

## Consultation: what works



Thanks for inviting me to give this short theme-setting address.

Like many of you I've winged my way this field without having much specific training. So I was pleased to be invited to carry out a consultancy for the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) last year. This was a global literature review into community participation in decision-making for new waste facilities. I'd like to briefly share some of what I learnt with you.

I want to talk about the role of trust in public consultation. Trust is hard to define and its presence is often elusive. Often you usually only realise it's important when it's gone - and then it's too late. Fortunately there are some principles we can apply to protect and build trust - they are the subject of my talk.

In addition, I am offering two decision tools to help you make (and justify) rational choices about that most vexed question - what is the right depth of public participation for a given situation? They're attached. I hope you find them useful.

The first thing I want to say is that there can be a lot at stake in a public consultation. When a consultation goes wrong it can be an awful, stressful, humiliating experience for the professionals, the public, and the agency. Many managers regard any engagement with the public as a high risk enterprise and seek to limit meaningful participation and control the outcome from the start. Some try to avoid it altogether. Many public consultations are shams. Many are nothing more than elaborate defence mechanisms designed to protect the decisions of barely accountable power-holders. The public knows this. As a result the enterprise of public engagement in Australia is now mired in cynicism, fear, and hidden agendas.

My second point is that, paradoxically, I believe the public still want to trust government. That's because trust is a low-energy state. When people trust they can have their say and then get on with their lives - they don't have to waste energy on anger and distrustful vigilance. They don't have to form action groups and stay up at night having boring meetings planning how to overturn what they see as a corrupted decision-making process.

Next, consultations are about power. The subjects of consultation - government plans, strategies and development proposals - almost always alter the distribution of risk in our densely woven society. They create new potential winners and losers. The public knows this too.

Fortunately for us, risk communicators have identified a number of factors which influence how individuals perceive risk, including: (Rowan 1996)

- 1) risks that are judged to be *controllable* by individuals are deemed less risky than those which are uncontrollable;
- 2) risks that are *familiar* to the individual and well known to science seem less risky than those which are unfamiliar and unknown;
- 3) risks that are *voluntarily accepted* appear less risky than involuntary exposures;
- 4) risks with a direct *benefit* to affected individuals are deemed less risky than those which lack a clear and direct benefit; and
- 5) risks which are *evenly distributed* across society are perceived as less risky than those which inequitably burden certain individuals or communities.

The typical response of members of the public to apparently uncontrolled, unfamiliar, involuntary, non-beneficial, or unfair risks is *outrage*.

There is a highly political dimension to outrage: as Rowan points out, these perceptions are expressions of various types of power: informational, decisional, and distributional. When people feel deprived of facts, unable to control their lives, and forced to bear the costs but not the benefits of change, outrage is a natural response.

The literature on risk communicators is quite explicit: public outrage can only be assuaged by power-sharing - something that both creates and requires trust.

The classic literature on risk communication is almost 20 years old but consultation practitioners have gradually come to the same conclusion through the force of experience. The trend is now clearly towards higher and higher levels of public participation - citizen juries, consensus conferences, collaborative forums, deliberative polls, referenda... (for instance, see Planning NSW's *Plan First* web site).

In these processes the outcomes are not known in advance and there is a degree of shared decision-making with participants. In other words, there is a degree of power sharing.

It's clear that to do our jobs well, we will need to be able to sensitively design processes that push the bounds of conventional consultation. Crucially, we will need to be able to *sell* high participation processes to risk-averse managers.

This paper includes two decision tools which will allow you to present rational cases for 'high participation' to risk averse power-holders.

But first I want to touch on three foundation concepts.

**1) The ladder of public participation**

Most of you will know this one. Community engagement covers a spectrum of possible approaches, with associated capabilities. It is often presented as a 'ladder'. I have blended two existing ladders (Arnstein 1969, IAPP 2000) to create one suited to local government.

The point is - the literature clearly shows that the greater the level of risk and/or conflict in the situation, the higher up the ladder you need to travel in order to manage that risk. This can be a difficult decision for many managers.

EMPOWER ↑ PARTNER ↑ INVOLVE ↑ CONSULT ↑ INFORM ↑ INFLUENCE	↑  Increased capacity for information processing and learning	↑  Increased capacity to elicit values	↑  Increased capacity for problem solving	↑  Increased capacity for resolving conflict
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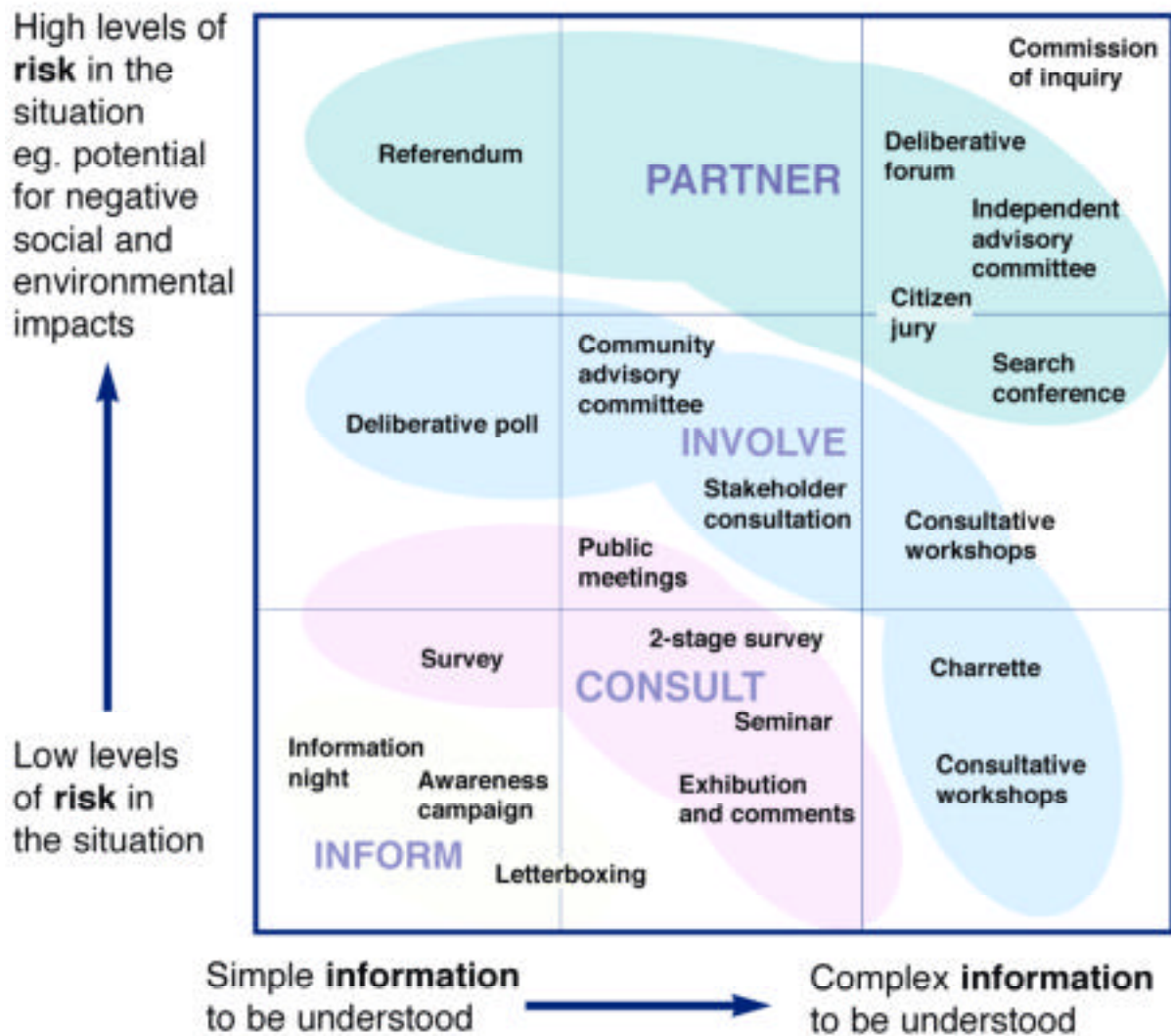
Table: Community engagement ladder

(Note that, in practice, most public involvement programs consist of an *integrated mix* of approaches, eg. distribution of information materials to the community ('Inform'), consultative surveys with the broad community ('Consult') and community workshops with keen participants ('Involve').)

## 2) The Public Participation Matrix

A useful way of making sense of the spectrum of different engagement methods is to compare the *inherent risk* in the situation with the *complexity of information* which needs to be understood by the participants for informed decision-making to occur. This allows us to compare some of the wide variety of engagement processes which are currently in use.

This matrix provides insight into the fitness of different methods to specific situations. It forms one of the attached decision tools.



### 3) Agency credibility

The choices required in, for instance, local planning, are rarely simple matters of balancing logic or data. They require judgements on incomplete information, informed by local values and concerns: hence they are inherently moral endeavours, which are as much about trust as facts.

'Trust' is an elusive idea, but it certainly includes credibility, a concept that has been the subject of a great deal of research. (Some have argued that it makes no sense to talk of trust in the context of contemporary government - the best we can really hope for is credibility.)

The literature is remarkably strong and consistent on one key point. It turns out that an agency's credibility is as important - if not more important - than its expertise. This can be a difficult idea for managers, planners or engineers to understand. Yet is it essential to the design of successful consultation processes.

The effect is that proposals introduced by trustworthy institutions are perceived to be less risky and more beneficial than those introduced by untrustworthy institutions.<sup>1</sup> This can also be a difficult concept to digest.

The credibility of authorities is based on a perception that those authorities share desired public values such as honesty, openness, lack of bias, fairness and overriding concern for the community's well-being. (McComas and Trumbo 2001)

Significantly, there is strong evidence that the *credibility* or *trustworthiness* of authorities is central to the resolution of public concerns over planning issues or new technologies.

Honesty is essential in building trust in relationships, hence hidden agendas or vested interests may damage credibility. Attempts to deceive or manipulate the public also destroy credibility. This suggests that the use of public relations 'spin' to manipulate public attitudes or gloss over the potential risks of proposed developments runs the risk of damaging an institution's credibility and exacerbating public conflict.

Following her intricate examination of the advisory committee process for Hampshire County Council's waste strategy, Petts 1997 concluded:

*'It is the credibility of the expert that is at least as important, or more important, than his or her knowledge. Credibility is gained by personal and organisational performance, by evidence of independence, and by evidence*

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<sup>1</sup> This effect is strongly supported by a wealth of empirical research: Kasperson 1986; Fewer 1999; Siegrist and Cvetkovich 2000; Siegrist, Cvetkovic and Roth 2000; Siegrist 2000; Sandman et al 1993; Petts 1994; McComas 2001.

*that the expert is acting with the interests of the public in mind.'* (p378)

A number of studies in the fields of communication research and risk management have attempted to unpack the public's understanding of 'trustworthiness'.<sup>2</sup> These studies variously suggest that the public perceives trustworthy authorities as displaying:

- competence and expertise
- dynamism
- lack of bias
- fairness
- concern for the community's well-being
- honesty and openness
- consistency and predictability

It follows that an organisation should not be both a proponent and a trusted player in a technology siting issue. Where a government body is a proponent, care should be taken to ensure to that the decision-making process itself is independent of that body. Once again, this is can be a rather surprsing idea to many in local government.

The role of the media is a factor in risk perception. Sandman et al 1993 carried our risk perception experiments with members of the public and concluded that news stories filled with distrust and outrage increased the reader's perception of risk compared to stories without distrust or controversy, irrespective of the information content.

Counter-intuitively, there is evidence that public may perceive bad news stories to be more trustworthy than good or neutral stories (Seigrist and Cvetkovich 2000).

Yet conflict and conflict-focused news stories are a virtually inevitable fact wherever new developments are proposed. This underlines the importance of government agencies remaining, wherever possible, unbiased mediators and umpires dedicated to the public interest, rather than interested proponents.

### **So 'what works'? (The qualities of effective participatory processes)**

What makes a participatory process successful? The literature suggests that a successful process depends less on the formal method of involvement than on 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

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<sup>2</sup> Reviewed in McComas and Trumbo 2001.

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:

- Access to the process: physical access at times and places that suited the participants.
- Power to influence the process and outcomes: participants could influence the agenda and consultative process.
- Access to information: participants requests for information where satisfied.
- Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions: e.g. neutral facilitator, sensitive seating arrangement.
- Facilitation of constructive personal behaviours ie. the process promoted respect, openness, honesty, understanding, listening and trust.
- Adequate analysis: process goes beyond assertions, and tries to empirically verify facts.
- 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.

These compare with the conditions of procedural justice set out by Hunold and Young 1999:

- inclusiveness;

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

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

**Conclusion: "deposits in the trust bank"**

The lesson I take from all this is the pivotal role of credibility in whatever level of consultation we are attempting (in all forms of communication actually!).

I take McComas and Trumbo's seven qualities as a checklist:

- competence and expertise
- dynamism
- lack of bias
- fairness
- concern for the community's well-being
- honesty and openness
- consistency and predictability

And I routinely ask myself "is this proposed communication/process making a deposit or a withdrawal from the credibility bank?"

Hopefully the answer will keep allow me (and you) to tread that fine line between service to the public good and service to the needs of our agencies.

I hope that is a useful dissertation. Now let's divide into groups to capture our own lessons.

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## APPENDIX

### Two decision tools <sup>3</sup>

Deciding on the appropriate level of public participation depends on the context and appears to be as much an art as a science. Advice from experienced practitioners should always be sought when designing a community involvement process. However as a guide, the following tools may be useful.

#### 1) The Public Participation Matrix <sup>4</sup>

The choice of a community involvement process depends on your assessment of two factors:

- the *risk* inherent in the situation e.g. the potential for negative environmental or social impact, or the risk of community conflict.
- the *complexity* of information which needs to be digested before informed participation is possible.  
Here are some questions to help you evaluate these factors.

#### *Inherent risk*

1) How do you rate the potential for conflict with the community over this decision?

Low     
  Medium     
  High

2) How do you rate the potential for social, environmental, or financial damage if the wrong decision is made?

Low     
  Medium     
  High

3) How many unknowns are there in the current decision-making equation?

None     
  A few     
  Many

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<sup>3</sup> These tools were developed in the course of a joint project between Les Robinson and Nolan-ITU for the Western Australian Local Government Association: *A Pro-Active Public Participation Policy for Waste Recovery in Western Australia*, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> The assessment questionnaire is inspired by a similar tool used by the International Association for Public Participation.

**Complexity of information**

4) How much information needs to be communicated to the community for them to participate?

<input type="checkbox"/>	A few simple facts	<input type="checkbox"/>	A detailed proposal	<input type="checkbox"/>	A significant amount of technical data
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5) How much learning is required by the participants before they can be expected to make an informed decision?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Low	<input type="checkbox"/>	Medium	<input type="checkbox"/>	High
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6) How many abstract or technical concepts need to digested before an informed decision can be made?

<input type="checkbox"/>	None	<input type="checkbox"/>	A few	<input type="checkbox"/>	Many
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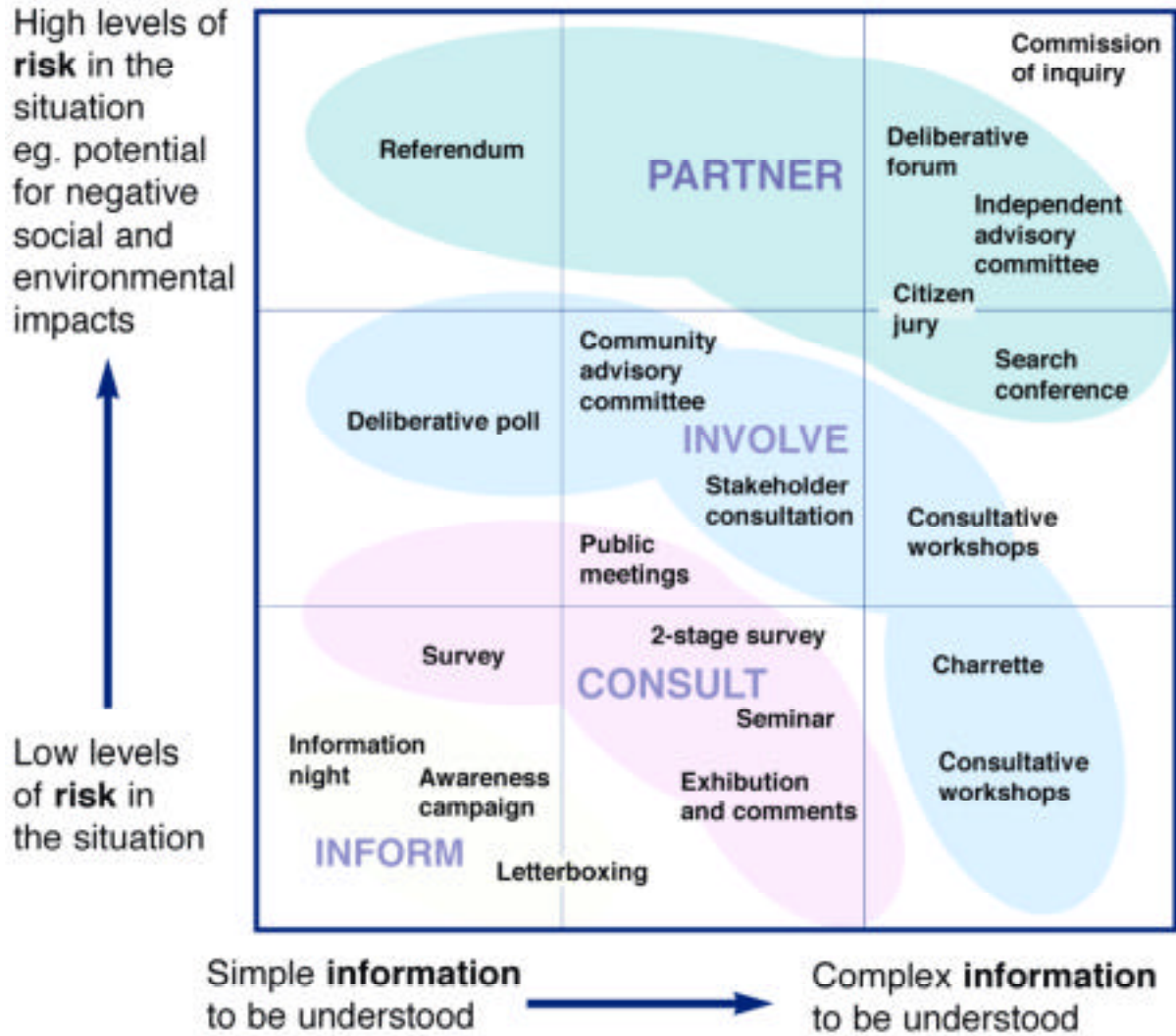
**Interpretation**

**IF** most of your answers are in the left hand boxes, then CONSULT methods may be sufficient.

**IF** your answers are scattered between the left, centre and right hand boxes, then INVOLVE methods may be sufficient.

**IF** the most of your answers are in the right-hand boxes, then you should consider using PARTNER techniques to minimise your risk and maximise the amount of knowledge and perspectives brought into the decision-making process.

The matrix below is a guide to particular community involvement methods which may be suited to the risk and complexity of your situation.



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Figure1: The Public Participation Matrix © Les Robinson 2002

## 2) Vroom-Yetton Decision Tree <sup>5</sup>

In 1973 Victor Vroom and Phillip Yetton introduced a contingency decision-making model for the business world. The model was intended to aid in deciding on the level of participation by subordinates to improve the quality of decision making in a corporate setting. The utility of the model was verified in a number of empirical studies.

The model was subsequently modified slightly to allow for public participation in general and in natural resource decision-making in specific, and it has been tested in a number of independent studies (Lawrence and Deagen 2001).

I have adapted the model very slightly to improve clarity and suit the Australian context.

### KEY

**A:** The manager solves the problem or makes the decision alone without public involvement (=INFORM).

**B:** The manager seeks information from segments of the public, but decides alone in a manner which may or may not reflect public influence. (=CONSULT)

**C:** The manager shares the problem with separate segments of the public or stakeholders, getting ideas and suggestions, then makes a decision which reflects public influence. (=INVOLVE, with separated stakeholder segments)

**D:** The manager shares the problem with the public and stakeholders as an assembled group, getting ideas and suggestions, then makes a decision which reflects public influence. (=INVOLVE, with mixed participants)

**E:** The manager shares the problem with the public and stakeholders as an assembled group, and together the manager and the group attempt to reach agreement on a solution. (=PARTNER)

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted slightly from Lawrence, R.L, and D.A Deagen. 2001, Choosing Public Participation Methods for Natural Resources: A Context-Specific Guide. *Society and Natural Resources*, 14:857-872.

1) Does the manager have sufficient information to make a high quality decision?

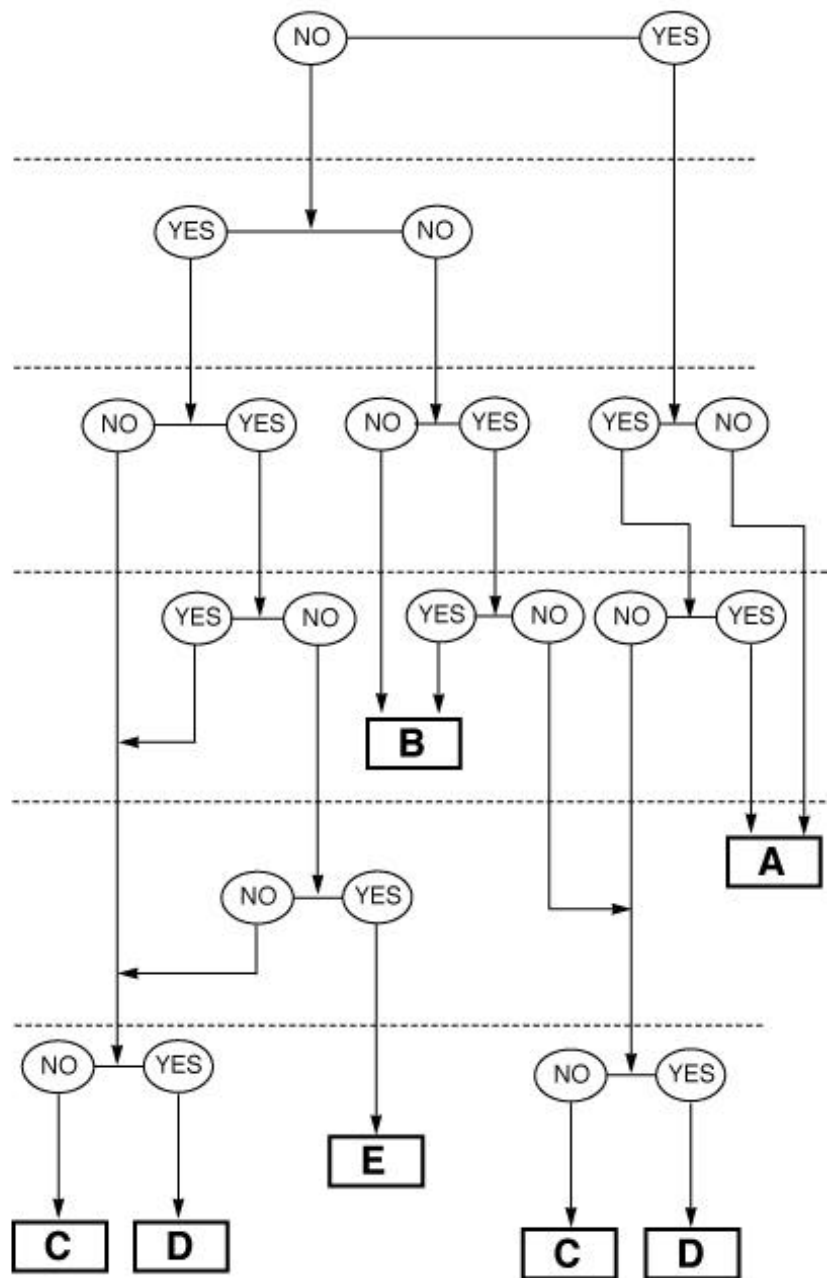
2) Is the problem structured such that there is space for alternative solutions?

3) Is public acceptance of the decision critical to effective implementation?

4) If public acceptance is necessary, is it reasonably assured if the manager decides alone?

5) Are the public and stakeholders willing to engage in a dialogue in order to improve the situation?

6) Would the quality of public input (or future relations) be improved if learning occurs among the public and stakeholders about the issues?



**Figure 2: Vroom-Yetton decision tree for selecting public participation methods for government decision making.**

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