

Including Community Voices: Meeting practices to increase participation opportunities for monolingual Spanish-speaking community members

Majority Rules

If you are planning for a meeting where the majority of participants are Spanish-speaking, why not hold that meeting in Spanish? Too often, we run meetings in English as a default, even if the majority of other attendees speak a different shared language. Allowing space for other language to come first, and preparing for those instances by having bilingual staff interpreters available to facilitate, allows us to be nimble in our community interactions and truly responsive to community voice.

Valuing Voice

Many collaborative meetings are a mix of paid professionals and community members. Whenever possible, provide pay, stipends, or incentives for community members' time. If you are leaning on them for their expertise, they should be paid as a way to demonstrate its importance. This also shifts power in the space, allowing all participants to feel equally valued.

Interpreter and Translator Appreciation

Interpreting a meeting as it unfolds is a daunting task. If you are using an interpreter, provide them with any available meeting content beforehand so they can review the materials and see if any clarification is needed. When asking for written materials to be translated, consider the time and expertise needed, and make the request and set the time deliverable accordingly. When creating documents to be translated, spell out acronyms or avoid them altogether. Whenever it is difficult to find the Spanish equivalent to a word, consider changing the English word to better fit Spanish instead. Co-creating documents with the person who will translate is a great way to ensure ease of translation.

Technology Support

The majority of meetings are being held over online platforms like Zoom these days, and participants may access meetings through a computer or smart phone. If possible, reach out to participants before the meeting to see if anyone needs help accessing a computer or smart phone for the meeting. Walk them through the process of downloading the appropriate program or application for the meeting and see if they have any questions. Consider how you may need to alter instructions for smart phone users. If you are running the meeting in English, include a slide in Spanish with instructions for accessing language interpretation. Offer this slide at a few points during the meeting opening, just in case people log on late. Be sure to introduce your interpreter to the entire group.

Before the Meeting

You may be introducing processes, systems, or specific lexicons that are difficult to translate into Spanish. You may also be inviting participants with varying degrees of literacy. Review your content ahead of the meeting and consider inviting Spanish speaking participants to a pre-meeting where you intro new concepts. There, you can answer any questions that come up and fully explain any concepts or processes that may be new. This is also a chance to review any acronyms that you may be using, and consider the value of their use. Reviewing concepts ahead of time can allow participants to be more present in the meeting and better able to provide feedback in real time.

During the Meeting

Present all information in Spanish and English. Having visual translation of content not only makes it easier for visual learners to take in content, it sets the tone for all participants to understand that this space is bilingual. Bilingual meeting spaces require patience from all participants and it's important to let everyone know to speak clearly, at an even pace, to allow for interpretation. Remind participants to allow time after statements for others to process and respond. Above all, make clear the need for collaborative community spaces to fully and authentically reflect the community they are seeking to serve.

After the Meeting

Set up a specific time after the meeting to check in with Spanish-speaking participants. This time is to check for understanding, gather any feedback they may not have been able to give during the meeting, and find out ways that you could have improved their experience. If possible, this check-in meeting should be run in Spanish, to ensure participants are able to fully express themselves. Document their experiences diligently, and consider asking questions about how they felt, or what the meeting experience was like for them. You can use this data to design future meetings with their comfort in mind.