

The Eight Characteristics of Highly Effective Public Engagement

Public engagement is undergoing a fundamental shift: governments want to hear from citizens who are informed about the issues, understand real world trade-offs and reflect the views of the general public rather than the “same ten people.” Citizens wish to be active participants in shaping their communities and to know that engagement provides genuine opportunities to affect decisions.

Across Canada and the world, governments and citizens are developing new methods that put people, relationships and collaboration at the centre of public engagement. Typically, these public engagement processes:



1. WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITIES

More often than not, people engage with each other on the issues that matter to them without government sponsorship or facilitation. Where possible, highly effective public engagement seeks to build upon and connect to these community-led conversations through partnership and collaboration.

2. SEEK OUT PARTICIPANTS WHO REFLECT THE FULL DIVERSITY OF INTERESTS AND PERSPECTIVES

Legitimate engagement outcomes depend upon input beyond “the usual suspects,” and require a concerted effort to incorporate missing voices, including equity-seeking communities that are under-served by traditional engagement approaches.

3. CREATE CONDITIONS FOR INFORMED AND ACTIONABLE PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Given appropriate information and structure, citizens have enormous capacity to deliberate and provide sound policy advice. Such processes set aside the traditional idea of an expert recommendation, and instead call upon specialists to frame trade-offs for participants to consider in relation to their values, interests and experiences.



4. EMBRACE A MULTITUDE OF LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION STYLES

People have many different ways of learning and communicating beyond the types of cerebral discussions that tend to dominate traditional engagement. Highly effective public engagement reaches participants through creativity, arts, storytelling, prize challenges and other methods in order to build awareness, tap new ways of thinking and feeling, and deepen connection.

5. LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY AND ONLINE TOOLS TO INCREASE SCALE AND AMPLIFICATION

Interactive media, social media and games can create compelling user experiences and are often accessible to audiences who are less likely to attend public meetings, such as youth, parents of young children, and citizens who are satisfied with proposed changes.

6. USE DIALOGUE TO BRIDGE DIFFERENCES AND INCREASE SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Some of the most powerful forms of public engagement activate participants as communities using professionally facilitated spaces and small-group discussion formats. Dialogue is an excellent medium for participants to listen deeply, humanize opposing perspectives, mediate their differences and build community resiliency through improved relationships.

7. PROVIDE TRANSPARENCY AND CLOSE THE LOOP

One of the largest barriers to public participation is the belief by citizens that their input will have no impact on government decisions. Combating this trust deficit requires decision-makers to communicate limitations honestly, continue to engage with participants and outline in a transparent manner how citizen input was used to shape final decisions.

8. SEE EVERY INTERACTION AS AN INVESTMENT IN LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

The key to building an ongoing culture of participation with diverse citizens is to see each interaction as an opportunity to build relationships and forecast future engagement opportunities. For many people, and especially younger generations, this means including a call-to-action.

Countless individuals and organizations have helped to shape our notion of high-quality public engagement, including our colleagues at the SFU Centre for Dialogue, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (ncdd.org), International Association for Public Participation (iap2canada.ca), Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger (see *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*), Public Agenda (publicagenda.org), Carolyn Lukensmeyer (founder of *AmericaSpeaks*), and Dave Meslin.