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Public Engagement:
A PRIMER FROM PUBLIC AGENDA

Since its inception in 1975, Public Agenda has been working around the country to create the conditions for greater community engagement with public life and a more citizen-centered approach to politics. In this document we offer a brief summary of the essential elements of our evolving approach to this work. This summary is organized around the following themes:

I.   Public Engagement: Creating Civic Capacity for Public Problem Solving

II.   Ten Core Principles of Public Engagement

III. Examples of Key Practices and Strategies

IV.   The Power of "Citizen Choicework"

I.   Public Engagement: Creating Civic Capacity for Public Problem Solving

Authentic Public Engagement vs. Business as Usual

In our society, public decision making is typically the domain of powerful interest groups or highly specialized experts. In terms of traditional interest group politics, it is generally the most influential or well-organized group concerned with an issue that is best positioned to steer public policy to its own advantage. When it comes to the role of experts, leaders often view highly trained experts as the only reliable resources for the development of sound policy. The logic of this approach to decision making is clear and familiar: Trained and specialized minds are the best suited to crafting policy proposals, while the most organized and influential groups are those with the best shot at translating proposals into public policy.

To the extent that citizens are considered at all, it is usually as consumers or clients of government, while as a whole, the public is most often viewed as an audience to educate or a problem to manage. In this dominant framework, the citizenry is rarely viewed as a vital resource or potentially powerful partner in problem solving. To be sure, there is sometimes a minor nod toward gaining a degree of "input" from "customers" or "end users." In these cases, an advisory committee, a public opinion survey or some form of public hearing might be put in play. In the best case, measures such as these add a small degree of input and legitimacy to a planning process. At worst, cynical, empty public relations gestures prevail, as in the rigged "town meetings" that are so common these days. With participants screened and questions carefully controlled, such counterfeit engagement contributes mightily to the cynicism that is so prevalent among citizens today.

Authentic public engagement, by contrast, is a highly inclusive problem-solving approach through which regular citizens deliberate and collaborate on complex public problems. Rather than relegating people to the sidelines, it invites them to join the public dialogue surrounding a problem and provides them the tools to do so productively. As a result, leaders know where the public stands as problem solving progresses, while citizens themselves contribute to solutions through their input, ideas and actions.

In short, authentic and skillful engagement with a broad cross section of stakeholders improves results by:

- Bringing together multiple points of view in order to inform decisions.

- Creating legitimacy and a 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.

While broad-based public engagement is not possible or appropriate for every decision, it can be the right move for addressing many kinds of public problems and developing and implementing many important decisions and initiatives—particularly those whose success and sustainability will depend on the support and concerted actions of many varied stakeholders.

Capacity-Building vs. Event-Oriented Approaches to Engagement

Too often the work of public engagement is viewed as a large event, such as a public forum and media event that marks the conclusion 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 moments of reflection in the life of a community that is learning to improve the way it communicates and to generally become more organized, democratic and capable. Such civic moments are points of departure for new forms of individual and collaborative action, community organization and leadership development and a deepening of public dialogue.

To have lasting impact, public engagement must move beyond any event, beyond the "project" phase, to become an evolving set of civic practices and habits among leaders and the public that become embedded in the life of the community. The goal is to foster a culture of decision making in which citizens and leaders share 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.[1] The most important point here is that *as efforts are made to engage stakeholders in problem solving, 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 practices like Community Conversations, local citizens learn to moderate them and local leaders (from grassroots leaders to public officials) learn to leverage the process to inform and facilitate change.

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[1]   See, for example, W. Friedman, A. Kadlec, and L. Birnback, "Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Citizen Engagement in Bridgeport, CT" (Public Agenda, Center for Advances in Public Engagement, *Case Studies in Public Engagement*, No. 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).

II. Ten Core Principles of Public Engagement

Dan Yankelovich, cofounder of Public Agenda, points out that there are two wrong ways of 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.

In our view, the following principles are key to designing effective public engagement.

1) Begin by listening

Understanding the public's starting point and the best ways to communicate with and engage people on tough issues requires careful and systematic listening. Be alert to the issues non-experts care about, the language they use to discuss them, and their concerns, aspirations, knowledge base, misperceptions and initial sense of direction with respect to solutions. Doing so will allow you to engage people in ways that are meaningful in light of their interests, concerns and natural language. It will help you avoid making faulty assumptions about people's positions or using jargon that, however useful to you, is counterproductive when it comes to engaging the public.

Interviews, focus groups and other forms of qualitative research are almost always useful first steps in engagement efforts. In some instances, survey research can add considerable value to a public engagement initiative, broadening insight into the public's starting point and stimulating media coverage that energizes the public debate around a problem. Public Agenda is fortunate to have a powerful public opinion research capacity to complement its engagement work.

2) Attend to people's leading concerns

When there are gaps between the priorities of leaders and experts and those of the public, it is important to recognize that people will be most receptive to leaders' and experts' concerns if the issues that they themselves are already feeling most concerned about are acknowledged and being addressed by leaders. As one example, Public Agenda had a major impact on education reform in the 1990s when our research and engagement work demonstrated that parents and taxpayers would be more receptive to reform goals such as "higher-order thinking skills" if they were first convinced that schools had "safety, order and the basics" under control.

3) Reach 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 through networking strategies and the use of a variety of media and venues.

4) Frame issues for deliberation

Engaging citizens involves speaking their language and acknowledging their concerns. Expert-speak must be translated into the language that laypeople use and should address the public's concerns. Framing an issue for public deliberation requires focusing more on values-related conflicts and broad strategies than on technical details and tactical minutiae, which are more the province of experts. It means, in essence, helping people wrestle with different perspectives and the pros and cons of going down different paths.

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 (which Public Agenda calls "Citizen Choicework") also helps people with very different levels of expertise engage both the issues and one another more effectively than a wide-open discussion with no structure.

5) Provide the right type and amount of information at the right time

It is helpful to provide people with carefully selected, essential, nonpartisan 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, beyond a few salient essentials, people should themselves determine, through their deliberations, the information that will allow them to move deeper into an issue. Enabling people to better determine their informational needs is one of the important purposes and outcomes of public engagement.

6) Help people move beyond wishful thinking

The trade-offs 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 trade-offs 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 approach they are willing to support and figure out how they can make their own contribution.[2] A strong engagement initiative will be inclusive as well as 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, in part, of taking care to "close the loop" in any given round of engagement. For instance, participants should be informed of the ways 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.

Moreover, citizens who participate in the work of public engagement should be encouraged and supported to act on their deliberations and not just wait for officials to act on their behalf. This work is predicated on the idea that tough public problems require work on many levels by many parties. Well-designed engagement opportunities energize citizens and lead many to want to roll up their sleeves and get involved. Encouraging and enabling citizen action in response to public deliberation gives people a role and a way to contribute. Moreover, it gives them a personal stake in the success of the work.

10) Build long-term capacity as you go

When done well, each round of public engagement will set the stage for broader and deeper public engagement in the future. Engagement processes are not only exercises in public problem solving, they are civic experiments that help people learn how to better reach out to and include new people, frame issues for deliberation more effectively and meaningfully, facilitate dialogue and collaboration across boundaries that have not typically been broached, and build common vision and common ground that allow different kinds of people, with different interests and experiences, to work together to make headway on common problems.

The work should thus always operate on two levels simultaneously: On one level it is about addressing a concrete problem, such as improving education, public safety or jobs. On another it is about building what philosopher John Dewey called "social intelligence"—the capacity for a democratic community to communicate and collaborate effectively in order to solve its common problems and enrich its public life.

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[2]   Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgement: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse University Press, 1991).

III. Examples of Key Practices and Strategies

Various strategies and practices can be employed to engage citizens, each with its strengths and weaknesses. In this section we review several that have proven to be especially useful.

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, for instance, an efficient means to inform leaders 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 and so forth.

But while focus groups achieve some public engagement goals, they do not achieve them all. They provide a reading of people's states of mind but do not, by themselves, help them develop their thinking very much. Focus groups 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 focus groups do not necessarily give them much of a say. They clarify differences in priorities 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?"

Strengths:

- Focus groups 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 yours to do with as you wish.

Weaknesses:

- Focus groups do not do as much to legitimize your plans with stakeholders and the community overall as do other, more "public" strategies. 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

In contrast to focus groups, in which people are typically paid to participate and the agenda remains in the hands of the researcher, 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 (for instance, sessions with community leaders, experts and policy makers combined). The idea is to engage people in productive dialogue about a problem or initiative, to elicit their interest and ideas about how to make it work.

Strengths:

• Stakeholder dialogues allow you, as focus groups do, to target specific groups that are most important to your work.

• They tend not to cost much.

• They do not 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 have done many times before (such as lead meetings), and they can usually implement the strategy with little or no outside help.

Weaknesses:

• They require time and care to do well.

• They do not raise general awareness and engagement throughout the broader community as effectively as larger and more diverse Community Conversations do (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

Community Conversations 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 three public engagement strategies we've discussed so far in the sense that these are large-scale civic events meant to include members of 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 introduce citizens to the fundamentals of an issue and help them weigh alternative solutions
- Trained, nonpartisan moderators and recorders
- Careful forum follow-up

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

Strengths:

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

Weaknesses:

- 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 benefit from 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 give them productive ways to stay involved.

Online Supports for Public Engagement

To date, practitioners of online public engagement have mostly been working on new and better ways to link up like-minded people. But to us, true public engagement must also mean bringing together diverse and *un*like-minded people to think, talk and work together on shared problems, and there are very few good examples of accomplishing this via the Internet.

What is clear at this stage is that face-to-face approaches to public engagement, such as those discussed above, can be *strengthened* via online strategies. For example:

- Websites can be used to recruit participants and coordinate organizers.

- Online forums and comments boards can parallel face-to-face dialogues.

- Websites can disseminate deliberation materials for use beyond formal Community Conversations, such as by educators for classroom use or in "meet up" discussion groups that citizens form on their own.

- Websites can disseminate results and provide ways for face-to-face forum participants to continue their deliberations online, as well as develop action plans and create new collaborations. Online strategies can thus make a big contribution to the all-important matter of forum follow-up.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Focus Groups, Stakeholder Dialogues and Community Conversations as Public Engagement Strategies

Type of Engagement Strategy	Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus Groups	Efficient way to gain input You maintain maximum control of information	Less effective than other strategies for legitimizing plans May require money and expertise to do well
Stakeholder Dialogues	Targets key groups Relatively inexpensive Requires minimal special expertise, technical assistance	Time-consuming Limited impact on community overall Can be politically tricky to include some stakeholders and not others
Community Conversations	Engages the most people Generates new ideas and partnerships Raises general awareness through direct contact, word-of-mouth and media attention	Usually requires technical assistance Labor-intensive, requires significant lead time Requires some level of ongoing follow-up

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 discussion starters generally comprise three or four different perspectives on the issue at hand—distinct approaches with different strengths, weaknesses and trade-offs—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 conflicts and trade-offs involved. Thus, effective engagement is not about imparting the "right" answer. Rather, it is a matter of creating opportunities and space for citizens of different backgrounds, experiences and points of view to think together about different dimensions of an issue in a task-oriented manner.

Public engagement in this mode, 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 create common ground.

For examples of Citizen Choicework discussion starters on a wide range of topics, case studies of our work and other information about Public Agenda's research and engagement work, visit the Public Agenda Engagement Resource Center on our website at www.publicagenda.org.

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) researches, develops and disseminates new insights and practices that contribute to the field of public engagement. CAPE is dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems through dialogue, deliberation and collaborative action.

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public opinion research and civic engagement organization. Founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich, the social scientist and author, Public Agenda is well respected for its influential public opinion polls, balanced citizen education materials and ground breaking community-based engagement initiatives.

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Public Agenda

6 East 39th Street
New York, NY 10016
t (212) 686.6610 f (212) 889.3461

1100 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 1090
Washington, DC 20005
t (202) 292.1020 f (202) 775.8835

www.PublicAgenda.org