



Tools Training Strategy Facilitation

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Qualities of effective participatory processes (2002)

Our experience, and the published literature, suggests that the particular method of public participation, for instance, a citizens jury, stakeholder forum, consensus conference, is a secondary factor in success. The primary factors appear to be:

- 1) Whether the agency is genuinely committed to public participation and intends to honour the commitments it makes to its community.
- 2) The underlying human qualities of the process.

1) Agency commitment

It is likely that the single most important factor in the success of a public participation program is whether the agency is genuinely committed to public participation.

In their study into public participation in natural resource management in Australia, Buchy, Ross and Proctor 2000 note:

"Sadly, it seems that few Commonwealth and State agencies treat public participation as 'core business'. As a result it is difficult to achieve the 'paradigm shift' required in genuine adoption of participatory processes and their results.

"Further, their staff members' liaison, facilitation and extension skills are not truly respected and supported. Nor are the heavy personal demands of managing – or even just joining – participatory processes appreciated. The interpersonal interactions involved can be gruelling as often as they are rewarding, and staff often need to 'debrief' after stressful encounters. The time demands of travel and encroachment into 'personal' hours are also severe.

"Organisational culture within agencies engaged in any form of public participation thus needs to recognise and support the skill sets involved."

A number of other researchers emphasised the importance of having an agency committed to public involvement (for instance Beriele and Konisky 2000, Curtis and Lockwood 2000).

In Kuhn and Ballard, in their 1998 examination of four Canadian hazardous waste facility siting processes, found that the commitment of the agencies to open decision-making processes was the key element in retaining public trust which in turn made the difference between success and failure.

Aronoff and Gunter 1994 examined seven studies of locally based technological hazard disputes and identified three factors that contributed to better outcomes: the first of these was the agency-community relationship *'reflecting the agency's willingness to negotiate collaboratively with lay persons.'*

Petts 2000 concluded that this is a key challenge for government:

'It will also require change in the procedures of governance, in particular a need to break down the barriers of compartmentalised decision making by different authorities and groups.' (p830)

Agency commitment: some questions for the decision-maker

Buchy Ross and Proctor 2000 suggest that agency managers ask themselves these questions before entering a public participation process.

- Why do I want to start a participatory process?
- What is available for negotiation, what is not? Have I stated my intention clearly? Have we established a shared understanding?
- Am I committed to listening to the people and acting on their input (or am I just going through the motions)?
- Does the process add value to the community – what's in it for them?
- Given the scale, the process and the issue, have I allocated sufficient time and resources?
- Have I identified the major stakeholder groups and do I understand how they relate to each other? Do all stakeholders have an equitable chance to participate? Do they have the capacity to participate?
- Which useful skills/information will we potentially learn from taking part in this process?
- What are the risks?
- Is the approach we have designed appropriate for the Indigenous, other cultural or organisational group to be involved?

. Have we sought advice from participating Indigenous organisations or key informants (including Indigenous people and women) to ensure that the approach is suitable?

B) Underlying human qualities

Numerous deliberative methods are described in the literature, and in practice these are further adapted to suit particular situations. It's fair to say however that designing a deliberative process may be more an art than a science, and experienced practitioners should be involved wherever possible.

What make a participatory process successful? The literature suggests that a successful process depends less on the formal method of involvement than on the underlying qualities of openness, trust, respectful interaction, shared control and agency commitment.

Chess and Purcell 1999 concluded that the success of a participation program does not depend on the particular *form* of participatory process chosen. The factors affecting success or failure instead included the history of the issue, the context of participation, the expertise of those planning the effort and the commitment of the agency.

Beierle and Konisky 2000 identified qualities of successful processes: the quality of the deliberative process; the quality of communication with government; the commitment of the lead agency; and the degree to which jurisdiction over the process was shared.

Poisner's 1996 evaluation of participatory processes suggested seven criteria for the effectiveness of community involvement processes:

1. Do the participants represent all significant sectors of the community?
2. Does the process focus on the common good?
3. Does the process engender critical reflection of the values underlying the discussion?
4. Do the participants communicate in person, face to face?
5. Does the process involve citizens, as opposed to individuals hired to represent citizens?
6. Does the participation process encourage dialogue?
7. Does the process inculcate civic virtue?

Tuler and Webler 1999 interviewed participants in a major US forest management consultation process and derived seven 'normative principles' for effective community consultation processes:

1. Access to the process: physical access at times and places that suited the participants.

2. Power to influence the process and outcomes: participants could influence the agenda and consultative process.
3. Access to information: participants requests for information where satisfied.
4. Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions: e.g. neutral facilitator, sensitive seating arrangement.
5. Facilitation of constructive personal behaviours ie. the process promoted respect, openness, honesty, understanding, listening and trust.
6. Adequate analysis: process goes beyond assertions, and tries to empirically verify facts.
7. Enabling social conditions necessary for future processes:
 - resolving conflict not heightening it;
 - building better relationships between different participants and interest groups;
 - promoting a sense of place; and
 - being aware of public concerns about the cost and effort of such a process.

Compare these with the conditions of procedural justice in hazardous siting decisions set out by Hunold and Young 1999:

1. inclusiveness;
2. consultation over equal resources and access to information (to help overcome power imbalance);
3. shared decision-making authority; and
4. authoritative decision-making.

Similar evaluative criteria have been developed by other researchers (Duffy, Halgren et al 1998; Beierle and Konisky 2000).

Some advice for project designers

A number of studies provide useful advice for those who design public involvement processes.

Chess and Purcell 1999 concluded that empirical research supports 'rules of thumb' which are based on the accumulated experience of practitioners: Clarify goals (e.g. ensure the agency's underlying goals don't contradict it's public support for participation).

1. Begin participation early and invest in advance planning.
2. Adapt traditional participatory forums (e.g. precinct committees) to meet desired process and outcomes goals, and involve experts from outside agencies to provide technical assistance.
3. Include a mix of participatory methods eg. community advisory committee for sustained interactions, workshops to develop options, polls to involve larger numbers of people.

4. Collect feedback on the public participation effort, so you can demonstrate that it 'worked'.

Lyn Carson 2000, in her work for Planning NSW, proposed a four-step process which built on the work of Ortwin Renn in Germany (Renn et al 1993).

1. *Visioning*: a randomly selected group of community members, that is demographically representative of the affected community, is brought together to establish visions, values and the criteria against which the process can be evaluated.
2. *Operationalising*: 'experts' who may be knowledgeable members of the community, advocates, or technical experts, are brought in to assist the first group to form an action plan and test it against the stated values.
3. *Testing*: the plan is put to the community as a whole, typically through a survey.
4. *Evaluation*: if the proposal is approved, a firm recommendation is made, the result is communicated to the whole community, and the participant group evaluates the consultation process against the criteria established in step 1.

Carson suggests this structure can be adopted to suit a range of deliberative methods including consensus conferences, citizen juries and Charettes.

Dr Janette Hartz-Karp in the WA Ministry of Planning, is utilising *community consensus forums* to seek solutions to some of Perth's most difficult land use conflicts. This model mixes community activists, randomly selected community members, agency staff and technical experts in intensive one-day consensus seeking events. The participants are broken into work-groups under the guidance of facilitators, who are specially trained for the event.

She simultaneously utilises *deliberative polls* to consult with the community (where subjects a mailed an information pack with the survey) in order to test the broader public's views. (pers. comm. Dr Janette Hartz-Karp March 2002)

Specifically concerning facility siting processes, Kuhn and Ballard 1998 in their analysis of the siting of Canadian hazardous waste facilities proposed a generalised 'Open approach' with seven steps:

1. establish general environmental criteria;
2. broad public consultation;
3. invitation to participate;
4. consultations with interested communities;
5. site investigations;
6. community referendum;
7. site decision.

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