



Engagementworks

Community Engagement Basics

Session 4 – Video 3

**Engaging on the Problem and the
Solution**

Engaging on the Problem and the Solution

Introduction

In this lesson we want to offer you an engagement model that we think will be more effective than the D-A-D model described in the previous lesson.

Before doing that we want to talk about the power of the community in effective decisions which will lead us into the engagement model that engages on the problem as well as the solution.



Problem Definition

Problem definition is one of the most critical parts of the decision process.

There is little point in reaching a decision on a problem only to discover that the decision is of no use because the problem was ill-defined in the first place.

This is why it is so important to involve key stakeholders at the problem definition stage.

They will know things unknown by the organisation's "experts" that will be vital to a successful outcome.

Getting stakeholders on board at this early stage sets things up for a successful result.



What is really interesting when we talk about experts is that most of us believe that valuable knowledge is concentrated in a very few hands.

We assume that the key to solving problems or making good decisions is finding the one right person who will have the answer.

If you think this then you are wrong because research dating back over 100 years shows that chasing the expert is a mistake.

What the research has shown is that groups are remarkably intelligent, and do not need to be dominated by exceptionally intelligent people in order to be smart.

When our imperfect judgements are aggregated in the right way, our collective intelligence is often excellent. Given the right conditions a crowd, i.e. the public, will almost always make a better decision than an expert or group of experts.

The Power of the Public

So, what are the characteristics of a smart crowd?

The conditions that a group needs to be smart are:

- Diversity
- Independence
- Decentralisation, and
- A way to aggregate the data contributed



Diversity means having variety

It's about including people from differing backgrounds

Diversity adds perspectives that would otherwise be absent because it removes the destructive characteristics of group decision-making.



Diversity expands a group's set of possible solutions and allows the group to conceptualise problems in novel ways

It also makes it easier for a group to make decisions based on facts, rather than on influence, authority, or group allegiance.

In other words it helps eliminate "group think".

Experiments conducted by Scott Page, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, showed that groups made up of smart and not-so-smart people did better than groups of smart people only.

He concluded that you could do better by selecting groups randomly and letting them solve a problem than spending a lot of time finding smart people and letting them solve the problem.

The point of Page's experiments is that diversity is on its own, valuable so that the simple fact of making a group diverse makes it better at problem solving.

Human beings can be **independent** decision makers.

Independence doesn't mean isolation, but it does mean relative freedom from the influence of others.

This is important because a group of people is far more likely to come up with a good decision if the people in the group are independent of each other.

Independence is important to intelligent decisions because –

- It keeps the mistakes that people make from being correlated, so that errors that people make don't wreck the group's collective judgement as long as they are not systematically pointing in the same direction



- Independent individuals are more likely to have new information rather than the same old data everyone is familiar with.

Decentralisation means moving away from the centre or power base

It implies that if you set a crowd of self-interested, independent people to work in a decentralised way on the same problem, instead of trying to direct their efforts from the centre, their collective solution is likely to be better than any other solution you could come up with.



In terms of decision making and problem solving there are a couple of things about decentralisation that really matter:

- It encourages specialisation which tends to make people more productive and efficient
- It increases the scope and diversity of the opinions and information in the system

Decentralisation is also crucial to what has been described as tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is knowledge that can't be easily summarised or conveyed to others because it is specific to a particular place, or job, or experience but is nonetheless tremendously valuable.

Connected with this is the assumption that is at the heart of decentralisation, namely that the closer a person is to a problem, the more likely he or she is to have a good solution to it.

Decentralisation's great strength is that it encourages independence and specialisation on the one hand while still allowing people to coordinate their activities and solve difficult problems on the other.

Its great weakness is that there is no guarantee that valuable information which is uncovered in one part of the system will find its way through the rest of the system. Sometimes valuable information never gets disseminated, making it less useful than it would otherwise be.

A decentralised system can only produce genuinely intelligent results if there's a means of **aggregating** the information of everyone in the system.

Decentralisation and aggregation go together.

There has to be a way to bring together the data collected through a decentralised process.

Information only becomes of value when it can be collated in a way that is useful to decision-making.



Debate and Decide Model

So, what is being advocated here is that you need to engage on both the problem and the solution if you want the best possible outcome.

Continuous engagement is important to ensure that your organisation stays connected to the community and stakeholders throughout the process.



If this doesn't happen and the community becomes disconnected even though they may have been engaged, say, at the problem definition stage they could become outraged if they were not involved in the intermediate stages leading up to the final decision to be made.

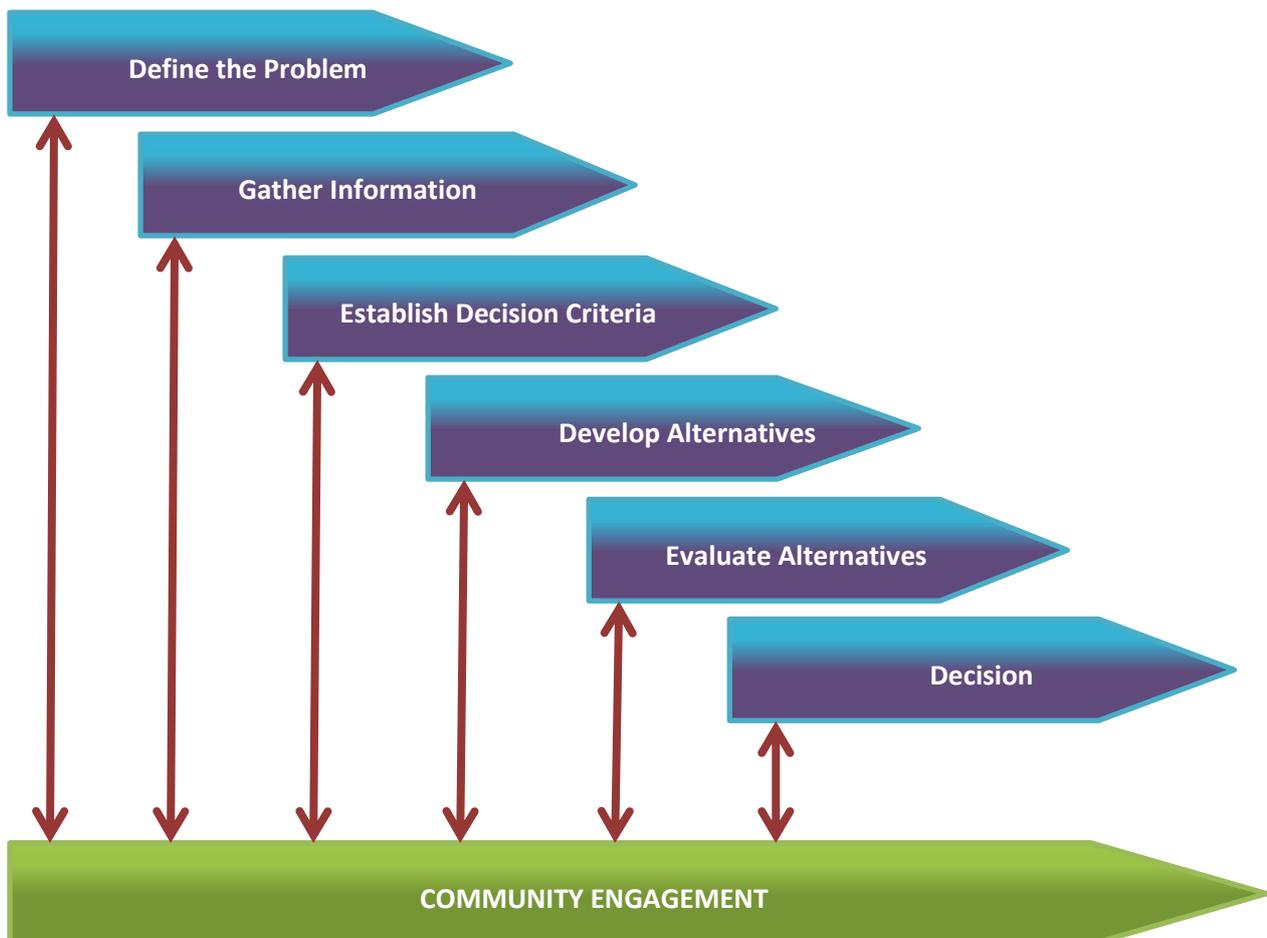
The community needs to know at the start what the various stages of the decision process will be and how they will be engaged at each of those stages.

Now, looking at this you could say, but this is going to take more time than just consulting on the solution, and you could be right.

But here's the thing.

The extra time spent up front getting the engagement process right and the community on board will be far less than the time, energy and resources you will spend on the outrage and controversy that could result from making a decision in a vacuum with minimal public participation.

Debate and Decide Model



Conclusion

In this lesson we have -

- emphasised the importance of problem definition to the decision process. People that impact on or are impacted by a decision should be fully involved in defining the problem and then remain engaged throughout the decision process. If stakeholders become disconnected during the process you are pretty much back to square one
- crowds are full of people capable of making smart decisions. Given the right conditions they will always make better decisions than experts.

