*The Problem with Consultation - * Session Notes

Speakers:
- **Donald Lenihan**– VP of Engagement, Public Policy Forum (http://www.ppforum.ca/)
- **Cathy Dandy**– Director, Parent & Youth Engagement; Kinark Child & Family Services (http://kinark.on.ca/)
- **Adriana Beemans**– Director of Programs & Services, Working Women Community Centre (http://www.workingwomencc.org/)
- **Joseph Peters**– Partner, Ascentum (www.ascentum.ca/)

Moderator:
- **Chi Nguyen** – Director, Mass LBP (www.masslbp.com/)

Issue #1 – Overview of consultation processes and theory

Moderator Question: "Tell us a little bit about your theory of consultation and about your work with diverse communities."

Adriana "Our approach to community engagement is reflected on the slide: Settlement + engagement = inclusion. Engagement as a broader perspective of feeling included in society… the pattern of behavior by the official results in either alienation or inclusion. Settlement is included because we need to address their needs as key, key issues, be honest and explicit about what we want to address. How we act and how we behave affects the outcome of our work plus their experience and desire to re-experience. Consultation engagement baggage. Engagement is authentic by focusing on the power dynamic ex. Pay local community animator a decent wage, have authentic conversations through story-telling, not just about translation."

Cathy "We have to think about issues of power, control, why institutions want to consult, what communities want out of it. More about drawing out opinions to understanding the political aspect about where we want to go with public policy eventually flipping it so community is driving what they want to see addressed. Pull away from 'inside and outside', and institution as seeing the public as other, how do we break down authority or making decisions "for." TDSB is about to embark on a consultation about consultation. Consultation has to be about a conversation, really open, and really listening, understanding we need cultural brokers, talk to people in a way that doesn't reflect agenda-oriented meeting space, more parochial consultation process. Construct something that is more reflective of relationships, of exchanging ideas – problem is that it is messy, slow, and challenging to make the leap of faith and losing control of efficiency

of the top-down directed model. What I have found in my work is that when we can encourage people to embrace a more organic process, truly desirable of eliciting and engaging the community, and fostering a different agenda, over time there is a dramatic shift in the way things occur. What is consultation? Acting together? Building things together? Talking together?"

Don "What's wrong with consultation? Nothing in principle. The problem is we use consultation to solve every problem. We need different processes and tools to deal with different problems. Public engagement is different than public consultation. Complexity. The world has changed in the last 15 or 20 years, it is way more complex and integrated. Government cannot solve problems on its own. Issues like wellness or environmental control? Government cannot solve these problems alone, they need the public and stakeholders. The successful engagement process is one that transfers responsibility and ownership to public and stakeholders. Need to mobilize these people.

Golden rule: There is no responsibility without control. You need to give people a say; in order for them to have responsibility, you need a process to transfer that control to the people.

Formulate the plan: Views > Deliberation > Action

These are the three stages of consultation. Consultation involves the public in this way: asks the public what's your view on the problem? (we note what you're saying) We deliberate after sending you home. We then come to the solution and formulate the plan of action and give it to the government in the form of a report. You got shut out of the process early on. You need to come along for the process; you have to feel genuine ownership, which you can't feel unless you're a part of the entire process.

When are we dealing with complex issues that need public's action as part of the solution not just their views. At the end of the view stage then we have a conversation and talk it through together, appropriate trade-offs, and last stage is you telling me what your action is going to be, make the choices for your part in solving the problem. In sum, we need to draw a basic distinction between public consultation and public engagement. Some problems genuinely belong to the government, but to date many problems are complex and require the public's full participation."

Joseph "Our role is to engage the public in informed decisions. What happens with public involvement is that people are at the wrong starting point in their engagement – the means, the approach, and the tool. People are fixated on town halls, wiki, and social spaces. We need to ask why, how this is going to organize our decision-making.

Understanding how the public input will help inform our question. This is where we must start. People are hypnotized by the method or the approach. This is incorrect.

Diversity should be a principle if that is a priority for you. Espouse it and then go out to get it. Organizations understand the sustained value of public involvement, engaged citizenry; it doesn't happen accidentally rather we need to think about it systematically. "

Chi's recap of the panelists' main points:

- *Adriana*- personalizing the authority figure and understanding the power dynamic
- *Cathy*- government can't be afraid of being messy
- *Don* - public needs to own, and given permission to imagine the ways of moving forward
- *Joseph* - the philosophy what is the contribution you want the public to make

Issue #2 – Engaging Diverse Communities

Moderator Question: "how does the engagement of diverse communities affect their view of politics?"

Cathy "Diverse community of young people – currently in the school system we have a "sit down and shut up" model of engagement. When you frame things in a certain way, with the system telling/directing, young people come out of the system fully aware of their world, but the institutions that operate looks like their own school. Their notion of engagement is at a rudimentary level, making them question the reason of why they should vote. Education has a role to redefine that young people have a stake in owning and defining the problem."

Don "A good process will make them feel included and a real part of the process. A complex issue is the task of defining the problem is as controversially as finding the solution. If you can pose the question in a way the public can give an answer then you are doing a consultation. If you ask the question and wonder if that is the question that requires the community engagement. Need the community to articulate how things are at a specific point in order to define what measures/processes are necessary (ex. homeless in a specific community)."

Adriana "How they envision that person of power/authority, what you represent as a government official or consultant is something much broader. It shapes their perspective. How do they perceive what you're going to do with their opinion, are things going to change automatically? Ownership and accountability – racialized and marginalized communities – punch above their weight trying to rectify the inconsistencies of what our public policies mean in action. Community engagement cannot be a buffer for action. How do you help them own the definition of the problem?"

Chi to Joe "Joe, what did you mean by diversity as a principle, how do you apply that on your practice?"

Joe "Random sampling, and scientific processes to ensuring diversity. This can work and cannot work. America Speaks does fantastic public initiatives: New Orleans after Katrina + World Trade Centre site, and healthcare in California (with Governor Arnold Schwartzenegger) by going out in the community and meeting leaders in the community to get their assistance to get the public out – this results in the best diversity.

Use keypad, turning technology: everyone responds to their background, statistical representation in the room and it can be projected on the wall. When they used a random sample, the scientific method, the Spanish community did not show up because they were fearful of government. Very proactive measures are needed to ensure ongoing relationships with diverse communities."

Issue #3 – Getting People into the Room

Chi to Adriana "Adriana can you tell us about your strategies to bring people into the room."

Adriana "It is a meaningful experience to have people you know in the room the first time you come into any room. Different options for involvement are necessary so you don't have to speak if you don't want to and feel no pressure to engage beyond your comfort level. Can take different levels of involvement including time commitment. Onus is on us to translate. Trust is a key issue. "

Questions from Attendees

#1 - Question from Aaron "Toronto 2015 (Pan AM games that are coming); framing the context about engaging with diverse communities. How do you get the group that you want out and the attendance you're looking for? You typically get the same group at any consultation, looking for an opportunity to speak. (How do you) encourage people to speak?"

#1 – Answers from the panel

- **Cathy** "One, go to where people are. Every time we have a consultation to invite people in, there are barriers of culture, of fear. It's not about "tell us what we want" but to go where people gather and where they're having conversations. Develop relationships with people who are respected, movers, and influencers. A really good warm bridge to having a conversation. Conversations work best within the framework of a relationship. "
- **Adriana** "Having enough time to do the outreach. Frame the question or what you're looking at. Newcomers have a strong level of activism in their country of

origin. Using the ethnic media as a story, so people follow it over a long time, so when you have an invite they are already connected. Put it in their language so that they can fully express themselves. "

- **Don** "Recruitment and identification is one of the hardest things. Build a new relationship, and ongoing established dialogue. Dialogue ends with action, and you go around the cycle again and again. People don't show up because they don't believe that the processes are worthwhile. You need to build the level of trust and belief in the process. First, build relationships of trust with opinion leaders in the community."

#2 – Question from Jeff "(These are) good examples of what to do, but what needs to be considered is setting your target of what you would like, be creative, and get your group to go get it. Cleveland 150 white chairs by community organizers doing outreach, people would walk by and talk about it, and outreach organizers standing around talking about it. Moved these chairs from location to new location as a systematic outreach. Can download a paper on the six principles of outreach from my website."

#2 – Answers from the Panel

- **Cathy** "On framing the question: (you) can't ask a group of young people about student success; you have to bring a trusted teacher and ask about how are you struggling. It's about how you get in and ask those questions. "

#3 – Question from the floor

From the floor "Defining the problem is as hard as defining the solution. A paradigm shift from the Second World War, to teach people how to get up the bus stairs using crutches, originated from Berkeley's movement on accessibility and flipping the problem to say "how does the bus become accessible?"

#3 – Answers from the Panel

- **Don** "*Example*: Processing New Brunswick on skills development with university, business, and association leaders. New Brunswick thought they would become an energy hub of the Atlantic region. The questions were: "What are we going to do about the shortage of skilled labor? How are we going to bring them in from outside the province?" Happy people were the business community; unhappy people were the women, minorities, etc. The problem is the inability to use the labor that is in the province now, not how to bring in people from outside the province. Framing the issue begins to frame the solution. Doing so gave us a 180 degree turn."
- **Adriana** "*Example*: Parkdale Project Read. Key challenge: the learners who

have low literacy, the focus was on "Why are they not participating?". Through conversation the key (issue that was identified) was that they didn't feel invited. We thought the barrier was way larger than it was. It requires a lot of confidence to raise your hand. Pylons with lights, green, instead of lifting their hands."

- **Joseph** "Currently there is a great opportunity for change; accidental, but we need to take those opportunities. Federally, we've seen cuts to research on public opinion - to 1/10 of what it was. Public consultation is the way outside information can be gathered, better a conversation than a telephone survey. Problems associated with people coming and saying how can we do this survey and call it consultation."

#4 – Question from the floor

From the floor "To Don: problem of perspective and bias in finding the solution. How do we get people about us, the managers, to pose questions and not bring in their own biases in the later analysis?"

#4 – Answer from the Panel

Don ""Do you need a public engagement process?" is the first question so you ask your manager: "What do you think is going to happen if we go out and ask this question right now?"

Example: Sustainable development – the reason we have this concept is our realization of showing the interconnectedness of environment and the economy.

Next, you ask your manager, what is the solution stage? Governments can do programming, and regulatory stuff. Need a process that brings the citizen into the process and that they own the solution."

#5 – Question from the Floor

From the floor "Being more proactive rather than reactive. Connect with MPPs, community advisory community, etc.; does it translate back into your team functioning? For example, speaking English; is it comfortable, is it ok? Do you have a policy that all the staff speak English?"

#5 – Answers from the Panel

- **Adriana** "The hardest challenge is the person who does the engagement. Need to make sure of the follow-through. Your accountability and integrity that is on the line as the person who does the outreach… need commitment by the institution,

being clear and honest to the communities about what's going to happen. Need to support the citizens and not just hand them off to the next person. Need to be able to troubleshoot, be flexible especially as communities change and turnover in two years. "

- **Cathy** "There has to be internal cultural change."

#6 – Question from the Floor

From the floor "A Barrier of consultation is that it is done at a time when parents are struggling to feed their children. There is no day care for the parents and parents are working. How do you reduce the barriers of exclusion, so that citizens can come to participate? That is why you get the same fifty people. "

#6 – Answers from the Panel

- **Don** "The problem is how we implement and design the consultation – not the process of consultation itself."
- **Adriana** "I wish that consultators would collaborate rather than hold their own consultations in order to show everyone's time is valuable especially in racialized or marginalized communities."
- **Cathy** "Place the consultation around an event rather than hold your own consultation separately as that smacks of arrogance."