



## Public Engagement: A Primer from Public Agenda

This memo is organized into the following sections:

- I. Introduction: Authentic Engagement & Capacity Building
- II. Ten Core Principles of Public Engagement
- III. Three Public Engagement Strategies
- IV. The Power of “Citizen Choicework”
- V. Public Agenda’s Public Engagement Experience

### I. Introduction

#### Authentic Engagement vs. Business as Usual

Most often, decision-making is an expert-driven process. Get the best information, bring trained minds to bear, make the best decision, and only then reach out to wider audiences to persuade them to sign on. Those outside the circle of decision-makers and experts tend to be viewed as an audience to be educated or persuaded, and sometimes as a problem to manage. Rarely are they seen as a vital resource or potentially powerful partners in problem-solving.

From this perspective, planning and decision-making are confined to a small circle in order to make progress quickly and minimize the static. To be sure, there is sometimes a minor nod toward gaining a degree of “input” from “customers” or “end-users.” An advisory committee, perhaps a questionnaire, or some form of public hearing might be put in play. In the best case, these minor measures add a small degree of useful input and lend some legitimacy to the planning process. At worst, empty, cynical public relations gestures prevail, as in the rigged “town meetings” that seem to be gaining popularity these days, in which participants are carefully screened and questions carefully controlled.

Authentic engagement, by contrast, involves substantive give and take with those who have an interest in the decisions that are made. While broad-based engagement is not appropriate for every decision, it can be the right move for developing and implementing many important decisions and initiatives—particularly those whose success and sustainability will depend on many varied stakeholders. Skillful engagement with a broad cross-section of stakeholders can improve results by:

- Bringing together multiple points of view in order to inform decisions.
- Creating legitimacy and sense of shared responsibility by involving the public and diverse stakeholders early and often in a change process, rather than after decisions have been made.
- Fostering new allies and collaborations.
- Stimulating broad awareness and momentum for change.

#### Capacity-Building vs. Event-Oriented Approaches to Engagement

Far too often, public engagement initiatives are viewed as culminating in large events or public forums that mark the terminus of the effort. But to be truly effective, public engagement should never be a “one and done” affair. In our view and model, public events like Community Conversations are best understood as points of departure for new forms of individual and collaborative action, community leadership development, and for further engagement.

To have lasting impact, in other words, public engagement must move beyond the “project” phase to become a set of community practices and habits of communication among leaders and the public that are embedded in the life of the community. The goal of engagement, by this account, is to help foster a culture of decision-making in which citizens and leaders share in the responsibility for addressing problems of common concern. Much can be said about how habits and practices of engagement become embedded in

the life of a community.<sup>1</sup> The most important point here is that *as efforts are made to engage stakeholders in problem-solving efforts, capacity should be built at every turn for future engagement.* Practically speaking, this means that local organizations learn to work together to design and organize engagement, local citizens learn to moderate dialogues, and local leaders learn to leverage the process to inform and facilitate change.

## II. Ten Core Principles of Public Engagement

Dan Yankelovich, cofounder of Public Agenda, points out that there are two wrong ways to approach engaging the public. Unfortunately, these are the two most common approaches. The first is the public hearing, in which citizens supposedly express their views, but where two kinds of “voices” tend to predominate: the angriest and the most organized. The *general* public, and certainly those who have been traditionally marginalized, are rarely represented in any meaningful fashion.

The other common approach, the expert panel, reverses the flow. Instead of leaders being subject to unproductive rants from angry citizens or hearing input only from the “usual suspects,” expert panels often subject a passive, glassy-eyed audience to the pontification of a few knowledgeable individuals. This approach operates on the dubious assumption that providing more information is the key to engaging citizens. Information certainly has its place in the scheme of things, but it's easy for this strategy to go awry and amount to little more than a useless data dump.

How then, should we proceed? The following principles should be kept in mind as approaches to public engagement are developed.

### 1) *Begin by listening*

Understanding the public's starting point and leading concerns, not to mention determining the best ways to communicate with and engage people about tough issues, requires careful and systematic listening as a first stage. Be alert to what people fear, want, know and feel they need to know. This also means that you should look to engage people using their interests, concerns and language—and avoid jargon completely. Interviews, focus groups, and other forms of qualitative research can be extremely useful first steps in carefully planned engagement efforts.

### 2) *Attend to people's leading concerns*

When there are gaps between leaders, experts and the public, it is important to recognize that people will be most receptive to leaders' and experts' concerns if the things that they themselves are *already* feeling most concerned about are acknowledged and being addressed by leaders.

### 3) *Get beyond the “usual suspects”*

It's easy to bring together those people who are already powerfully involved stakeholders in an issue, as well as those who love to sound-off in public. Finding ways to include or represent the broader public, especially those whose voices have traditionally been excluded, is a more challenging proposition. This takes special effort at community outreach and the use of a variety of media and forums.

### 4) *Frame issues for public deliberation*

Engaging citizens involves speaking their language and acknowledging their concerns. Expert-speak must be translated into the language that lay-people use, and should address the public's concerns. Generally speaking, framing an issue for public (as opposed to expert) deliberation means concentrating more on values-related conflicts and broad strategies and less on technical details and tactical minutia. It means, in essence, helping people wrestle with different perspectives and the pros and cons of going down different paths.

---

1. See, for example, “Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT” by W. Friedman, A. Kadlec, and L. Birnback. Public Agenda, Center for Advances in Public Engagement, Case Studies in Public Engagement, Number 1, 2007. See also, E. Fagotto and A. Fung, “Embedded Deliberation: Entrepreneurs, Organizations, and Public Action,” final report for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2006.

Framing for deliberation communicates that there are no easy answers and that many points of view are welcome and essential to the discussion. This technique (that Public Agenda calls “Citizen Choicework”) also helps people with very different levels of expertise engage both the issues and each other more effectively than a wide-open discussion with no structure. Based on Public Agenda’s long experience with public engagement, this is one of the most important steps you can take—especially with average citizens as opposed to professionals and experts.

### **5) Provide the right type and amount of information**

It is important to provide people with carefully selected, essential, non-partisan information up front in order to help them deliberate more effectively, but it is equally important to avoid overloading people with a “data dump.” Concise and thoughtfully presented information is useful, but too much all at once can result in people feeling overwhelmed by information. It plays to the experts in the room while disempowering regular citizens. Instead, people will themselves determine what sorts of information they need in order to move deeper into an issue. Creating the conditions for people to determine their own informational needs is one of the important purposes and outcomes of meaningful and productive engagement.

### **6) Help people move beyond wishful thinking**

The tradeoffs that are embedded in any issue that citizens must confront should be brought to the surface. A strong public engagement initiative will look for diverse ways to achieve realism and seriousness (not to be confused with humorlessness) in the public debate and help people move past knee-jerk reactions and wishful thinking. Challenging leaders who pander to people’s wishful thinking and providing corrective information once it’s become clear the public is “hung up” on a misperception or lacking vital information are key tasks here.

### **7) Expect obstacles and resistances**

People are used to doing things in a particular way, and it is hard work to grapple with new possibilities. It may even threaten their identities or interests (or perceived interests) to do so. It therefore takes time, and repeated opportunities, for people to really work through problems, absorb information about the tradeoffs of different approaches, and build common ground.

### **8) Create multiple, varied opportunities for deliberation and dialogue**

People need to go through a variety of stages to come to terms with an issue, decide what they are willing to support and figure out how they can make their own contribution.<sup>2</sup> A strong engagement initiative will be not only inclusive but iterative, giving people multiple and varied opportunities to learn about, talk about, think about and act on the problem at hand. Community conversations, “study circles,” online engagement strategies and media partnerships are a few of the possibilities.

### **9) Respond thoughtfully and conscientiously to the public’s involvement**

It is critical that organizers, experts and/or leaders respond to the public’s deliberations. This is a matter of taking care to “close the loop” in any given round of engagement by keeping people informed of all the ways in which their ideas and concerns are being incorporated into the work of problem-solving among official decision-makers. Moreover, it means taking the time to explain why some ideas are not being incorporated. Doing so deepens people’s understanding of the issues and fosters mutual respect.

### **10) Follow-up is critical**

Responding to public input is only part of the equation, though. Just as important is helping people find a way to make their own contribution to the issue moving forward. Once you’ve elicited people’s interest and participation, it’s extremely important to follow up with them and help them deepen their capacity to become more involved. Well-designed engagement opportunities energize citizens and lead many to want to roll up their sleeves and get involved, and it is vital that public engagement opportunities are designed as a point of departure for further collaborative work. Doing so not only gives people a role and a way to contribute, it gives them a personal stake in the success of the work.

---

2. See Dan Yankelovich’s *Coming to Public Judgment* for a fuller discussion of the seven stages people go through as they wrestle with issues.

### III. Three Public Engagement Strategies

Various strategies can be employed to reach out to stakeholders, raise their awareness, gain their insights, and build common ground and active support for your plans. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

Specifically, we focus here on the following public engagement strategies:

- **Focus groups**
- **Stakeholder dialogues**
- **“Community Conversations”**

#### Focus groups

Focus groups—essentially, small-group research interviews—are a tool that can accomplish some, but not all, of the goals of public engagement. They are an efficient means to inform the planning team of the priorities and concerns of various stakeholders.

Moreover, there is no better way to prepare for the open give and take of, for example, Community Conversations than by exploring issues first via a few focus groups. Doing so can help you understand the public's starting point, frame the issue you wish to talk about, develop background materials, become aware of potential hot-button issues that can derail the dialogue, prepare moderator training materials, etc.

But, while focus groups achieve some public engagement goals, they do not achieve them all. They provide a reading of people's state of mind, but do not, by themselves, help them develop their thinking very much. They can illuminate confusion but do not constitute the communication needed to correct it. They can distinguish those issues people are willing to delegate to leaders from those they want to have a say in, but do not necessarily give them much of a say. They clarify differences in priority among various stakeholders, but do not help communities work through those differences to build the common ground and collaborations that can best serve the varied interests of diverse stakeholders.

Nor does focus group research provide the public vetting of a solution that helps legitimize it. You can always argue that you received good input from many stakeholders via focus groups, and that these were incorporated into your thinking and planning. But as focus groups are a controlled process, not a public one, they are also easy to call into question. Who did you talk to? Why didn't I have a chance to participate? I wasn't there, so why should I trust the process?

The strengths of focus groups include:

- They are an efficient way to gain input from various important stakeholders or from the community more generally. This can help you refine your plans, communicate about them more effectively, and prepare for more ambitious engagement activities later on.
- They are a relatively controlled process, in that the information is pretty much yours to do with as you wish.

Among their disadvantages are:

- Focus groups do not do as much to legitimize your plans with stakeholders and the community overall as other more “public” strategies do. People are less likely to say that there was some kind of democratic process involved and therefore they should respect the approach you are bringing to bear to achieve your goals.
- They require some resources and expertise to do well.

#### Stakeholder dialogues

Focus groups, the research methods just discussed, keep control in the hands of the researchers. In focus groups, for example, people are typically paid to attend. It's therefore not hard to steer the conversation directly to the topics you want to discuss, and the information is yours to decide how to use.

By contrast, stakeholder dialogues are a less controlled process. Participants are not research subjects; they are peers, citizens who are voluntarily contributing their time and ideas. They'll tend to be more assertive if they have questions about the agenda. Compared to focus group participants, they'll feel less constrained about commenting to others—including, perhaps, the media, about what it is they've discussed.

These sessions can be with highly homogenous groups—a session with policy-makers only, for example. Or, depending on your purpose, they can be more diverse, with several different stakeholders, e.g., sessions with community leader (“grass tops”), experts, and policy-makers combined. The idea is to engage people in productive dialogue about your initiative, to elicit their interest and ideas about how to make it work.

The strengths of stakeholder dialogues include:

- They allow you, as focus groups do, to target specific groups that are most important to your work.
- They do not tend to cost much.
- Nor do they require much in the way of special expertise. While some designs will work much more effectively than others, stakeholder dialogues are closer than other engagement strategies to things that leaders and have done many times before (i.e., lead meetings) and they can usually implement the strategy with little or no outside help.

Drawbacks, limitations and challenges of stakeholder dialogues include:

- They require time and care to do well.
- They do not raise general awareness and engagement throughout the broader community as effectively as larger Community Conversations will (see next section).
- They can raise some issues of diplomacy because, as a practical matter, you will have to concentrate on some stakeholders more than others.

## “Community Conversations”

These are opportunities to engage a broad cross-section of a community in dialogue, including both specific stakeholders and average citizens. They are the most public of the public engagement strategies we are discussing in this manual in the sense that these are large-scale civic events meant to include all sectors of the community on the issue at hand.

While there are several models that have been widely applied for broad-based community dialogue, most are variations on a basic set of principles, which, in Public Agenda's Community Conversations model, may be summarized as follows:

- Nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants
- Small, diverse dialogue groups
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives
- Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders
- Forum follow-up

These elements will create participative, productive, inclusive and effective community forums.

The strengths of community forums are:

- They tend to reach the largest number of people and to gain the broadest (although not usually the most detailed) input.
- They can generate positive press coverage and raise general awareness.
- They can bring new ideas, resources and partners to your initiative that you hadn't even considered.

Disadvantages of a public forum strategy are:

- They are labor intensive and require a significant amount of lead time, especially to recruit diverse participants.
- If you are not already experienced in public forum work, you'll need technical assistance to create useful discussion materials, develop organizing strategies, train moderators and recorders, and form plans for moving from dialogue to action.
- They should not be one-time affairs: you must be prepared to follow up with participants to keep them informed and create actions consistent with goals.

### Summary Table: Strengths and Weaknesses of Three Public Engagement Strategies

Type of Public Engagement	Pros	Cons
<b>Focus Groups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficient way to gain input</li> <li>• You maintain maximum control of information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less effective than other strategies for legitimizing plans</li> <li>• May require money and expertise to do well</li> </ul>
<b>Stakeholder Dialogues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targets key groups</li> <li>• Relatively inexpensive</li> <li>• Requires minimal special expertise, technical assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time-consuming</li> <li>• Limited impact on community overall</li> <li>• Can be politically tricky to include some stakeholders and not others</li> </ul>
<b>Community Conversations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engages the most people</li> <li>• Raises general awareness through direct contact, word-of-mouth and media attention</li> <li>• Generates new ideas and partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labor intensive, requires significant lead time</li> <li>• Usually requires technical assistance</li> <li>• Requires some level of ongoing follow-up</li> </ul>

### A Note on Online Supports for Public Engagement

While it is still unclear how effectively high quality public engagement can be conducted purely online, it is quite clear that each of the above face-to-face strategies can be *strengthened* via online strategies. For example:

- Websites can be used to recruit participants and disseminate results.
- Online forums and input mechanisms can parallel face-to-face dialogues.
- Online workgroups can follow-up community conversations by developing action plans and supporting new partnerships.

## IV. The Power of “Citizen Choicework”

To create the right conditions for effective public engagement in stakeholder dialogues and Community Conversations, Public Agenda regularly draws on qualitative research such as focus groups and interviews to inform the design of “Citizen Choicework” discussion starters. These are generally comprised of three or four different perspectives on the issue at hand—distinct approaches with different strengths, weaknesses and tradeoffs—that serve as a point of departure for carefully crafted and moderated engagement and dialogue.

The “choices,” though presented as discrete entities, are not intended to be treated as necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, the framework is a means to help people disentangle key elements of a complex problem in such a way that they can discuss it more effectively and grapple with the tradeoffs involved. Thus, effective engagement is not about imparting the “right” answer, but rather it is a matter of creating opportunities and space for citizens from all over the political spectrum to think together about different dimensions of an issue in a task-oriented manner. After the small groups have had an opportunity to work on the problem together, all of the groups are brought together in a plenary session to report the results of their work.

Community dialogue such as this, which brings diverse stakeholders *to* the table while putting diverse ideas *on* the table, results in more common ground, more clarity about disagreements, clarification of lingering questions and concerns, and ideas for moving ahead collaboratively on the problem at hand. Moreover, as people from different backgrounds and with very different viewpoints are given the opportunity to *work* together in their deliberations, it builds mutual respect, deepens the sense of purpose for participants, and helps span various divides.

Therefore, we always include in our Choicework materials a range of ideas that we find, based on preliminary stakeholder research, helps citizens enter into dialogue with others who have very different backgrounds and starting points.

Public Agenda has created dozens of Choicework discussion starters on a wide range of topics. Most of our Choicework materials are available from our website at [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)

## V. Public Agenda’s Public Engagement Experience

Co-founded in 1975 by distinguished public opinion analyst and social scientist Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda brings over 30 years of experience in engaging the public in productive and meaningful dialogue, conducting qualitative and quantitative public opinion studies, and producing high quality citizen education materials.

Public Agenda’s dual mission is to help:

- Citizens effectively engage in critical public issues so they can make thoughtful, informed decisions.
- American leaders better understand the public’s point of view on important local, regional, and national public issues.

Since its inception, Public Agenda has worked as an objective explorer of public opinion, a scrupulously fair-minded author and producer of citizen education materials, and a pioneer in the practice of public engagement and civic dialogue. We have facilitated the work of local leaders and national policy makers to engage citizens in new, more productive ways in hundreds of communities and regions nationwide and on dozens of tough issues such as education, taxes, health care, the environment, and foreign policy.

Our work has won praise for its credibility and fairness by Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, and experts and decision makers with varied views on controversial issues. In addition, Public Agenda and our work regularly appear in such media as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, the Associated Press, USA Today, Parade, Los Angeles Times, CBS, NBC,

ABC, CNN and Fox News. Editorial writers and columnists frequently make Public Agenda's research and citizen engagement work the subject of their articles.

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) researches, develops, and disseminates new insights and practices that help improve the quality of American public life by building the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics. CAPE is dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems through dialogue, deliberation and collaborative action.

## Engagement in Action

The following are examples of our hundreds of public engagement projects:

- Statewide engagement initiatives in Connecticut and Nebraska on education and youth issues and in New Jersey on state tax reform.
- Public dialogues on global climate change in partnership with science museums and "Science Cafés" in Denver, Brooklyn, and New Jersey.
- Intensive work with the San Jose school district and with the Bridgeport Education Fund on education and community issues.
- Partnerships with the American Association for the Advancement in Science on the ecology of Puget Sound and on teaching evolution.
- A national Facing up to the Nation's Finances initiative on the federal debt and budget.
- Achieving the Dream, a national initiative to close achievement gaps at the nation's community colleges (Public Agenda is a national partner for this initiative, specializing in helping colleges engage their communities, students and faculty in efforts to improve student success).
- A three-year initiative working with local leaders in the Kansas City region to improve math, science and technology education.

For case studies of our work, examples of issue guides and "Citizen Choiceworks" discussion starters on a wide range of topics, and other information about Public Agenda's research and engagement work, see our website:

Home page: [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)

Public Engagement Section: [http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe\\_home.cfm](http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_home.cfm)

Public Engagement Resource Center (Choicework discussions starters):  
[http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe\\_toolkit.cfm](http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_toolkit.cfm)

Public Engagement Case Studies: [http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe\\_cases.cfm?list=1](http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_cases.cfm?list=1)

CAPE (Center for Advances in Public Engagement): [http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe\\_cape.cfm](http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_cape.cfm)

For more information, contact:

Alison Kadlec, Ph.D.  
Senior Public Engagement Research Associate  
Associate Director, Center for Advances in Public Engagement

Public Agenda, 6 East 39<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10016  
Phone: 212-686-6610 (ext. 40)  
Email: [akadlec@publicagenda.org](mailto:akadlec@publicagenda.org)  
Web: [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)