

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION: WHY BOTHER?

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Why people are bothering about community engagement and collaboration

Governments, businesses and non-profit organisations across the world are increasingly treating community engagement as core business. The level of complexity and interconnectedness of issues like climate change, terrorism, ageing and global economic shifts means that these organizations not only have to be able to engage effectively with communities but also be able to collaborate and develop systemic responses to these issues (Head, 2008)(State Services Authority, 2008a). Community engagement can provide organisations with the opportunity to tap into local expertise and perspectives within communities. It also allows them to identify local and emerging issues, which have the potential to delay or derail projects if they are not pre-empted and/or responded to rapidly. This is an important aspect of meeting one the key challenges facing the public service identified by the Victorian State Services Authority, that of 'developing more responsive public services' (State Services Authority, 2007).

As noted in a recent report commissioned by the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), "There is an extensive literature on the public policy benefits and success factors of community engagement strategies, which are also variously described as community involvement, public participation, citizen participation, and deliberative democracy." Fritze J, Williamson L, Wiseman J (2009). Communities, both within Australia and across the world, are calling for responsible, accountable and effective governance (Engaging Queenslanders, 2005). There is an expectation that government will provide coordinated and accessible services that meet the needs of local communities, and that government will be transparent and accountable for its actions. Perhaps most pertinently, there is also an expectation that individuals and communities will be able to influence decisions that impact on their lives and their local environment (Stewart, 2009). Business is also adopting community engagement strategies because they reduce the risk of project approval delays, business disruptions and increased costs that can result from mistrust, disempowerment and a lack of information within local communities and stakeholders – (BHP Billiton 2009).

It is clear from the experience of other government jurisdictions that limiting community member opportunities to participate in decision making can result in deteriorating outcomes and an erosion of trust in government (United Kingdom, Department for Communities and Local Government 2009). A further driver of the focus on community engagement in the increasingly individualized nature of the engagement between government and communities. The rise of Web2 interfaces and the level of person to person engagement through these tools is shifting the expectations that individuals have about their engagement with government and the tailoring of community engagement activities to reflect these expectations requires innovation both in project and program planning and in delivery of engagement efforts. (United Kingdom Cabinet Office, 2009) (Bourgon, 2009)

The Australian Government recently launched the Government 2.0 Taskforce to progress thinking in this arena and a quote from the launch of the Taskforce is very relevant to this paper:

“We might ask – why?

Because, simply, the world is changing before our eyes.

Protestors are using a range of new media – including websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – to tell the world, in words and images, about what is happening in Iran.

If I were a ruler in North Korea or Burma, I would look at these seismic events and feel very worried indeed.

Worried because one of the great truths of our time is that people want to be free, and information can help them to be free.

But for most governments, the breathtaking pace of change in information technology should not be a threat but a marvellous opportunity.” (Australian Government, June 2009)

This paper incorporates discussion not only of community engagement but also collaboration and partnerships because each of these terms are foundational to operating in this changing environment and they have a number of things in common that are important in building the core capacity to deliver them:

- They are processes that cut horizontally across traditional functions;
- They are as effective inside the organization, across organizations and in working with communities;
- Proving that they contribute to outcomes isn't simple; and
- They take significant planning and skill to do well.

For this paper, the “why bother” is about increasing an organisation's ability to engage with its communities in a way that supports the level of involvement in decision-making, service thinking and strategy development that is effective. Collaboration, partnerships and joined-up-government are foundation behaviours that support engagement planning and delivery. (State Services Authority, 2007) (Kotter J P 1995) Despite the extensive literature and thinking about community engagement, there is still debate about its value and delivery. This debate often manifests itself in inquiry about the risks associated with community engagement, stories of engagement gone wrong, and about the blockages to engagement.

Building the skills, systems, and culture to deliver community engagement, collaboration, partnerships and joined-up-government and requires a planned approach and organizational commitment. This paper outlines how the Department of Planning and Community Development in Victoria implemented a program of improving community engagement capacity that used as its foundation, the very good engagement work already being undertaken within the department.

Department of Planning and Community Development

The Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) was established in August 2007 to lead and support the development of liveable communities. Liveable communities are built through improvements in urban planning and development, particularly in the outer suburbs and regional areas where Victoria is experiencing strong growth. The work of the department is underpinned by the commitment to working with communities identified in policies including *A Fairer Victoria* and *Melbourne at 5million*. (<http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au>)

The Department for Victorian Communities was the precursor of DPCD and the practice of community engagement has been a key element of the department's approach to working with communities since its inception. For example, the department has eight regional teams – 3 metropolitan and 5 regional/rural - that are the community engagement face of the department, particularly in rural and regional areas. DPCD works in some way with all Victorian towns and cities, diverse community groups, non-profit organisations and community members.

This level of geographic, demographic and social diversity of stakeholders and communities requires a high level of focus and skill to ensure that communities feel listened to and that their interests are recognized in policy and program development and delivery. The success of these efforts also depends on effective collaboration and on joined-up-government thinking. DPCD is a recognised leader in community and stakeholder engagement within the Victorian public service and is regularly called upon to provide expertise in this area, for example as part of the February 2009 bushfire response.

Capacity Building

In 2008, the Department of Planning and Community Development established a project to focus on community engagement capacity within the department. This project aimed to build on the good community engagement practice and skills that were already evident in the work of people within the department and a cross-organisation project team that included many internal experts was charged with identifying ways to improve our community engagement capacity and to use collaborative and engagement approaches to manage the project.

The project focused on:

1. **Thinking Framework** – this included clarifying DPCD's collective definition of community engagement given that the organization works with a multitude of place-based communities, peak bodies, community groups focused on specific needs, non-profit groups, business groups, and individuals;
2. **Embedding Into Systems** – finding ways to systemically incorporate community engagement into human resource and other processes including **project planning and risk management** tools to support culture change and sustainability;
3. **Learning and Development** – the project identified **learning and development strategies** to build community engagement capacity within the Department;
4. **Tools and Methodologies** – the project worked on ensuring that **tools and methodologies** are well understood, delivered in planned and skilled ways and that they are outcomes-focused;
5. **Evaluation and Evidence** – the project focused on developing an evidentiary approach to the thinking and practice of community engagement that fits with the increasing professionalism of the public sector. Writing up case studies of good engagement practice was part of this evidentiary approach;
6. **Engagement and Communications** – the project found **ways to engage** people in community engagement thinking across the department;

7. **Building Collaboration** - with other Victorian government agencies in relation to community engagement – we **established the Whole of Government Community Engagement Network** with other agencies to support a joined up approach to community engagement. DPCD continues to coordinate this network.

1. Thinking framework and definitions

DPCD adopted the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation as a thinking framework (Framework) to support well-planned and well-delivered engagement with communities. The IAP2 (Attachment 1) defines engagement through using a continuum of community engagement interventions from ‘Inform’ where the promise to the public is “We will keep you informed”, through to “Empower” where the promise is “We will implement what you decide”. The approaches of ‘Consult’, ‘Involve’ and ‘Collaborate’ each denote a different level of engagement and a different promise to the community.

Adoption of the IAP2 as a Framework was established early in the DPCD project which ensured that the project focused on improving community engagement capability, rather than spending time focusing on creating a new framework and set of definitions. Also, collaboration and partnerships were defined to reduce confusion about the ways in which government agencies interact with each other and also with stakeholder and community groups. Obviously there is some overlap with the IAP2 Spectrum but the following definitions helped us to be able to talk the same language about these concepts.

Community Engagement	<p>Community and stakeholder engagement is any process that involves stakeholders and community members in decision-making in order to improve outcomes. We use IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation as our framework for engagement practice, focusing on informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering.</p> <p>We also recognise that “Community engagement is a two way process by which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision making, service delivery and assessment; and • governments and other businesses and civil society organisations involve citizens, clients, communities and other stakeholders in these processes”. United Nations (2005)
Collaboration	<p>“Collaboration is a process through which people who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.” (Gray, 1989)</p>
Partnerships	<p>DPCD’s research (Pope and Lewis, 2008) across ten of its major partnership initiatives found five key factors for effective partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a good broker/facilitator to build relationships - the right decision-makers at the table with a commitment to contribute - a clear vision and objectives - good processes - ongoing motivation through evaluation and champions.

2. Embedding Community Engagement into Organisational Systems

The DPCD Community Engagement Project team also identified key organizational systems that would support community engagement delivery and capacity building and a culture of engagement.

Human Resource Management

An early activity of the DPCD Community Engagement Project was to incorporate community engagement skills as a capability area under the *DPCD Capability Framework* which is used as the basis of position descriptions, performance planning, skills development planning, and aids in recruitment. This has been important in recognizing community engagement as a skill, and in legitimizing discussion of the engagement skills that may be required for different roles within the department.

Project Management

Community engagement planning tools were built into project planning templates for key areas. This meant that project planning incorporated thinking about communities, stakeholders, and community engagement tools and methodologies at the very beginning of project development. This then is embedded in project management, reporting and evaluation. The Project also developed an engagement planning template that can be incorporated into any type of project or program planning. The engagement planning template uses the Victorian Department of Sustainability (DSE) community engagement planning process as its basis and has been adapted to DPCD needs after extensive consultation with staff across the department.

Evaluation

DPCD has an evaluation toolkit (<http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/evaluation>) that is available on its website and so can be used both by DPCD staff and by the organizations it works with. The toolkit provides a step-by-step guide to the process of designing an evaluation and therefore identifying how a project or program will meet its objectives and desired outcomes. This toolkit was essential to the community engagement project, because it is research-based and reflects the need to build an evaluation and evidentiary basis into projects and programs and responds to the issues raised about the value, risk and delivery of community engagement activities.

Partnerships

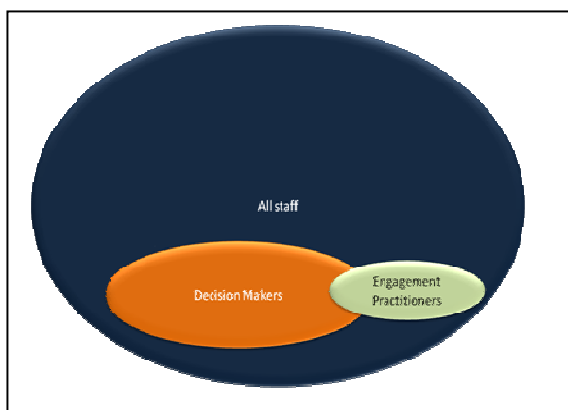
Prior to the Community Engagement Project, DPCD developed a set of partnerships tools that are available to communities, community groups and to staff within the department. The partnership material provided a key opportunity for the project as it helped to define what partnerships are and also led the way in creating templates and tools to structure good planning and process.

3. Learning and Development

Learning and development was seen as a key mechanism to improve community engagement capacity and the project used a number of approaches to build learning and development for community engagement across the department. Research activities included:

- Researching and mapping community engagement learning and development activities available across Australia, particularly those focused on public sector needs
- Reviewing the literature about community engagement and used this as the basis for identifying potential issues related to learning and development
- Surveying DPCD staff to identify key areas for community engagement learning and development
- Working with a think tank from one of DPCD’s leadership programs to research and review approaches to learning and development for community engagement. The think tank created the model of thinking about learning and development outlined in Diagram 1 below. The project team then asked members of the whole of government Community Engagement Network to identify the key capabilities required for each of the target groups – all staff, decision makers, practitioners and this work is being considered in terms of potential “products”.

Diagram 1: Community engagement learning and development focus areas



While very simple, the diagram clarified the different target groups for community engagement learning and development and identified that they may have different development needs. Previous discussions about learning and development had made assumptions that all of the people in these groups needed the same type of skills development and activities to support development or had assumed that some groups did not need skills in engagement. The diagram indicates that:

- **All staff** – require some skills in engagement, whether they are working directly with communities, delivering programs and projects, or in an internal role;
- **Decision makers** – need to understand engagement opportunities, risks, planning needs and delivery requirements
- **Practitioners** – have experience and training in community engagement planning, tools and techniques and have responsibility for delivering effective engagement activities, therefore their development needs are specialized

For DPCD, key learning and development activities supported included:

- Community engagement training programs developed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment were made available to people across the department. We particularly supported programs in regional areas that were held for people from different government agencies in the region.

- Training programs were specifically developed for people involved in urban and land use planning both within the department and who work with the department, using DPCD's PLANET training program.
- Train the Trainer development was provided for staff with an interest in training others in community engagement using the DSE training programs. This area of activity is likely to be expanded in future.

The above diagram is also being used as the basis for identifying and targeting skills development in community engagement for other government agencies. Also, the Whole of Government Community Engagement Network is using it to identify potential approaches to skills development for both practitioners and decision makers across the public sector.

4. Tools and Methodologies

Community engagement tools and methodologies are critical to the delivery of good community engagement. However, they can also distract from the main game – which is planning engagement and using the right tools to work with the right communities to get the outcomes required.

Often, when planning for community engagement, project groups jump immediately to the type of tool (or solution) that they have experience with, rather than focusing first on identifying outcomes and then assessing tools in terms of these outcomes. Tools like *Open Space Technology*, *Appreciative Inquiry*, *conversation mapping*, and *Citizen's Juries* have all contributed to the rich set of tools available to practitioners and decision makers, (Engaging Queenslanders 2005)(Department of Sustainability and Environment – Effective Engagement).

However, this rich set of tools has to be used in a way that suits the community involved and outcomes being sought. DPCD has incorporated into its community engagement approach, an information booklet about tools that can be used to enhance each of the IAP2 Framework elements. This information is based on the excellent work of the Department of Sustainability and Environment – Effective Engagement, and Engaging Queenslanders Guides.

5. Case Studies and Evidence

Case studies are powerful ways of providing evidence about how community engagement and collaborative activities have created a difference for communities. Case studies are particularly useful because they can reflect the complexity of the issues being addressed and the contribution of community engagement practice to these outcomes. As outlined above, the DPCD Evaluation Toolkit provides a good set of tools to support hard data capture, as well as case studies and other evidence.

DPCD has a strong focus on capturing the outcomes from projects and programs, and specifically in relation to the Community Engagement Project, captured the value of effective community engagement through:

- Collecting case studies that reflect each of the IAP2 Spectrum areas and documenting these for DPCD staff to access.
- Supporting a forum on evaluation in August 2009 that was attended by over 100 people from across the public sector and where case studies and different methods of capturing evidence about achievements were presented.

6. Engagement and Communications

To support the capability development approach outlined above the Community Engagement Project also put in place a number of strategies to support engagement internally around the project including:

- **Information** – provided information on activities of the project using intranet and email approaches. Information was also provided through an internal blog that allowed staff to provide input into the project and to tell their stories about community engagement
- **Consultation** – consulted staff across the department for a number of activities including skills needs, community engagement planning template, potential case studies
- **Involvement** – actively involved staff and teams in the development of the learning and development approach, the community engagement planning template, and case studies
- **Collaboration** – the project team were volunteers from across the department and this group, which changed depending on need, designed the overall project objectives, worked together on key activities and delivered key activities
- **Empowerment** – the project planning and engagement tools ensure that project and program teams are empowered to make decisions about how community engagement should be delivered to meet the needs of their communities.

7. Whole of Government

In early 2008, DPCD and the DSE established a network of people in Victorian government agencies who were interested in improving the quality and delivery of community engagement within the public sector.

The network has grown from 4 people to around 100 over 18 months and has focused on:

- Building community engagement skills including supporting cross-government training in community engagement, particularly in regional areas
- Identifying ways to standardize the quality of delivery of community engagement practice across government agencies
- Providing a point of contact to share resources and tools about community engagement and learning from what has already worked
- Improving the evaluation of community engagement approaches and building an evidentiary base for decision makers – this includes finding way to show that community engagement has reduced risk and cost associated with projects.

The Network has also recognized that agencies have different community engagement needs, are at different levels of development of community engagement capacity and therefore necessarily are implementing community engagement capability development strategies in many different ways.

Conclusions and future thinking

The DPCD Community Engagement Project delivered tools and strategies that are being used to improve community engagement planning and practice. The project also practiced what it preached, using community engagement techniques to engage internally, and build collaboration and partnerships with many different groups in engaging on the project. This project has influenced thinking both within and across departments about how to build community engagement capacity and to build a sustainable core of skills through embedding tools and thinking into organisational systems and culture. DPCD is continuing to focus on the development of community engagement capacity, particularly through involvement in the whole of government Network and through strengthening learning and development programs available to staff.

Additional reflections from conversations with other public sector jurisdictions and organisations working on building community engagement capacity:

- In most government jurisdictions, funding processes, reward systems and organizational structures focus attention on delivery through functions rather than on horizontal action. Therefore, problems that require horizontal attention – using engagement, collaboration or partnerships - as part of developing solutions are more likely to be seen or implemented as one-off activities or projects that do not require on-going support or skills.
- There are on-going debates about the recognition and access to internal skills in the area of community engagement within government agencies, in relation to the use of external experts.
- As a lead on from the previous point, there have been discussions about “professionalizing” community engagement skills in the same way as engineering and accounting have built their professions over time.
- A number of projects that have focused on developing community engagement skills have seen a spill-over effect – the skills form a good basis for leadership of difficult projects, high-performance team management, and for cross-organizational performance improvement.
- Research into collaboration, partnerships and community engagement indicate that they all require a very high level set of skills, tools and techniques to do well – this is an area for further research and action.

Community engagement, collaboration and partnerships all provide mechanisms to connect people to governments and to decision making about their future. Because of their nature collaboration, partnerships and community engagement, are difficult to define, measure and deliver – this does not mean that we shouldn’t seek to define and skill people in their delivery. As noted in the introduction, governments, business and non-profit organisations bother about community engagement and collaboration because the problems being faced today cannot be solved simply or through unconnected and unskilled action. The DPCD Project has demonstrated ways to develop the core culture and skills to support effective engagement with communities.

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ATTACHMENT 1 – IAP2 Spectrum of Community Engagement

IAP2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:
We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fact sheets • web sites • open houses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public comment • focus groups • surveys • public meetings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • workshops • deliberate polling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • citizen advisory committees • consensus-building • participatory decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • citizen juries • ballots • delegated decisions.

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