Public Engagement: A 21st Century Leadership Skill

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Agenda:

• Is public engagement a fad?
• Why it’s tough…to do well.
• The roles you must play to host an effective public process.
Is Public Engagement a Fad?

Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever)

Data-driven and evidence-based practices present new opportunities for public leaders to increase impact while reducing inefficiency. But in adopting such approaches, public leaders must avoid the temptation to act in a top-down manner. Instead, they should design and implement programs in ways that engage community members directly in the work of change.

What I Learned When an Angry Group Destroyed My Public Meeting

By Ron Littlefield | January 20, 2016

Civic engagement. There is a lot to draw to in that phrase. It encapsulates, as one writer put it, “every many ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future.” The quality of that participation and the measure of improvement are both the subject of much hard work.

These civic experiments are getting citizens more involved in governing themselves

By John Gastil and Hollie Russon-Gilman | February 19

President Obama steps at the Highland Center for the Arts in Springfield, Ill, on Wednesday, where he appealed for help tackling modern politics of “polarization and meanness” that “turns
“Data-driven practices and programs hold great promise as a means for making progress against seemingly intractable social problems. But ultimately they will work only when community members are able to engage in them as leaders and partners...As policymakers, elected officials, philanthropists, and nonprofit leaders shift resources to data-driven programs, they must ensure that community engagement becomes a critical element of that shift.”

Good, Bad, Ugly of Public Engagement in CA: aka, Culture Clash

• 85% of respondents say “their views on public engagement have changed since their careers began.”

• 77% of respondents “are interested in hearing more about public engagement practices that have worked in other places.

Good, Bad, Ugly of Public Engagement in CA

- **76%** say their public meetings are “typically dominated with narrow agendas”

- **64%** say their public hearings “typically attract complainers and ‘professional citizens’”

- **69%** say a “lack of resources and staff could stand in the way of a deliberative public engagement approach.”

- **80-85%** negative responses to “How would you describe ‘the public’?” (training participants)
So what happens…

“We [Planning Dept] always put people up in front of the public who are the least prepared to be there.”

- Gail Goldberg, Fmr. Dir, City of LA Planning

Broken public processes lead to broken relationships with the public.

Traditionally, public engagement is not a skill taught in policy/planning programs, but this is changing.
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IS A SPECTRUM OF PROCESSES

Inform > Consult > Incorporate > Empower

Note: Each stage comprises the next
Definition of Stages...

**Inform:** Providing info only to the public

**Consult:** Asking the public for input on **pre-set** options

**Incorporate:** Involving the public in **developing** alternatives or “forced choices”

**Empower:** Asking public to make the decision/solve the problem within council guidelines
What Makes It a Leadership Skill?

• Knowing **when** to engage, and at what level of the “Spectrum”.

• Knowing **how** to design a process that allows for some level of input.

• Knowing **who** to involve and at what level.

• Knowing **what/how much** info can help discussion.

• Knowing your (your department’s) strengths/weaknesses.

• Trusting the process, and leading others to as well...
“Customer” Characteristics

• Name, blame, complain and find fault
• Consumers not creators or problem solvers
• Think in terms of “I”/”me”
• Entitlement mentality
“Citizen” Characteristics

• Accountable, responsible welfare of whole

• Understand they have some responsibility for the safety of their neighborhood

• Acknowledges sustainable change only happens through citizen participation
Important Point

Our process can invite either “citizens” or “customers”. It’s our choice.
Can you read this?
A Better Way...
Working through an issue...

Budgets...

1. Thinking like a facilitator...
2. Thinking like a marketer...
3. Thinking like a participant...
Exercise…

Good/Bad experiences with public engagement... and what made it so?