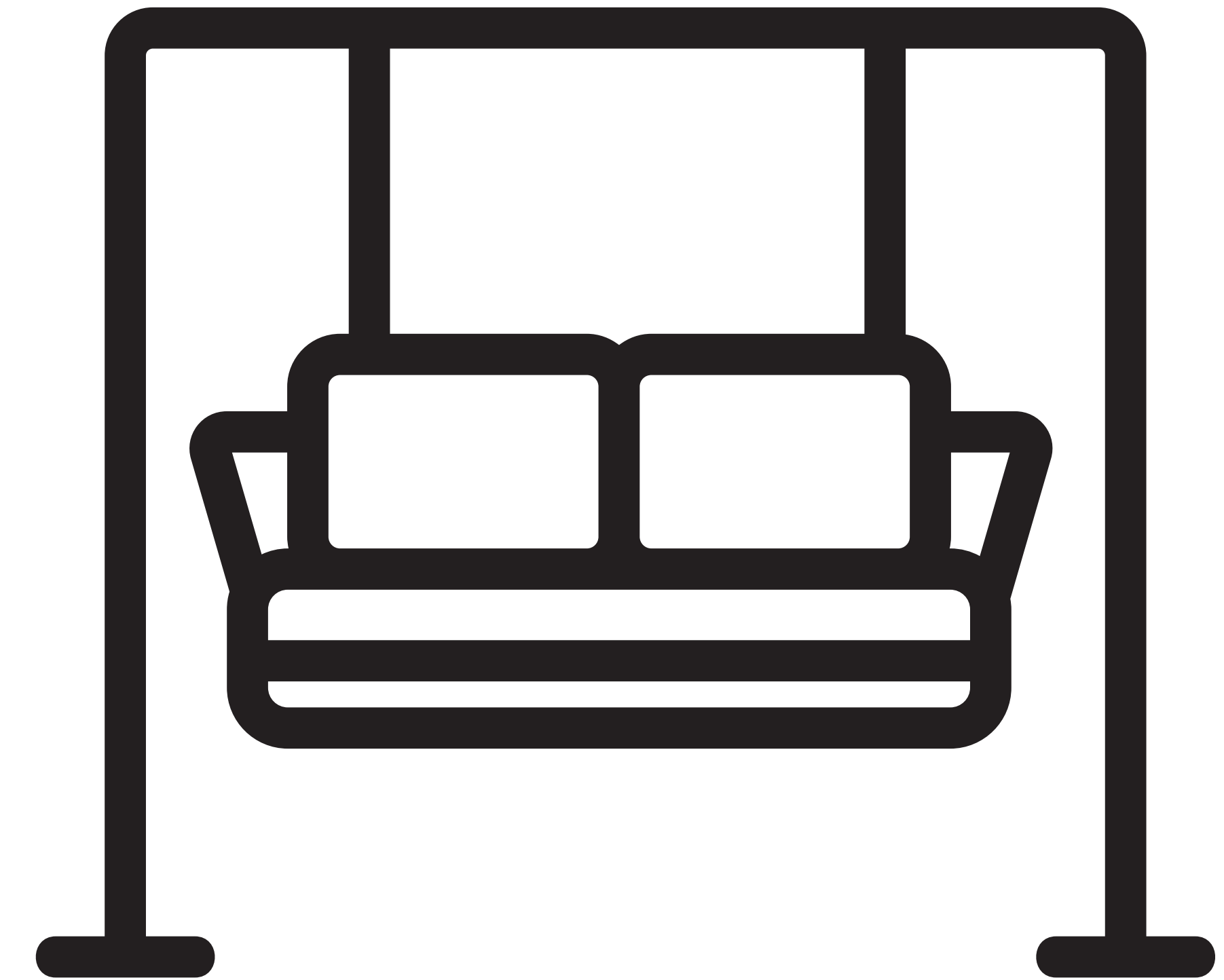
Identify the Leaders It is important to identify the community leaders and influencers of your community. These may be faith leaders, elected officials, long-time residents or activists. Whatever the makeup of this group, the intent is to work closely with them to develop realistic benchmarks, goals and next steps as you work together to bring long-lasting change to the area.

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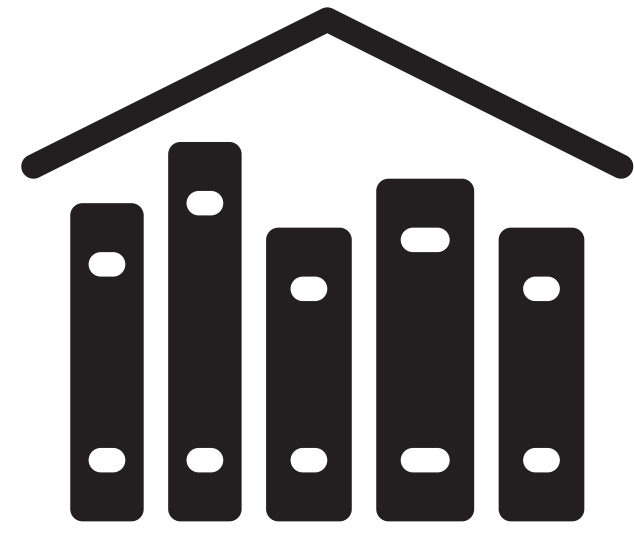
Entertain “Front Porch Conversation” In the South, business comes secondary to relationships and communities are very sensitive to perceived outsiders. This statement is not an indictment on business dealings or an assumption of a deprioritization of necessary work, but rather a recognition that the people *doing* the work matters in the South and that dealings are less transactional. When engaging with any principal, elected official, community leader or influencer, conversation will often start around an array of familial topics like sports (particularly SEC football), family, travel or food. Welcome these conversations and be an active participant in getting to know the person you are engaging with. This is part of the relationship building process that is weaved in the culture of “Southern hospitality” in the South.



Host 1:1 Meetings 1:1 meetings are typically in-person meetings with a community member, leader or influencer to discuss your intentions within the community. These meetings are helpful to build community support for your particular issue. During these sessions, leaders should be asked questions about their work and their reach while you gauge their interest in helping support your work. These meetings typically last 30 minutes to an hour depending on the topics discussed. Be sure to ask about any contacts they would be willing to connect you to within the week. It is important to bring a tool to capture the names and contact information from the person you are meeting with.



Keep Your Word When you are beginning to build trust in a community, it is important that you quickly develop a reputation for delivering on your promises, both big and small. This does not mean guaranteeing your organization will fix the issue or policy or even reach the desired outcome, it simply means you will work diligently toward it. Communities, especially diverse communities in the South, unfortunately have become used to being on the receiving end of broken promises, so your commitment to being different through swift follow-through is vitally important and shows you are serious about the investment you’re making in the community. Remember, “the fortune is in the follow-up” and is mutually beneficial for you and the community.



Give Homework Assignments Want to move community stakeholders to action fast? Give them a homework assignment! Although this assignment won't be reviewed and graded for a report card, it will be helpful to your work and will also give your stakeholders an opportunity to actively participate in altering the future of their community in a positive way. This "homework assignment" reinforces the idea that community stakeholders possess the expertise needed to reach community sovereignty and removes the notion that they are being saved or "worked on" but that you all are working together.



Check-In Often Keeping your line of communication open often is a key facet in building a solid community relationship. Checking in with your identified community stakeholders, or cold-calling/emailing new contacts further establishes the seriousness of your objective and that you intend on maintaining a long-lasting relationship after the work has been done. Personally, whether friends or family, we develop a tight-knit bond with certain individuals because we communicate with them often. Any relationship takes work and that is no different when building relationships within the community.



You Are the Student Although your organization may possess the much needed research, information and/or policy recommendations for the community's benefit, remind your team that you are to assume the role as students of the community. Think of your relationship as a dance, and you each take turns leading as you both are in positions to teach one another. You'll begin to find your groove eventually, but starting in a space of submission to the community recognizes the teaching that comes from their expertise through their lived experience within the community.



Tap Into Faith Many people in the South are led by their faith beliefs. Faith leaders and their institutions of worship are revered as anchors to their communities and offer a wide array of services such as, but not limited to, counseling, housing, food and even bills and utilities support. When appropriate, enlist the support of faith leaders within the community. Not only can they offer much needed validation to your work, but will work alongside you in your strategy as a trusted messenger sharing key issue points to reach their congregation and surrounding community in ways you may not.



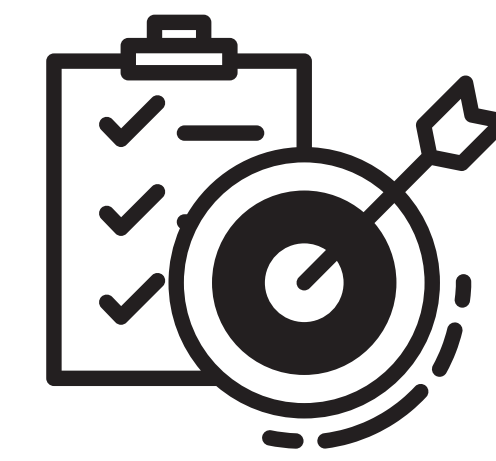
Stay Transparent and Honest When working within any community, set an example of what honest and transparent leadership looks like by keeping them in the loop. Based on the nature of our work, sometimes we are not always the recipients of good news, but it is always a good idea to keep your stakeholders abreast of any and all developments as well as any budgetary wins or roadblocks. When dealing with funds particularly, give constant updates on approved spending, gifts or other items of note. Do not assume that all donors, volunteers, or other community members will read heavy text documents and be sure to offer updated information on legislation, internal wins or pivots. Any financial information and updates should be in both long and summarized formats.



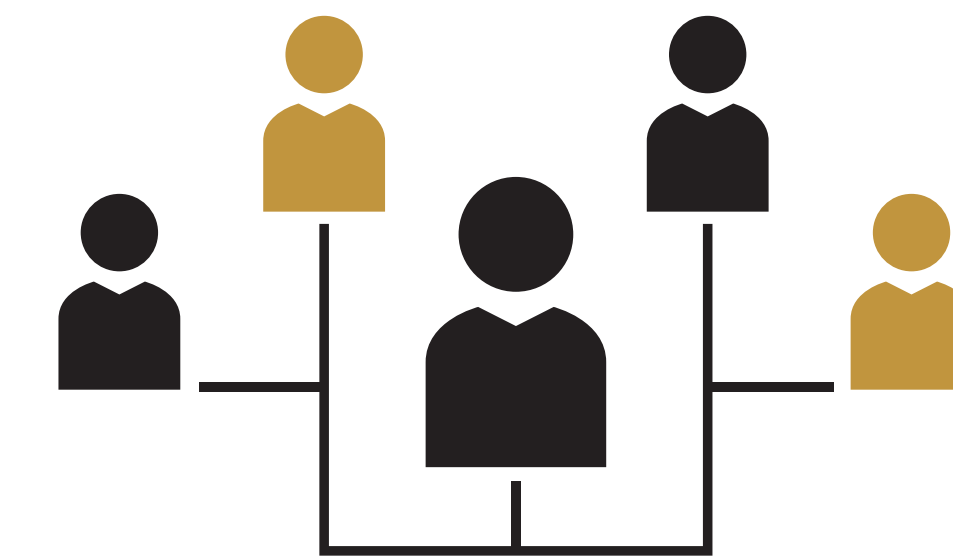
Make an Ask! Would your closest friends and family help you with meeting your goal? More than likely, yes. However, it is important to make sure that when you engage anyone in participating in an activity for your mission, you **MUST** make a direct ask. Why ask for anything? You want the person in your new or existing relationship to feel empowered and know they have a role within your mission. This establishes the level of accountability they have to you and your mission and allows them to own a piece of that. Make the ask specific and actionable. No matter the request, failure to make a direct ask could be the difference between stagnation or moving your issue forward.

Examples of Direct Asks Include:

- “*Could you provide me the names of 5 people within your network who you believe would be interested in learning more?*”
- “*Do you mind making the connection to [name] by this Thursday?*”
- “*Would you co-host a virtual town hall on [issue] with our organization on [date]?*”



Set Realistic Goals and Manage Expectations Taking inventory of your own internal capacity is important. When working alongside a community on a project or issue, set realistic goals and manage expectations by clearly stating the capacity of your team and not making promises you cannot keep. If your team is small, and you are handling a large issue, you may need to more heavily rely on the skills and capacity of the community (this is where your asset-based development comes in, wink wink). When you are honest about what you can do, you remove unnecessary stress on the team and the accompanying assumption that you will tackle everything alone. Be reminded that people are understanding and more flexible than we realize, so don't be afraid to be honest about what you can commit to and delegate the rest.



Offer Your Network and Resources One of the key tenets to the SouthStrong network is the peer-to-peer sharing of beneficial resources and networks. Everyone has a network, and one of the best ways we can show support is by extending our network to those who may need it. When working within a community, offer your networks and share any resources that you may come across that could help the community. Whether your network includes a group of donors focused on decreasing maternal mortality rates or granting available financial resources to youth doing voter registration, all network connections and resources are welcome. This is the time to help the community and any of its leaders shine (many who have been working within the community for decades).