



Engagementworks

Community Engagement Basics

Session 2 – Video 2

**The Constraints of Community
Engagement**

The Constraints of Community Engagement

Introduction

In this lesson we continue our discussion on why community engagement is important and focus on the constraints.

What are the constraints?

Constraints could include all of these things.

- Problems with the public
- Apathy
- Selfish motivations
- Deficiencies in public knowledge and ability
- Problems with processes
- Not representative
- Excessive costs and time
- Power and politics dominate – power struggles



Now let's take a closer look.

Problems with the Public



How do you 'let people have their say', and end up with something better than if they had just stayed out of it?

The value of anyone's contributions to a decision-making process, from elected decision makers to members of neighbourhood associations, can be hindered by apathy and selfishness and deficiencies in knowledge and abilities.

However, these potential 'pitfalls of public engagement' tend to be associated with the 'general public' and exasperated by the public being denied meaningful ways to participate in decision-making processes.

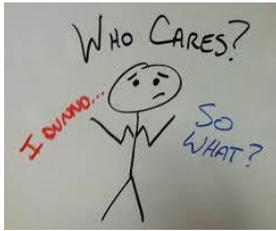
Therefore, these 'problems' should not be viewed as reasons to exclude the public for influencing decision-making processes; rather they should be viewed as key elements that must be effectively managed as part of any holistic engagement process.

Apathy

If you hold a public meeting to discuss a proposal that the public has little hope of influencing and hardly anyone shows up is that a sign of public apathy or intelligence?

People need to believe that their participation will make a difference.





Apathy towards voting and poor attendance at local meetings can be viewed as signs that the public's interest and competence in participating in democratic processes is in decline.

Low participation levels have been attributed to increasing demands on the public's time and resources combined with growing frustration with commonly used participation options, such as public meetings.

Another contributing factor to non-participation is a general culture of exclusion that keeps certain group and individuals from participating.

Older, wealthy and well educated citizens dominate participation processes around the world.

Therefore, forums for public involvement are often dominated by the same people who claim to represent 'the people' while in fact they represent a privileged minority group of the general population.

A compelling argument against public apathy is that public involvement is contingent upon having meaningful and rewarding ways to participate, and make reference to the popularity of joining NGOs to support this assertion.

Selfish Motivations

People are predisposed to pursue their own interests, even if they hold noble intentions to further the public good.

The term, Not in My Backyard ('NIMBY') is commonly used to describe how people who live close to a proposed development site try to block a development with community benefits as a means of furthering their own interests



Deficiencies in the Public's Knowledge and Abilities

The public is criticized for having a limited knowledge of its elected representatives and government functions, and limited abilities to participate.

However, the public tends to incorporate a number of 'information short-cuts', such as relying on past experiences as well as political and media messages, to enable them to keep up with and when it is possible to have a role in public affairs.



Problems with the Processes

Common criticisms of community engagement processes include that they are not representative, cost too much and take too long; and do not adequately address power imbalances and political considerations.

In turn these process failings are seen to undermine the value of community engagement, to the extent that resulting decisions can be worse due to the public's involvement.

Not Representative

Some say that it does not matter if a broad cross section of the public participates in community engagement processes as the public is represented by its elected leaders.

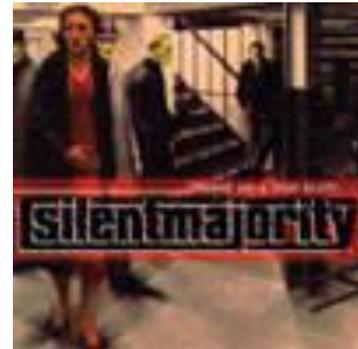
Leaders of large groups, whether their leadership is formal (i.e. elected) or informal, are almost always exceptional members of their group, in terms of material, professional and social status, which creates a gap between them and the larger group that they 'represent'.

Leaders' abilities to stay in touch with the people they represent are a measure of their personal commitment and the effectiveness of process requirements designed to keep them accessible and accountable to their members.

Furthermore there can a propensity for the more vocal members of society to draw undue attention to their views, at the expense of the more moderate minded members public who are often referred to as 'the silent majority'.

Disadvantaged and minority people are less likely to participate in their governance.

Finally there is the problem with options being chosen because they are the least objectionable to the largest group, rather than being the best options.



Excessive Costs and Time

A common complaint about community engagement processes is that they take too long and cost too much;

It has been noted that, 'although it is unfair to characterize all time consumed in community engagement as 'delay,' community engagement undeniably slows things down at the start of the process but time savings occur later in the process through the avoidance of controversy and outrage from affected stakeholders which is not only time consuming but also costly.



Power and Politics Dominate

Community engagement processes are renowned for being fraught by political and power struggles.

Research suggests that those with the most influence in community engagement processes are the most satisfied with these processes, with influence being a dimension of both power and politics.

Politics can be seen as, 'the result of contests which occur whenever attempts are made to secure authority over others', while power 'is commonly understood as the ability to produce intended effects'.



Conclusion

In this lesson we have built on the previous lesson where we discussed why community engagement is important and what the benefits are.

In this lesson we have added the constraints.

We can now see why community engagement is important and what the benefits and constraints are.

