

Consulting Citizens V.S. Engaging Citizens

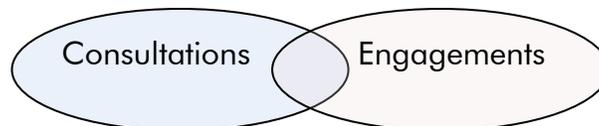
Purpose

This short piece is an initial attempt to clarify (a) the nature of *citizen consultations* and *citizen engagements*, and (b) the relationship between them. This clarification makes it easier to deal with such questions as: “*Under which conditions should citizens be consulted and under which should they be engaged?*” “*Are societal conditions changing enough to warrant more engagement and less consultation?*”

Disclosure: The authors take the view that there are good reasons why citizen engagement should become the normal form of government/citizen interaction in the 21st Century.

Introduction

The relationship between processes that consult citizens and those that engage citizens can be drawn as a Venn diagram. Figure 1 shows that while there are some similarities, the differences between these two types of processes are greater than the similarities.



The Relationship between Citizen Consultations and Engagements
Figure 1

There are several reasons why both the similarities and the differences need to be clarified and understood:

- A definition of both terms must be stipulated. The reason is that there is no use of either ‘*citizen consultations*’ or ‘*citizen engagements*’ that is clear, consistent and widely-utilized. Rather, both terms are applied to a wide variety of processes. As a result, misunderstandings, confusion and the frustration of unfilled expectations are common. Clarity and a shared understanding regarding what these terms mean in a specific situation is a condition of success.
- It is our view that consultations and engagements are quite different from one another and rest on quite different assumptions. Success with either process requires that the initiating authority be clear about the situation it is facing, its intentions in that situation and the capacities and expectations of its citizens.
- In constitutional monarchies, including Canada, it has generally been assumed that the voice of the people is spoken clearly during, but not necessarily between, election campaigns. Those in authority have tended towards the view that by

being elected they have rightfully been given the authority by citizens to act between elections. Therefore, governments tend to assume that they can legitimately make decisions without consulting, much less engaging, citizens between elections. This implies that if citizens are to be consulted, it is either out of the generosity of those in authority or because the authorities genuinely have a need to know what citizens are thinking.

- The assumptions underlying consultations and engagements differ substantially. Today's common practice and the habits that go with them reflect the past, but not our present, let alone our future. Consider that in the past, those in authority typically had much higher levels of education and access to more reliable information than did citizens. Further, hierarchies and the concomitant deference of those below to those above were widely accepted and presumed to be legitimate. Finally, communication between citizens and those in authority was costly, time-consuming and fragmented. In sum, between elections, it was not the citizens' place to question or demand accountability from those in authority. The thought that citizens might be engaged deeply and routinely in policy formulation was not taken seriously either by citizens or those in authority.
- Today, all of this is in question. Many citizens expect to be consulted on many matters; a smaller number expect to be deeply engaged. Both of these expectations have been driven by the long-term drift within Canadian society to higher levels of education¹, easier access to reliable information, a greater capacity to communicate both among citizens and with those in authority, and the emergence of well-paid and highly-organized lobbying efforts by organizations with a vested interest in the outcomes of public policy discussions. In sum, many citizens are every bit as knowledgeable and able as public servants. Accordingly, many citizens want a far more meaningful role in the processes by which they are governed. An increasing number want to be engaged as central actors in public policy formulation. They see themselves as citizens – as the rightful owners of the future of the jurisdiction.
- Some public officials are coming to the view that it is in their interest to govern in ways that are aligned with the deepest and most reflective thinking of its citizens. Consider that after the election in March 1993, Members of Alberta's Legislative Assembly consistently said that it was the easiest time to govern. The reason was that there was a deep and non-trivial agreement between citizens and their government about what needed to be done. Namely, deal decisively with the provincial debt and deficit.

Similarities

We note only those similarities that exist between every form of citizen consultations and citizen engagements. Accordingly, there are relatively few common features.

¹ See *The Decline of Deference*, Neil Nevitte, Toronto, U of T Press, 1996. Also note that the Millennial Generation is the first generation in human history in which a majority of children were raised as second-order perceivers and thinkers by well-educated parents.

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- Those in authority provide information to citizens about the issue(s) at hand.
- Citizens publicly state their views about the issue(s) at hand.
- The final authority to commit to a decision rests with those who have the legal authority to do so.

Differences

Citizen Consultations	Citizen Engagements
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Status of Participants: Stakeholders, clients, individuals with standing – a clear and explicit interest in the issue.• Role of Participants: Drop-in visitor to the process. Advocate for his/her own views or those of their group. Listening, learning and dialogue are not required.• Outputs: The varied views of participants have been recorded for the authorities to consider.• Outcomes: Those in authority understand the range of views held by the stakeholders. Trust and confidence may be increased or decreased.• Process: Designed by experts with the needs of the authorities in mind. Not owned or adapted by the participants.• Main Activity: One-way communication. One-off presentations of self-interested points of view. “Drive-by democracy.”• Owner of the Issue: Those in authority.• Time-frames: Predetermined by authorities.• Strategy: Keep control in the hands of the authorities, who will then inform the citizens what will happen and why.• Key Assumption: Authorities are the authors of a well-functioning society. Authorities must be in control at every step along the way. Citizens must do what they are told to do.• Methods: There are fewer methods available to consult with citizens than there are to engage them. <p>Note: This list is incomplete.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Status of Participants: Citizen-owners of the jurisdiction and its future, co-creators, members of the community. Secondly, as persons with an explicit interest in the issue.• Role of Participants: Listen, learn, explore, dialogue, participate in shaping a consensus view that determines the path forward.• Outputs: A clear consensus statement that sets out what is to be done by those in authority.• Outcomes: Participants have increased confidence and trust in one another, the process and outputs, and those in authority.• Process: Designed by experts with the experience of the participants in mind, owned and adapted by participants.• Main Activity: Two-way dialogue. Explore the question and its context in sustained dialogue, looking for consensus-based agreements that honour all participants and their interests.• Owner of the Issue: The participants.• Time-frames: Participant-driven within parameters set by those in authority.• Strategy: Time and care taken to create trust and consensus pays off in shared commitment to and responsibility for the decisions taken.• Key Assumption: Citizens are the authors of a well-functioning society. Authorities cannot impose meaning or agreement. These must be generated by citizens.• Methods: There are many more methods available to engage citizens than there are to consult them. <p>Note: This list is incomplete.</p>

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A Continuum for Working or Engaging with Others

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	Inform	Influence	Involve	Collaborate
Purpose	Provide information to raise awareness	Exchange information to foster knowledge and understanding	Engage in dialogue; exchange ideas; explore options to build support and commitment	Seek shared understanding, common purpose, collective action; strive for consensus
Relationship	One-way	Two-way	Active	Active and adaptive

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