

Dancing With Many Partners

Part 2

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The consultation process often resembles an intricate dance. The many partners in that dance may include any or all of the stakeholders who have an interest in issues around which consultation is structured. In the case of education, “stakeholders” comprise every group in the society. Students, their parents, the business community, the communities in which schools are located, and educational institutions that receive these students may all be expected to have as much of an interest in educational issues as school teachers and administrators. The challenge is to make consultations accessible, feasible, and engaging.

First, we must rationalise the process so people are not overwhelmed with consultations. Stakeholders will not sustain their original motivation to participate if each consultation demands that they disregard their existing schedules to attend these meetings.

It would be irresponsible for busy teachers and administrators to continuously leave their posts to take part in consultations. It would be just as irresponsible for them not to make their opinions heard. It is important for parents to be involved in such discussions, but how many working parents can afford to leave their jobs time after time to participate?

Thus, the conditions under which consultations are now held often make participation almost impossible for many people who might have important contributions and new perspectives on issues that arise.

We need, then, to ensure that the best opportunities are provided to explore important issues and address public concerns in some depth. One important task is to determine which consultations are necessary, and eliminate those which simply constitute management of crises that need never have occurred if existing policies on the same issues had been effectively implemented in the first place. The organizers of such consultations need to understand that when the same topics continuously recur, people feel that nothing is being accomplished. This, in turn, leads to a perception of crisis, which exacerbates the public’s concerns and lessens their faith in what has already been achieved.

Furthermore, more flexible arrangements for canvassing opinions must be made. For instance, have we used e-technologies effectively to make the consultation process more accessible to more persons over a longer period? Some issues simply cannot be dished up in a one-day meeting. They must be revisited over time, as more sophisticated understandings of the situation are constructed. In many countries, this process is facilitated by online surveys, discussion boards, and other resources that allow interested persons to join and re-join the discussion, from any site and at any time. Off line, interactions may sometimes be structured so that targeted groups exchange ideas within each group at first, and then with other groups, so that issues are continuously being re-examined from different perspectives.

It is also crucial to provide necessary documents in time for participants to prepare adequately for these meetings. I have sometimes heard people complain bitterly that such documents only arrived in their schools or on their desks the day before, or even on the very morning of, the consultation. This weakens participants' contributions, and they may wonder, justifiably, whether they have merely been invited as window dressing, to provide the appearance of consultation.

Careful arrangements must be made when structuring a collaborative process of decision making, as compared to one where participants' inputs may amount to no more than commentaries on decisions already made. To use the dance metaphor again, it is sometimes important to let the other partner lead. This may entail, for example, giving community members opportunities to participate in shaping consultation agendas.

Even so, for collaboration to work, all parties concerned must be committed to that process, as opposed to a mere public relations event. Collaboration as process, not event, is something we all need to learn. For that process to succeed, we must establish its integrity. It is counterproductive, therefore, to make commitments during the process, and then renege on them, or delay unreasonably in fulfilling them.

Finally, people should be helped to understand exactly how their inputs will make a difference. Not all consultations have the same purpose. If people are not informed about the desired outcomes of consultations, they are not in a position to judge their effectiveness. Furthermore, the outcomes need to be communicated to the public explicitly, so people can be reassured that their efforts were worthwhile.

We are all learners in this process. New approaches will challenge our resourcefulness, but, evidently, the formula that now obtains is not equally effective in every type of situation.

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