

engaging PEOPLE

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Consultation - confusion or co-operation?

BY VIVIEN TWYFORD

The NSW Minister for Utilities, Carl Scully, recently announced that the time allowed for public debate on the desalination plant in Sydney's southern suburbs would be doubled. Radio advertising suggests to the public that "this is a chance for you to have your say." Was this a victory for community consultation? I don't think so. I think it's yet another example of the frightening confusion about why and when we consult communities.

The question of whether or not a desalination plant should be constructed, and if so, where it should be put, was always going to be a tricky one for the government. In my experience, when a decision-maker is faced with a potentially controversial decision they say "We must consult the public here", "Let's find out what the public think about this proposal" and the public are then "consulted" about a proposal that someone already sees as a solution.

The State government has decided and announced that a desalination plant is to be constructed in Kurnell. So what are they going to consult the public about? Such a "consultation" is typically framed as: "This is what is being proposed. Tell us if you don't like it."

What response does this typical "consultation" elicit from the public?

Those who never hear the question, say nothing. Those who hear the question and who like the proposal say nothing. Those who hear the question and don't like the proposal leap to their collective feet and object loudly. They expect first to be listened to and second to influence decision-makers because they are, after all, being "consulted".

What actually happens? Not much. Objectors are categorised as "activists" or "the usual suspects". Those professionals who used their knowledge, expertise and experience to make their recommendation in the first place feel that the public's challenge is out of place. "If they only knew what we know, they would understand and agree with us. They only disagree because they really don't know enough." They recommend more information is distributed so "the public will understand."

Regarding the desalination plant, we can predict that the government will hear from a lot of people who are unhappy with the proposal. People will say they don't agree with desalination. They will say

they don't want a plant in their suburb. They will say there are other ways to safeguard our water supply. We know this at the outset. The government knows this at the outset. The public know this at the outset. What will change?

In my view, the public must first be engaged around the identification

of the problem that needs to be solved. Is it "whether or not to build a desalination plant?" or is it "how do we provide appropriate cost-effective water supplies to meet the long-term needs of Sydney?" Then there must be some clarity about the public's role in deciding on an appropriate solution to the problem. Can they provide input that will allow any decision made by technocrats or politicians to be better informed or more sustainable? When "consultation" is a genuine process in which the public's input is used to make decisions, then members of the public can engage with decision-makers, facilitated by practitioners, to help create a solution that is well-informed, owned and implementable.

Sometimes decision-makers do have to make tough and unpopular decisions. Community engagement can help everyone to live with those decisions if the process is carefully designed, framed around the real problem to be solved and allows time for thoughtful deliberation.



Vivien Twyford

IAP2 Public Training Schedule for the first half of 2006

Adelaide	March - Planning, Techniques & Communication modules
Auckland	May - Planning, Techniques, Communication, Facilitation & Evaluation modules
Sydney	June - Planning, Techniques, Communication, Facilitation & Evaluation modules

Please see our website www.twyford.com.au for more details

*A flexible and
dynamic team of
consultants
which specialises
in expanding the
capabilities
and solving
the problems of
organisations*

Focused on Foundations

BY STUART WATERS

Have you ever renovated your home? If so you will know what I am currently going through – watching brickies over breakfast and diggers over dinner. We've recently seen our footings and slab go in, which means the garden is under metres of rubble.

In September, as a good excuse to abandon the building site for a while, I spent two days at a facilitative leadership course run by the Institute for Cultural Affairs. At first I was unsure about taking this course because it was based around a couple of techniques we know. Why should I spend two days learning about tools I already use? But as it turns out I learned a lot.

On day one we dealt with the art of the focused conversation. This is a questioning technique based around four different levels of questions:

- objective,
- reflective,
- interpretive and
- decisional.

It's a tool we often use in our work. In fact I would never embark on a group facilitation project without this technique in my tool belt, either using it to underpin the agenda of the session or a tool to help participants structure their thinking processes.

On day two we covered the technique that we call card-

storming. This is a method that is almost a Twyford signature. I have used it many times.

So what did I learn?

I learned the difference between being able to use a technique on the one hand, and understanding its broad philosophical underpinning on the other. I learned, again, that the important thing is not the technique but the reason for choosing it.

The Institute for Cultural Affairs refers to focused conversation and card-storming as Technology of Participation methods, but the course reminded me that it's more than technology. The strength of these techniques is the framework – the understanding of the value these techniques can add to group processes, and the critical importance of thinking, planning, rigorous design and skillful execution. These tools reflect an approach based on an understanding of how the world is, and how people function both as individuals and in groups.

The weekend course has given me something to build on, and with this solid structure in place I can use the tools with even more success. The foundations are always important. Even if they make a mess of my garden.



Stuart Waters

Can you run a public meeting for me?

BY MAX HARDY

Being contacted by a client to help with a community engagement process is unnerving when the caller says "We have a tricky situation and some very upset members of the community. We think this is a job for a professional facilitator. Can you run a public meeting for us in a couple of weeks?"

It's just as scary if someone asks us to run a citizens jury or a deliberative poll, before even discussing what the project or issue is about. What we are being asked, in other words, is "Can you run a technique for us?"

Those who have done the IAP2 Planning module will know that there are many questions to consider prior to even thinking about techniques. For example:

1. What are you actually trying to resolve or achieve in this project?
2. How do you believe that community engagement can assist you?
3. What is the level of concern or enthusiasm about this project?
4. How has this community experienced community engagement in the past? What level of trust exists?
5. How does communication happen in this community? Can we piggy-back onto existing ways to connect with people? How can we make it easy for people to learn about this issue/project and make an informed contribution?

6. How committed are decision-makers to allowing the community engagement process to inform their decisions?
7. What do you understand to be the values held by this community? (ie. what is important to people?)
8. Who has an interest in this project or might be affected by it? Of these, who have we not heard from?

Exploring such questions helps us decide how much effort to put into community engagement, and how we might approach it. There is no shortage of techniques, but we need something that helps us to engage the relevant people/groups, match the level of influence the process can have on the decision, and respect the values and strengths of that community.

Lastly, the technique you choose is not nearly as important as the sponsor's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. It is easy to ruin any useful technique if there is little integrity, poor intent, or mixed messages.

So now when I am asked to run a technique, I might reply "Have you read my article in the November 2005 Twyford Consulting newsletter?" I certainly don't want you to stop ringing me!



Max Hardy

Creating change in organisations: The attraction of the “quick fix”

BY VICKI VAARTJES

When you drive a car it is a simple matter to change direction – just turn the wheel and let the laws of physics do the rest. If only changing direction was as easy for organisations as it is for cars.

As dynamic social systems, organisations tend to respond to change in ways that are emergent, and often unpredictable. This presents a considerable challenge for those who are charged with responsibility for creating change and improvement.

When facing the need for organisational change the response of managers is sometimes to look for a quick fix – a tool, tip or technique that will do the job – much like a steering wheel does the job for your car. Unfortunately organisations do not have a simple steering wheel with which to change direction, but there are a few questions that can help us become informed so that when we act to change direction we are more likely to achieve the outcomes we want.

Question #1: Are we taking a systems-wide perspective?

Organisations are complex social systems so it makes sense that we should apply systems-thinking in our attempts to diagnose and address problems in our organisations and work teams. This approach acknowledges the complex relationships that exist between people, departments and functions, and recognises that a change in one part of the system can impact other parts because of this web of interrelationships.

Question #2: Is our approach aligned with the strategic direction?

An organisation's strategic direction should inform the solution

so that action takes the organisation a step closer to its desired goals. This implies the need to be very clear about where the organisation is heading – its direction and purpose – and the ability to identify the key characteristics or qualities that must be in place in order to forward this vision.

Question #3: Are we planning to take action that will create sustainable results?

Creating sustainable results within a social system also requires engagement – this means inviting staff to participate in critical change processes such as planning, decision-making and implementation. When done effectively, engagement supports awareness, learning, exploration of the issues, and ownership of outcomes – all necessary precursors for sustainable results. Another part of sustaining gains is ensuring that the organisation's processes and procedures encourage the kind of behaviour and practices that are desired.

Despite considerable effort, the experience of many organisations is that gains are not sustained, or have less impact than desired. It can be easy when faced with a problem to apply a quick fix, but when we do we run the risk of inadvertently creating another problem to fix!

Thinking through these three questions helps us to see the big picture and focus our fix on what will yield the most desirable and sustainable systems-wide impact. With better understanding, managers can steer their organisations through the twists and bends of the competitive market place.



Dr Vicki Vaartjes

Evaluation – Purposeless or Purposeful?

BY JOHN DENGATE

You just had a long and controversial public meeting and were glad to get out alive!

The client asks you the next day - “how do you think it went?”

You answer- ... “pretty well given the dynamics in the room”

... “I think we got the message across...”

... “at least people had a chance to have their say”

... “not sure, but I think it was OK...”

But why are we asking? What do we really want to know?

Aren't we most interested in how the meeting ran against some objectives we set in advance, and whether the meeting was useful in helping us get the outcomes we are seeking from engaging the public?

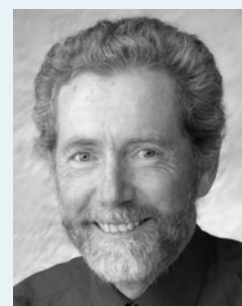
A key step in effective evaluation is making it purposeful, that is, setting a clear goal for our questions.

For instance, the objective of our controversial public meeting may have been to provide a clear understanding of a proposal, so the client's evaluation question becomes just that: “Did people

leave with a clear understanding of our proposal?”

Our evaluation would then focus on the evidence for getting the message across. You might use evaluation sheet questions such as:

- How well did this session answer your questions about this proposal? - Well/ Partly/ Poorly
- How well informed do you now feel about the proposal? - Well/ Partly/ Poorly



John Dengate

We might also monitor the level and quality of the questions being asked by the attendees after the presentation – did questions extend beyond a basic understanding of what was proposed? If so, that's a good sign that peoples' understanding had been stretched.

With a little planning we can make sure that all our evaluation is purposeful.

Twyford Consulting in the USA

BY JOHN DENGATE

Max Hardy and I attended the IAP2 2005 International Conference in Portland, Oregon in October.

What struck us was the passion and energy for the practice of engaging communities that emerged in both the keynote addresses and the sessions. It was hugely encouraging to realise over 300 people shared our belief about the value of participative processes, and to see the range of interests represented. We were challenged by Paul Loeb (author of "Soul of a Citizen") as to what role both IAP2 and we as individuals have in advocating for change at a political level to ensure a more deliberative and representative democracy, as well as advocating for engagement processes. This galvanised some interesting discussion about the roles we can play at an individual, group and organisational level.

We both fought off jet lag to facilitate pre-conference training. We were impressed by the increasing levels of grass roots interest in making better decisions, and their desire to be better equipped to challenge and support organisations in their attempts to engage with the public.



John Dengage, building bridges with international colleagues in Portland

A growing area of interest also is more effective evaluation of community engagement, with both practitioners and researchers developing and using some quite innovative yet practical methods.

Portland is a joy to visit (apart from the drizzle!), and is really proactive in both transport and community sustainability, with extensive bus, tram and light rail network, and a corresponding highly developed community network that forms an integral part of local government processes.

Examples of our recent or current jobs...

New Zealand

- Working with Auckland North Shore City Council to develop internal Public Consultation Policy and Procedures
- Delivering IAP2 Certificate training to Christchurch and Auckland City Councils

Public sector

- Engaged by the Victorian Department of Justice to provide support in the development of an innovative Neighbourhood Justice Centre project
- Working with the NSW Department of Commerce and the Sydney Catchment Authority on the communication strategy for the Metropolitan Water Plan
- Evaluated a two year stakeholder consultation process for NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Designed and implemented an innovative community panel for Kiama Council which

supported their Local Environment Plan review process

- Working with the Local Government Association of Queensland on a community engagement capacity building project

NGO Sector

- Undertaking a research project in the Greater Wollongong area for the Asthma Foundation of NSW
- Assisting Lifeline Australia Inc. engage its stakeholders in its governance reform process

Private Sector

- Provision of workplace development strategies including leadership mentoring/coaching and team development for Australia's largest steel manufacturing company
- Advising a large construction material company on consultation strategies to support a new industrial development in Western Sydney

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