

# Thanksgiving Day Lessons: What family expectations, turkey, and being grateful can teach us about public participation

Author : Jennifer Phillips

Categories : [Outreach Methods](#)

Tagged as : [Civic Engagement](#), [Community Engagement](#), [Lessons Learned](#), [Managing Expectations](#), [Thanksgiving](#)

Date : December 3, 2014



Full disclosure - I grew up in a large family with lots of extended relatives. On one side we could trace our roots back to tiny villages in Italy and on the other side we still had relatives living in Beirut, Lebanon. If you have seen [My Big Fat Greek Wedding](#) then you will have some idea of what growing up in a family like mine entails which is lots of expectations, relatives who are not afraid to share their opinions on areas of your life that you didn't realize they had a say in, and tons of delicious food.

What I didn't understand at the time was that a family like mine is an excellent training ground for a career in civic engagement. To illustrate my point, I would like to share three Thanksgiving Day lessons that my family has taught me which are applicable to public participation initiatives.

## 1. Managing expectations is crucial to success.

Just like you wouldn't let your Aunt Gina assume that you will arrive at her house at 2pm when you know you can't make it until 4, it is important to be clear with your stakeholders about what they can expect from you and the process/event in which you are asking them to engage. This can include a number of different expectations such as:

- Who will be the ultimate decision maker?
- Why is input being sought?
- When and with what frequency will stakeholders be able to participate?

Clearly answering these questions helps stakeholders to understand their role and increases the likelihood that they will leave the experience feeling good about their participation.

### 2. **Creating a comfortable environment encourages conversation.**

[Americans eat roughly 535 million pounds of turkey on Thanksgiving](#) and all that tryptophan tends to relax people. Add in some candles, background music and a boat load of carbs and family members tend to linger around the table a lot longer than usual which can lead to some pretty interesting discussions. This same principle applies to public meetings so when you are planning your next event, ask yourself:

- Does both the physical and emotional environment make people feel welcome?
- Do we need to offer childcare? Transportation?
- Do we have a budget for refreshments?

A quick word about refreshments – remember you aren't just trying to feed people, you are also creating atmosphere. So please don't buy a bag of Oreos rip the package open and toss them on a table. Instead, buy a couple of [cheap plastic trays](#) that you can reuse and put those cookies on a plate!

### 3. **Remember to say thank you.**

Saying thank you to the person who hosted the holiday is second nature to us. Over the years we have been conditioned to arrive with a bottle of wine or a bouquet of flowers to show our mom, grandma or Uncle Phil that we appreciate the hours they have spent slaving away in the kitchen and cleaning the house so that our family can be together. Community members may not have cleaned their homes so you can come over, but they may be skipping [House of Cards](#), hiring a babysitter, or trekking through bad weather to attend your meeting so don't forget to thank them. You can do this by:

- Saying thank you
- Meeting the expectations that you have set for the meeting
- Utilizing stakeholder input as agreed

I really think that these three lessons can help any public participation practitioner be more successful. After all, whether we are talking about our clan or community, [we are all family](#).

What is the most valuable thing your family has taught you about public participation?