

Beyond Public Meetings: Connecting Community Engagement with Decision-Making

– Vivien Twyford, Stuart Waters, Max Hardy and John Dengate.

REVIEW

Angus shows his father his classroom and where he sits. His cluster of desks is named 'the flowers' however privately he considers himself a 'bear'. How many times have you acquiesced against your own preference, just to keep the decision making process moving, only to leave with resentment that your voice was not heard or views incorporated? Beyond Public Meetings starts by taking us back to our school days with a wonderful short anecdote, that describes how getting communities to agree, on something as simple as a group name, isn't easy. This simple story goes on to highlight the assumptions made and concerns identified by those inside and outside the group decision making process.

In a world where community consultation and engagement have become more important and issues such as global warming, water shortages and the local impact of globalisation highlight how community issues are also everyday individual concerns and individuals want to play a role in deciding the best course of action.

This hands-on tool assists the community consultation process by providing techniques to ensure the voices of all the stakeholders in the process are heard. It acknowledges that everyone comes to the process with their own assumptions and while these assumptions may have some element of truth, pre-determined views often hinder the process of listening to all the ideas and experience required to make the best decision.

The book is based on over 10 years of Australian and international experience by the authors. The book identifies the basics: who is a community, what is community engagement and what are the major challenges. It develops a common understanding of these elements by using a variety of interesting case studies through out the book. It outlines in detail the 3 foundations that provide an understanding of community engagement as value-based; decision-oriented and goal-driven and how strong foundations ensure success during the community engagement process.

Like any process there is always ongoing need for review. The Twyford Consulting Group have experienced this process in a range of environments nationally and internationally and refined and incorporated changes over the years. This book is easy to read and use and the authors encourage all community stakeholders: the decision-maker, the practitioner, the project manager and the community member, to build skills to ensure successful outcomes for all involved. Many of the tools and techniques provided are transferable to a range of settings where making group decisions can be challenging. Beyond Public Meetings offers readers ways to build their confidence to be more proactive in a variety of consultation settings.

Perhaps in the future, with these new skills, Angus could be happy being a 'flower' or perhaps find a way to find a new group name that incorporates the needs and interests of the flower and bear supporters and anyone else involved in this little community.