

The 7 Secrets of Successful Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is one of the buzz words of the moment particularly in government, with all levels keen to be seen to consult with the community and provide transparent and accountable vision, policy and implementation. Hallelujah, we say, what a good thing.

But as is often the case, it is easier said than done. Stakeholder engagement can be an extremely valuable tool – but if not done properly, it can also result in a worse outcome than when one started. Think Murray Darling basin.....

It sounds easy, this 'community consultation'. But like many things that look easy from the outside, the reality is that effective stakeholder management is the same as any other process. It requires clear objectives, robust planning, specific tools and an approach that is tailored to the particular issue at hand, and sensitivity towards the complexities that face the inevitable range of stakeholders involved in the issue.

Stakeholder engagement is a specific skill requiring significant expertise. In this e-book we hope to share with you our experience of the 7 most important secrets to making stakeholder engagement work. We are accredited members of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), so some of our secrets are drawn from international wisdom – but much of it is based on our own experience in the field, of what works and what doesn't. We hope it helps shed some light on what is fast becoming a tool of choice for modern governments.

Terminology and Philosophy

Before we get into specifics, it is probably worth starting with some terminology clarity! Public Participation is defined as:

'Any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to make decisions'.

At Essence, we prefer the terms 'stakeholder' to 'public', and 'engagement' to 'participation'. Why is that? We have always found the term 'public' potentially confusing. If we say 'public' many of our colleagues think we are talking about 'the general public'. So we tend to use the terminology 'stakeholders' and that refers to all interested parties – including general public if relevant.

The second question is whether we should call it 'participation' or 'engagement' (not to mention the plethora of other terms such as 'consultation' or 'facilitation'!). At Essence, we believe that many of the terms are interchangeable – but we do have a real philosophical penchant for 'engagement' as THE key term that explains what we do. We consider ourselves to be engagement experts because of our core goal of commitment. Can we explain?!

These days the world is connected, at least so we're told. Yet for all our social networking, there's a strange sense of disconnect. No amount of internet, twitter, texting or Facebook is any help if you want to talk to someone from your electricity supplier. Or your bank. Or a politician.

This is why 'engagement' is so much more powerful and important than merely 'participation'. Essence is a marketing, communications and research consultancy that works towards actionable and measureable outcomes by building commitment. And before people will commit to thinking, believing and behaving differently, they must be engaged. We use this model to help us develop deeper insight into gaining commitment.

Commitment model



And this is why we consider ourselves to be Stakeholder Engagement Experts, not Public Participation Practitioners! Semantic maybe – but very important to us! So read on with our compliments, we hope you find these Seven Secrets useful!

1. Know why you want to consult

'Wow' I can hear you saying, *'This is a real revelation– know why you're doing something???!....'*

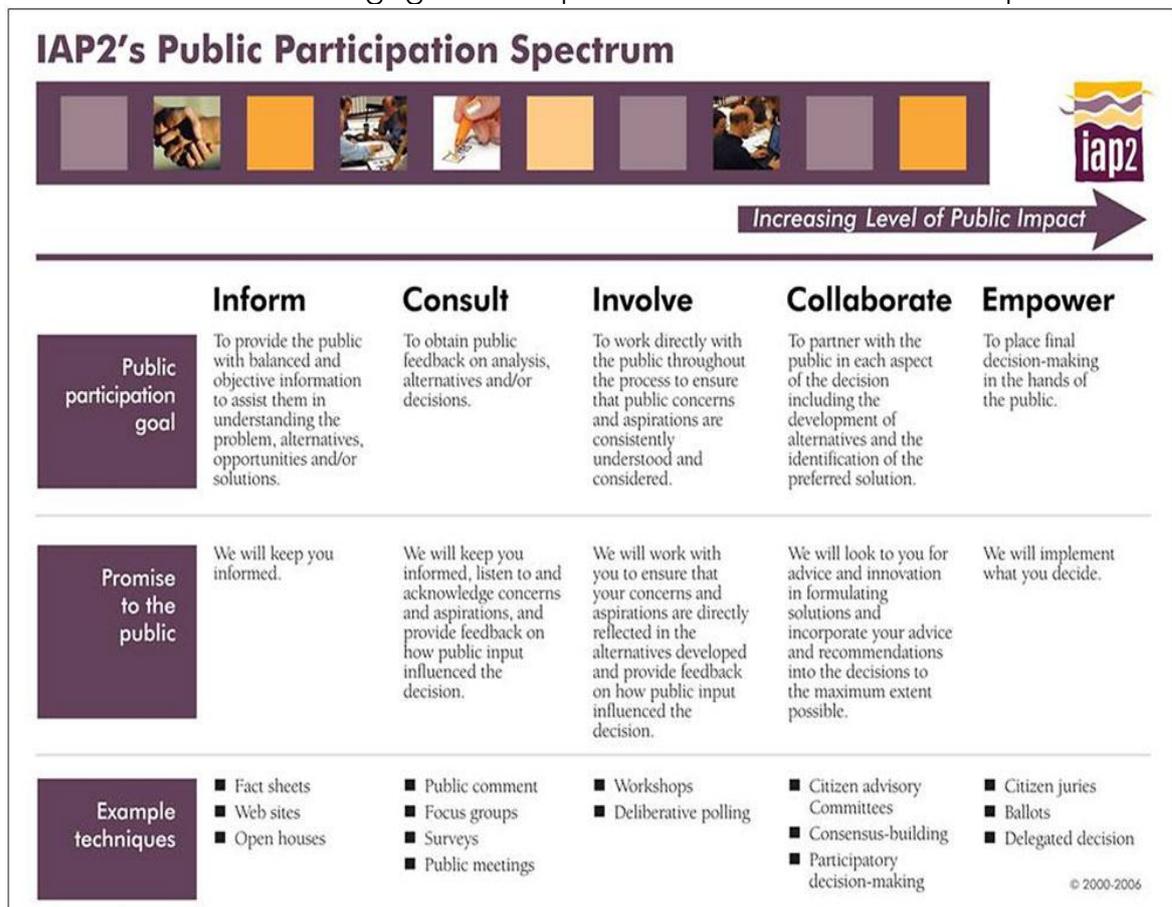
Ah yes, well may you be sceptical - and we agree with you, it is pretty obvious. But it is extraordinary how often there is a lack of clarity on why we are consulting in the first place. And if we don't get that right at the outset, then the entire design of the engagement is fundamentally based on unclear assumptions – which rarely lead to a successful outcome.

What are we really trying to achieve? Are we actually seeking the opinion and advice of stakeholders because we need their input? Or do we merely want to inform them of what could happen next? Are the stakeholders true partners in the process and we intend to work together with them, or have we pretty much decided what next steps are yet we want to 'look like' we are consulting? There is no moral judgement on the reality of the situation at hand as far as we are concerned – but it is critical that we identify and agree the true nature of the engagement and why it is that we want to consult.

Part and parcel of this conversation is the acknowledgement of risk. There is no doubt that stakeholder consultations carry with them some form of risk. This can be of great concern to those who prefer to avoid confrontation - the mere thought that there might be a group of key stakeholders together exploring issues can induce paranoia amongst control freaks. But the reality once again is if there is a genuine and acknowledged need for consultation, then the risk lessens. There is often only risk if they who do the consulting really only want one outcome to emerge.

Yes, stakeholder consultation can be complex, sensitive, emotional and suffer intense interest from the media. But it can also be a sign of a passionate and authentic democracy that has every right to put forth a view as decisions are made. Not every stakeholder will be happy with every outcome – but they do have a right to be heard.

IAP2 have an agreed 'spectrum' of the types of participation that can be undertaken with some engagement implications at each level of the spectrum:



We endorse a spectrum of engagement – and more importantly, the conclusion that the tools and processes we will employ should be different on the basis of what type of engagement is required.

We do not see stakeholder engagement as spin. We have seen concrete examples where effective stakeholder engagement has saved time and money, helped identify risks that would otherwise have remained unexposed, and made the next steps clearer and easier to undertake. And we have seen probably more examples where stakeholder engagement resulted in a more enflamed issue than it was at the start – with a key reason being because there was a lack of clarity about what the engagement was trying to achieve and why it should be undertaken at all.

2. Stakeholder engagement is a strategy not an event

There are some very accomplished practitioners out there who are strong issues or crisis management people, and who are the first port-of-call when the future looks like it might get tricky. And many of them do an excellent job in delving deep into the issue and handling the crisis at hand.

However, at Essence our experience has shown us that really effective stakeholder consultation is not a start/stop process. It quite often doesn't 'end' – not in the minds of the stakeholder, anyway! It merely evolves into the next iteration – it rarely goes away. Which means conceptualising the engagement as an 'event' can lead you down a very short term path.

In fact, we marvel at the fact that very rarely is the stakeholder engagement exercise, or community consultation process even factored in to central communications strategy and planning. Much of the community engagement that happens out there appears to be instigated by a Minister's office, or a policy division of a department perhaps – without any real embedding into the greater communications strategy.

And yet, isn't comprehensive stakeholder engagement the ultimate form of communication? Shouldn't stakeholder engagement – across the myriad of ways in which it can be undertaken, large and small – be a core part of any communications recommendation? And particularly so for issues that are complex or sensitive?

But how often are Communications Branches involved in the process? Or are they usually left out of the process because 'it's too early in the procedure' or 'because we have community consultations experts'? Often, it is the very communications people who should be involved in the process who are not.

And on the flipside of that, how many communications people actually see stakeholder engagement as a key communications tool in their armoury? How often is stakeholder engagement recommended as a core developmental process, long before the final communications strategy is developed?

It is our view that stakeholder engagement is every bit as relevant and insightful as traditional market research (a competency we also possess) – but on a different scale and requiring quite a different approach. The same way that market research is often recommended as the first step in the strategic communications development process, so should stakeholder engagement be, in our view. And yet many communications professionals do not readily consider stakeholder engagement as a bona fide and strategic communications tool.

Stakeholder engagement can take many forms, but at its heart it focuses on using the consultation process of key stakeholders to help make a more informed decision and chart a more productive future. It is not a one-off event, it is not a 'job done'. And in our opinion, it is about time it was factored into the entire communications strategy along with the suite of other tools proficient communications practitioners employ.

3. Clearly articulate the Core Commitment Challenge

At the start of every project we conduct at Essence we agree what we call the 'Core Commitment Challenge'. The Core Commitment Challenge is the overarching guiding thought or burning vision that guides each of our projects, whether it is the development of a strategy, a need for intuitive research, or an extensive stakeholder engagement process.

However, when it comes to stakeholder engagement and consultations, we are particularly rigorous about our Core Commitment Challenge. We fundamentally believe that the Challenge should be shared with the stakeholders, and articulated in clear and unambiguous language. It should be relevant, honest and time specific.

Importantly, we believe if there are 'non negotiables' in the process of engagement then they should also be stated up front. Too often when the purpose of the consultation is articulated to stakeholders, bureaucrats use government-speak gobbledegook to be politically correct, or to avoid specifics for fear of offending. But the reality is, if we have already decided that there ARE some non negotiables – even if they may be unpalatable – better to state them clearly up front so that stakeholders are not misled into thinking they are being consulted on something that in fact has already been decided. The down side of a consultation where already cynical stakeholders leave feeling the entire exercise was pointless is far worse than being honest up front about the elements of the engagement that are not negotiable, no matter how unpopular they may be. We would always rather say:

'There will be a road and we need to decide by the end of the month in which of the three locations it should be'

We prefer not to say;

'We need to consult to review a range of options and alternatives pursuant to the issue of access and including (but not limited to) a road'.

In summary, we believe a really clear Core Commitment Challenge should:

- Articulate the decision to be made or problem to be solved
- Reflect the needs of the decision maker
- Be focussed on something that the stakeholders want to solve/explore
- Be framed to articulate a challenge or dilemma
- Be in unambiguous community or stakeholder language
- Be simple
- Be a statement that most people can accept, and move on to resolution

4. Stakeholder engagement should be Values-based

We believe it is critical that stakeholder engagement be values-based. The Commitment Model is focussed on understanding what people think and do, why, and what might make them think or behave differently. Fundamentally we cannot engage productively without a thorough understanding of the values that a stakeholder holds.

The academics amongst us would say that values are the internal standards by which we all judge events or behaviours – what is good, bad, right, wrong, fair, unfair etc. Values are formed by cultural, social and institutional mores including family influence, national identity, religious affiliation, ethnic background, peer behaviours and so forth, as well as personal experience.

As individuals, our values govern our beliefs about 'the way things ought to be' – and they can be highly emotional and personal.

What we have found through use of the Commitment Model is that identifying the values behind the opinion are very helpful in understanding how people perceive the problem, the opportunity and solutions. And wherever possible in consultations, we seek to uncover the values of the stakeholder because it helps to explore the range of options at hand.

Once you identify common values, you can find common ground. Help people express their interest, not their position.

Imagine a stakeholder consultation that is based on debating whether there should or should not be a road. Imagine there is a group of people arguing that there should be a road – perhaps their reasons will be because of better access, safety, better trade and ease. Let's say the group of people arguing that there should not be a road cite reasons of cost, environmental impact, over population and community dislike.

If the stakeholder consultation remains at the level of what is good about the road and what is not good about the road, then the above factors are debated endlessly – but reach no conclusion. There is little opportunity that any of these factors will 'persuade' or 'convince' either side to change their minds or work together for a solution.

However, the identification of common values – common beliefs that both sides might share – elevates the issue into a space that can result in meaningful outcomes. Neither group may be able to agree on the benefits or disadvantages of a road – but they all may agree on the importance of community good. Therefore an engagement can take on quite a different scope as it seeks to explore what ways all groups can meet the value of community good and how a road does or does not contribute to that.

Values are a critical part of the stakeholder engagement process because if we understand what people value then we can understand how to engage them. And if we can engage them, then we can work together for a common outcome.

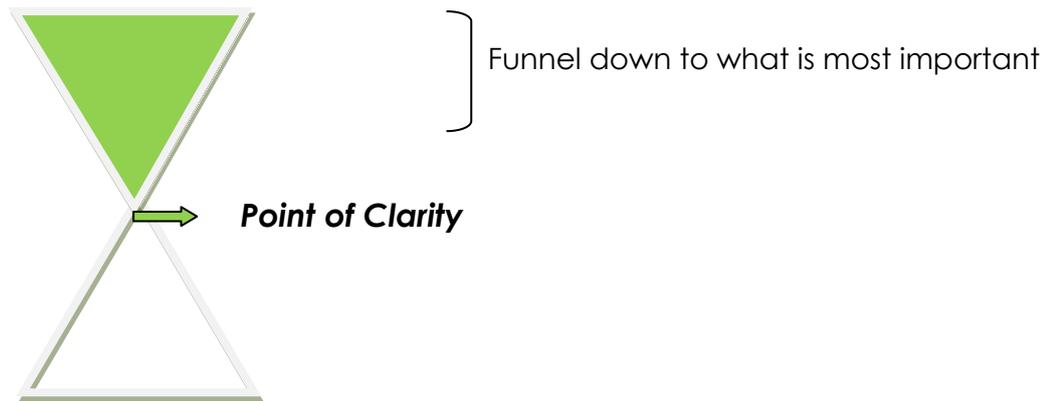
5. Good stakeholder engagements deliver output. Great stakeholder engagements deliver outcomes.

The days of what we call lazy consultation are over. Particularly in the area of communications, the wastage of entire groups brainstorming possible issues and alternatives and delivering reams of butchers paper output but no productive action plans is no more. Whilst it may be tempting to navel gaze and hide behind the 'blue sky thinking', the role of a really successful Stakeholder Engagement in our view is to make a decision. To ensure we come out of a session with a productive *outcome*. A clearer direction and understanding of next actions than when we went in. It is why our consultancy is called Essence – because it gets to the heart of the issue quickly and provides real, actionable, outcomes that can be readily implemented.

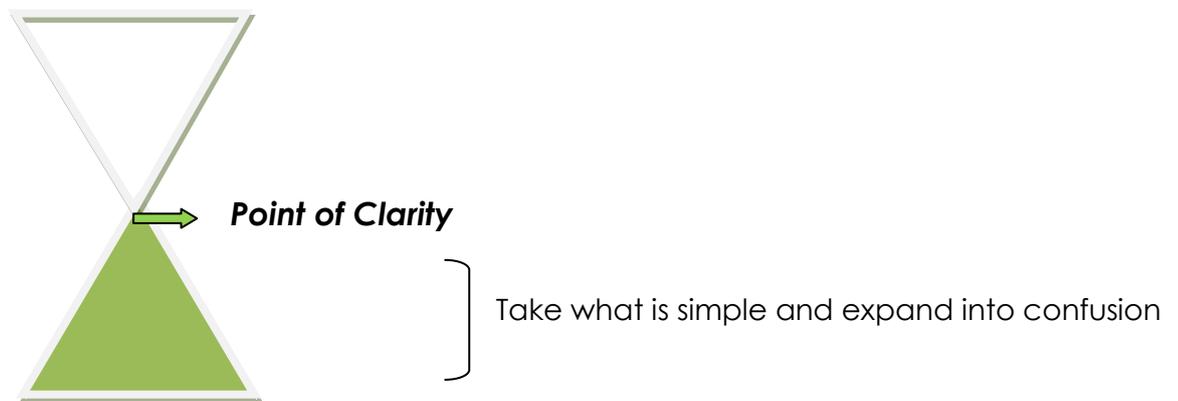
To ensure the engagement delivers usable outcomes a number of things must happen. As part of the preparatory meetings the team would of course agree the Core Commitment Challenge, the objectives of the session, what it is they want to explore, and who should be there to do the exploring. Context is imperative, and the basic briefing would be in place. Clearly there would be an agenda, some exercises and even a hypothesis about what action items might evolve.

However, the biggest enemy of usable outcomes in a stakeholder engagement session is lack of clarity and increased confusion. There is a strange dynamic that often overtakes groups in a facilitated session that results in more questions rather than answers! We like to think of it as convergent /divergent thinking.

Instead of sifting through all of the information to identify what is most important:



A facilitated session often loses clarity by getting bogged down in the bottom half of the process:



So the role as Facilitator is to always ensure that the group is in the top half of the thought process – explore all the options and get all the information, but funnel it down to the key outcomes and action points that will be of value.

It may well involve time to navel gaze, free form ideas and generally get issues off the liver. But if we can't see how the introspection will help the client or the group understand the issue better, understand why we have the issue, and what outcomes will address the issue – then we draw a halt to the discussion and refocus the engagement.

The heart of stakeholder engagement is the desire to make a decision and move forward. If no tangible outcome or decision is anticipated – then don't engage.

6. Use tools that allow stakeholders to be heard

There is a dazzling array of tools that can be used in stakeholder consultations as broad as any other option open to the experienced communications practitioner. At Essence we use a range of techniques which are tailor made for each project.

Facebook and Twitter are the channels we are most often asked about, and sometimes they are highly relevant – but often, they are not, they are simply the flavour of the moment. We have done consultations where real time feedback is an outstanding tool (we like pollanywhere.com by the way) – but the fact is that it is more important to understand what the particular stakeholder needs than it is to be seduced by a tool or channel. Where Facebook, Twitter or other forms of social media is important and our stakeholder voracious consumers of such channels, then we embrace it with open arms. But just as often, we look to the traditional old fashioned ways to explore and engage.

As always, the key is not the tool or the technique. It is important to have them, and each project requires careful thought about the type, nature and mix of the optimal selection. However, the real reason we use tools in stakeholder consultation is to ensure there are genuine opportunities for stakeholders to be heard. As a result we have used a range of tools over the years; from traditional 'town hall' meetings to smaller focus group consultations; from regulated industry body forums to on line surveys; from ethnographic mechanisms where we observe and discuss behaviour to large industry meetings with 300 people in attendance. And on each occasion we have purpose built the suite of actual tools and processes to develop the optimal stimulus for use for each project.

We understand that some stakeholders like to be heard a little too much (!), and their actual desire is to dominate conversation, give a pithy sound byte to a waiting media, and generally be disruptive. At times, stakeholders can also be highly emotional and even outraged based on their perception of the issue. Each of these states requires sensitive management of the consultation and managing this requires expertise and skill.

Generally these reactions are driven by an overwhelming desire on behalf of the stakeholder to be heard – to be acknowledged, their view validated. It does not always mean that the stakeholder must win at all costs – but it does mean that they must leave feeling that their views have been genuinely sought and fairly treated. This is one of many factors that helps influence our choice of tools and processes in any engagement process.

7. Feed back and close the loop

The final secret to Stakeholder Engagement is to ensure we feed back and close the loop for all stakeholders. Often facilitators (maybe the same who think consultation is an event not a process!) overlook that the process of consultation includes accountability and a responsibility to communicate it to all parties.

If we say we are interested in their views and value their opinion, then that means sharing the findings. If we say we are transparent and accountable, then that means sharing the outcomes. If we say we are making a decision on the basis of what we work out together – then that means sharing that decision with them.

Like the first secret it sounds simple and too obvious to warrant a purpose built reference. But it is not! Recently a facilitator at another company told me they had 'promised' in writing and were on the public record as saying they would share EVERY piece of feedback for a particular consultation they were working on. One gentleman provided feedback that was clearly extreme and potentially irrelevant. His view was that the harvesting of water was actually an anti Semitic plot. The relevant Body felt that such comments were somewhat unstable and unhelpful to the debate. That might well be true, but if you are on the record saying you will share EVERY comment, then you must do so. This man was continually harassing the Body because he wanted to see his comment acknowledged, which is what the Body said it would do – and then reneged.

(Our personal view is that sometimes evidence of the extreme fringe such as the above can actually help the cause, as everyone sees transparently how complex it can be to achieve a common value and a shared decision).

Whether one has promised to share every view or not, it is necessary for every stakeholder consultation to provide honest feedback and clearly state the eventual decision and outcome of the engagement.

Summary

So there we have it – our 7 Secrets to successful Stakeholder Engagement. We are genuinely excited by the move afoot to increase the level and amount of community engagements and consultations and which appears to be occurring at every level of government in Australia. We see the greatest opportunity for Communications Professionals to really take hold of this 'new' tool and to factor it into strategic communications planning rather than allowing it to occur in isolation or as an afterthought. This is a key strategic planning tool for the future and we would love to see it embedded in the Communications discipline.

And of course, at Essence we believe we are at the forefront of this type of thinking. It helps that as communications professionals we are fascinated by human behaviour. Our use of the commitment model shows us that regardless of our subject matter, we have an innate curiosity for why people behave the way they do. We are equally fascinated by the workshops we have conducted with Generation Y as with Religion and Spirituality. As captivated by the sport of horse racing as we are about prevention of alcohol fuelled violence. As challenged by inspiring more sustainable behaviours as we are about raising the profile and role of regulatory bodies. At Essence, every project receives the same approach of genuine interest and desire to simplify, clarify, focus and implement.

There can be no greater privilege than guiding a group of focussed intelligent and passionate individuals to a productive decision and a clearer future.