

THE GOLDEN RULE OF STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

By Jane Logan

Stakeholder consultations are a terrific tool for organizations embarking on strategic planning, project planning or policy development. Through approaches like surveys, road shows, meetings and workshops, organizations are becoming more accountable to their stakeholders and engaging them in their success.

Nonprofits and charities not only host these stakeholder engagements, they are invited to others as participants. Everybody's doing it.

But these initiatives can backfire when stakeholders expect their ideas to be acted upon and see no results, or when they get different results than they expected. Setting appropriate expectations can save a world of frustration and disillusionment for participants and organizers alike.

The golden rule of stakeholder consultations is to make a clear promise about the participants' role in decision-making.

Consider the differences between an open house to tell people about an issue, a survey to assess concerns and alternatives, and a facilitated session where participants make recommendations.

Each is a legitimate way of consulting with stakeholders, but makes a substantially different commitment to those involved about how their input will be used.

Weigh your options when setting consultation objectives

One way to tackle the nuance in clarifying expectations is to begin with the simple grid of participation alternatives developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). It's designed for public consultations, but charities and nonprofits can use it to consider their options with other stakeholders as well, whether members, clients, volunteers, employees, or related organizations.

I like to use it as a starting point when setting consultation objectives.



The IAP2 spectrum begins with informing stakeholders then escalates through consulting, involving, collaborating and finally empowering participants in consultations. Each level has a different goal and makes a correspondingly bigger promise to participants, as the following table shows:

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goals	Public Participation Goals	Public Participation Goals	Public Participation Goals	Public Participation Goals
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 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 aspirations, 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 decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Techniques to Consider	Example Techniques to Consider	Example Techniques to Consider	Example Techniques to Consider	Example Techniques to Consider
<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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Implementing the Golden Rule: plan with the end in mind

The promise to stakeholders should start on first contact with potential participants. An invitation to participate in a stakeholder consultation must be clear about its purpose and outcomes. It should state how the consultation's results will be used and how this will benefit those who participate.

Inviting or involving the right people is another key step in making certain an organization gets useful input it can act on. It goes without saying that a one-sided survey group or meeting will result in one-sided input, and an unrepresentative process can doom a well-intended consultation. A mix of expertise, affiliations and demographics will make both stakeholder advice and its long-term outcomes meaningful.

The instructions and agenda for a face-to-face consultation will also need to echo the session's objective. Never ask for decisions if you simply seek advice, recommendations or guidance. And if a group is being asked to reflect and consider, it must have time for discussion and sharing ideas. In this case, small group work and plenary discussion may be more productive than formal presentations.

Good governance and the Golden Rule: Don't sign any blank cheques

One of the duties of a Board Member is to exercise reasonable care when making a decision as a steward of the organization, and input from stakeholders will allow her to make truly informed choices. That said, ultimate decision-making for many decisions is the Board's responsibility.

On a practical level, an organization that fully commits to implementing decisions made based on stakeholder consultation may not be exercising reasonable care. Some decisions have higher price tags than others, and it is a Board's duty to ensure funds are used efficiently and activities fall within the scope of its mission. The health and sustainability of the organization depend upon informed decisions. Therefore the scope and parameters of delegated decisions in stakeholder consultation should be tightly defined.



Last, follow-through and communicate results

Naturally, the rubber hits the road with implementation. Individuals who participate in processes with no visible outcomes are not likely to come to the table again. An organization's credibility suffers if it appears to be all talk and no action, or all talk and no listening.

There are three stages to follow-through for stakeholder engagements that go beyond simple information sessions.

- First, make a decision.
- Second, implement it.
- And third, communicate it.

Don't forget this last piece! Communicating results is more than a courtesy to stakeholders - it is an essential element to make good on the commitment or promise to consultation participants.

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