

MAKING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WORK

J P Dunn

Introduction

Twenty to thirty years ago the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works almost always had the blessings of the general public to forge ahead and determine what was required for the provision of necessary services for the public. Whether this involved building another dam or sewerage plant, the public saw this as constructive. The Board was the water expert and generally that was that.

The relationship has shifted significantly since then. Now the community expects to be part of any major decision-making process.

An increasing challenge in the water industry is to keep in touch with our stakeholders. Public awareness of water as a shared resource, accentuated by the current drought, means that the complex communication web between individuals, groups and organisations needs to be more carefully considered and connected. The industry is responsible, more than ever before, for informing stakeholders of recent developments, consulting with them, talking with them and LISTENING to their needs and responses - not just telling them the *fait accompli* of what is happening.

Yarra Valley Water has committed itself to sustainability, which has further highlighted the necessity to develop more successful ways of connecting with their stakeholders - especially when significant issues and opportunities arise. Whilst most of the existing methods of consultation have been effective, the increasing mass of issues and the decreasing timeframes for the responses required, call, more and more

To engage stakeholders, the World Café methodology is more productive than a public meeting in a hall or theatre. The intimate café-like setting of small tables with carefully designed question sessions is conducive to earnest conversations and feedback.

frequently, for alternative means of engagement. A creative, refreshing and often intensive approach is increasingly called for. The following stories serve to



Figure 1. A World Café session at the Green Paper Consultation.

illustrate some of the key aspects of successful stakeholder engagement, summarised in the guidelines accompanying this article. In both cases Yarra Valley Water moved well beyond their primary objectives and significantly advanced relationships with those who attended.

Story One - Stakeholder Consultation on the Green Paper "Securing Our Water Future"

The Victorian Government, in facing up to the challenge of matching demand for water with the limited resource, published a Green Paper on sustainable use of water and called for feedback from both the authorities and the public. Yarra Valley Water decided to actively create an opportunity to hear and record their stakeholders' response to this major

proposal. The Green Paper was an extensive public document that covered a vast array of topics having significant implications for all points of connection within and outside

the organisation. The consequences could be enormous.

Recognising that all of Yarra Valley Water's stakeholders would inevitably be affected by the decisions made, they worked with consultants, *Now for Future*, to determine a number of commitments. Firstly, they would attempt to ensure that enough stakeholders were aware of the paper's existence and, secondly, they would invite them to a forum where everyone was encouraged to work together to gather the most outstanding responses. They would then incorporate this vital feedback into their submission to the Victorian government.

The initial idea was fraught with a number of challenges. The Green Paper, *Securing Our Water Future*, comprised some 147 pages, spanning seven different chapters and covering all the major areas of water use in Victoria. A process was required to address how many of the stakeholders would be aware of the document and then how many of those would have had the opportunity to read it.

The suspicion was that only a few could afford to spend the time and energy that a water company itself would invest in researching the various implications, connections and ramifications of such a document. To further add to the complexity, in such a gathering there would be a handful of stakeholders who would be intimately acquainted with the document.

The invitation list was extensive, including all key stakeholders. In order to give all invitees the opportunity to view the document beforehand a web reference was included as part of the invitation. Everyone then had the option of viewing the document and making an informed decision about the value of attending. When participants registered on the day they were also provided with an executive summary for reference.

The World Café methodology had a large influence on the event. Unlike a public meeting in a hall or theatre the environment was hospitable and the more intimate café-like setting of small tables with carefully designed question sessions was conducive to earnest conversations and feedback. Everyone in the room had the opportunity to contribute to the generation of the major issues and could post up what they individually considered to be the major issues of the paper. All present were encouraged to respect the balance between their listening and their contributions.

To facilitate relevance and focus, large summary charts, photo-enlarged directly from the document, were used and individual participants' approval and concerns were collected on these charts. Their overall contributions were visually portrayed on a 1.5 metre by 5 metre wall chart during the convergence (plenary session). The graphic recorder employed colour, words and graphics to capture both the key issues and the spirit of the groups.

At the close, participants were delighted with their chance to contribute feedback and many noted their interest in hearing the wide range of perspectives of the representatives present. Not only was the information collected - the stakeholders recognised that Yarra Valley Water was listening and valued their different perspectives.

Story Two - Sustainability Partners' Forum 2004

The aim of this forum was to connect



Figure 2. A World Café is built on the metaphor of a café with its small tables and comfortable conversation.

innovatively with stakeholders to accelerate the speed of the journey to sustainability. There was already a firm and clear company commitment to the future and an equally clear recognition that it was vital somehow to entice the stakeholders to consider joining forces and to build partnerships in this venture.

The aim was to generate a sense of urgency, enthusiasm and creativity and to capture the collective intelligence of this diverse group. A micro-learning organisation was created where people could quickly locate their own influence in the overall picture of water and feel compelled to address the positive environmental potential.

Again an ambience was established that was hospitable and encouraged all present to feel relaxed and a part of the morning's work, rather than merely onlookers. Again the design respected both the required objectives, the realities of people working in groups and aimed to stretch their potential.

The morning was divided into three sessions:

Session 1

The first session was brief. The progress made by the Yarra Valley Water in its sustainability journey was shared. The

ongoing examination of the water cycle had uncovered three significant breaches in the system, being greenhouse gas emissions, water resources, and waste from sewage treatment.

This examination was made particularly accessible with the use of a central visual reference - a large hand-drawn system diagram that covered one wall of the conference centre (see Figure 3). This chart served as a clear point of reference throughout the half day. As the two speakers explained each of these breaches, all present could follow visually, and begin to detect the influence that they had.

The next two sessions engaged all the stakeholders with Yarra Valley Water staff, working together in a joint investigation - initiating the shared spirit that was hoped would continue well beyond the day.

Session 2

The first question posed was, "Where do we all fit into the picture and how we can do things differently?" The individuals searched for their own spheres of influence across the hydrological cycle - particularly where they played a part in the system breaches, and then faced the challenge of how to do things differently to avoid these breaches.



Figure 3. Graphic recording in action at the Sustainability Partners Forum.

The hard questions were investigated and, building on the café ambience, the World Café was employed as a means of connecting all participants. Everyone was encouraged to listen together. The varying responses in the room were cross-fertilised as people changed tables. The major responses were drawn to the surface by the group and then captured graphically on the systems chart in the convergence session.

Session 3

Innovation was taken a step further when the group explored “Working together to make a difference”. The focus now concentrated on the guests and how Yarra Valley Water might most profitably work with them to address the breaches identified. Each stakeholder was allocated a table and a rotation of Yarra Valley Water managers worked with them to identify potential projects that could make a difference.

Throughout these last two sessions all sat together, face-to-face, at small tables, listening carefully to one another as the new ideas emerged. Seemingly, as with all such events, time was scarce and the response to each of our objectives for the day was consequently limited. Nonetheless, at the end of this short time together there were definite directions identified and contacts forged to advance them.

Conclusions

The increasing interest and knowledge of the community in sustainability, and water in particular, means that organisations like Yarra Valley Water must plan for the future with their stakeholders alongside - not as followers, but as fellow travellers. Increasingly there is a need to evolve different ways of actively keeping the communication channels open and adopting a listening role as well as knowing when it is appropriate to inform or educate. Genuine engagement with stakeholders cannot be an occasional symbolic event. It is now an ongoing imperative for success.

Stakeholder relationships are now a part of the business - not an addition. When the objectives are complex and of paramount importance there may sometimes be a requirement to invest in an independent facilitator to provide guidance with suitable processes and best practice facilitation. This does not absolve the hosts. They become fellow participants free to engage in frank conversations about issues that are critical for all present.

The Author

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GUIDELINES FOR GENUINE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

DESIGN

- Be clear about the outcomes you want to achieve
- Be realistic about what can be achieved before, during and after the event
- Maintain a consistent message of ‘We value what you have to contribute’ throughout all aspects of the engagement. *The demonstration of this simple message can have an enormous influence on culture (with internal stakeholders) and reputation (with external stakeholders)*

- Go beyond delivering information and calling for questions by:

- Designing for high quality interaction
- Keeping relationship development in mind
- Creating the optimum mix of speaking and listening
- Taking advantage of the full range of facilitation and stakeholder engagement methodologies available and being prepared to use a combination of these to accomplish different objectives

- Duration - allow enough time to achieve your objectives whilst keeping it short enough for people to dedicate the time and maintain their energy and focus

- Be clear about your next move.

Determine up front:

- Will a follow-up action or event be necessary?
- What will this be?
- Are we ready to commit to this publicly at the end of the event?

INVITATION

Do not underestimate the importance of the invitation process. Many stakeholder engagement processes are destined to under-achieve as soon as the invitations have been sent because they have not given adequate attention to the following:

- Lead time - has enough notice been given for invitees to fit it into their diaries?
- Invitees - have we been inclusive? Have we made clear the number and seniority of representatives that we are inviting?
- Marketing - there is no shortage of meetings and events for busy people to attend. The invitation has to “market” the event. This means that it should be attractive, spark peoples’ interest and clearly present your value proposition (that is, what’s in it for me if I come?)
- Expectations - is it clear why you are inviting them, what you hope to achieve, and what invitees should do to prepare themselves for participation?

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

- Ensure that participants are appropriately briefed before attending the engagement session. Briefing information needs to be carefully selected and structured - sending too much information can be just as ineffective as sending none at all.
- Consider giving invitees a set of questions that they can discuss with their colleagues prior to attending
- Consider using graphic recording during engagement sessions to “make the conversations visible” and to increase creativity, group memory and ownership
- Consider using graphic templates as a way of keeping small group conversations focused

ON THE DAY

- Create a hospitable and inviting environment that will lift the spirits and energy levels of participants
- Reiterate the objectives at the start and, as necessary, during the proceedings in order to keep participants focused
- Create a “safe” environment for conversation that allows participants to expose their thinking and make it open to the influence of others - World Cafés are excellent for this
- Be flexible with the program in order to mine high-energy seams of conversation and to maintain participants’ energy and concentration levels
- Encourage participants to identify patterns and links in their contributions rather than add increasing levels of disconnected detail - graphic recording can have a major impact here
- Honour and acknowledge all participants’ contributions - this is a natural consequence of graphic recording

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE EVENT

- Ensure that participants know where the information they have contributed is going to next and how it will be used
- Ensure that participants understand how they will be informed and/or involved as the stakeholder engagement process proceeds

FINALLY

- Ensure that the overall event respects the achievement of all parties being in the same place at the same time
- Utilise genuine engagement as an integral part of your communications - both internally and externally
- Share all data collected in the workshop with all participants, as collective knowledge to which they have contributed

engagement, process design and strategy development services to corporations and government. The company has a particular interest in sustainability. Now for Future Pty Ltd, Suite 12, 208 Canterbury Rd, Canterbury, Vic, Phone 03 9888 6187, Fax 03 9888 6951, Mobile 0400 788 110, email: nowforfuture@yahoo.com, www.nowforfuture.com