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High emotion, controversy and conflict in public engagement
Workshop by Stephani Roy McCallum, Dialogue Partners
Speaking notes

The world is different place than it was 10 years ago and what worked 10 years ago does not work today. There have been fundamental shifts in the way people connect, in their expectations of organizations and government, and how people organize, perceive and interact with large and “powerful” organizations. This does not necessarily mean that people are different at their core, but the way they come together has changed.

A typical project at Dialogue Partners includes the following:

- Complexity (versus complication) where issues are not easily solved and there are multiple facets and approaches
- Wicked problems where one possible solution might have all sorts of unintended consequences and outcomes and you don’t know what the “best” solution will be until you have tried (and failed) on a number of them.
- Where there are multiple parties with multiple competing views at play.

Another typical feature of these projects that are complex is that:

- They are highly emotional
- Full of outrage – an intense emotional reaction to a situation that might be anger, but might also be fear, anxiety, grief, frustration etc
- They are rich and deep with conflict – multiple types, sources, styles of conflicts among multiple parties
- They are full of controversy, usually with the media circling and many people on the fringes of the issue telling stories and perpetuating judgments and characterizations

I want to be clear that this is not as simple as saying that those who are your “opponents” are just saying “no” because it is easy, because that does a real dis-service to their needs and views, but that it presents an enormous opportunity to understand why the “no” is being offered

Let’s start by thinking about WHY people participate – and why they don’t. *[Group exercise and discussion]*

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- Margaret Mead



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It is critically important to understand people's desire to participate and the role they want to play, along with the commitment your organization can make to the influence the public will have on the issue under consideration.

Let's see what happens in practice. *[Group exercise and discussion].*

Remember:

If you have conflict, controversy, high distrust or complexity – this is an opportunity to go further right on the spectrum because it is an indication that people want a voice in the conversation. Just remember not to promise more than you can deliver or you will destroy trust and generate outrage.

Trust is at an all time low in western nations – if you think your public might not trust you, you are probably correct. While trust in governments and organizations is dramatically down, there is a corresponding increase in community activism and engagement – outside of formal process. People are engaging on issues that matter to them – just not with your organization or at your meeting.

Trust is a nebulous thing you must earn, and it is made up of much more than keeping your commitments and extends to your capacity to engage and address the issues, along with the demonstration of your care for people.

You should assume you have no trust – until you have earned it.

More people – not less – are engaging on important issues in ways that are loud, vocal, organized and visible. 10 years ago the people who attended protests or signed petitions were characterized as radicals, or on the fringes of society. Today, these people are you, or your neighbours, friends and colleagues – showing up to demand a voice on important issues. Regular people like you and me.

This rise in community voice presents a fundamental challenge to existing power structures – who holds it, who uses it, and this includes visible power and invisible power. This demand for a voice is questioning existing power structures including governance ones – this represents a fundamental change in society.

Along with this shift in power and the questioning of who holds the power, and who has the right to hold it, comes the issue of trust.

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Many organizations have a belief that there is an element of control in public engagement, but I believe this is just an illusion. Now, I'm talking about situations and issues of conflict, emotion and controversy here.

I have heard so many practitioners say if we are just clear about expectations then we can address the issues. But this founded on the premise that if you explain YOUR expectations for THEIR involvement that they will therefore understand and accept them. But that assumes that your expectations meet their expectations, and that you have the control over what their role will be. It is based on the assumption that you hold the control and can offer to them a role that they can choose or not. It is that element of choice that is critical – because individuals and communities may choose to accept the expectations for involvement you place on them, and frequently they reject these expectations and work around you. Then they are called opponents as if somehow their lack of agreement with your expectations for their involvement makes them your adversary.

Think about your projects – if you assume no control – then you might be able to find a middle ground for moving forward that identifies your needs AND theirs and doesn't inherently polarize you and your stakeholders because you have assumed that you have a measure of control that they don't have in a given situation. Because you don't actually have that control – unless they choose to give it to you.

I frequently provide the example of light rail in this situation. If a municipality is planning a light rail line, but for whatever reasons (engineering, budget, timing) can't provide the public with meaningful influence on the line itself, they often look for other items to engage the public on that they would be willing or able to give up control. An example of this is station design. The intent is good here – to be clear about expectations, to provide people with something they can influence instead of something they can't. The big question is whether people who actually care about the route see involvement on murals in stations as a measure of meaningful engagement. The answer is usually no, and the lack of opportunity to engage on the issue that really matters to them frequently turns them to the creation of their own active, organized campaign against your project. Saying yes at the outset in some measure often saves you way more time and money than saying no thinking if you give them something else to have influence on they'll be "happy".

An absolute requirement for addressing or transforming conflict is intimacy. Social media and online engagement are important elements of any good engagement process. They are critical to getting the word out, to knowing what people are saying when they are connecting with each other, to encouraging participation. Plus you would be right to assume that if you have a controversial issue

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people are already talking about it, and you would be wise to engage and understand what they are saying in social media.

This explosion in technology is about a deep human desire to connect with each other – with the ability to create connections. Don't you get "friends" on facebook? The basis of social media is about relationships and issues – the things people care about. They aren't engaging on your corporate facebook page about your hot issue – they are talking to the people they know and care about, and to others in their community of interest.

However, you can't build intimacy through social media. You can't look into someone else's eyes, see their pain or fear, and offer your hand in support. You can't deeply understand their culture, world view or needs through social media. You need intimacy for that.

The challenge with social media in public engagement situations of conflict and controversy is that you can't resolve conflict without that intimacy.

Your facebook friends can't solve wicked problems with you. You need to get people in a room for that – and there will never be a replacement for the emotion and intimacy that comes with being together – and the opportunity that presents to transform conflict.

In this project example, we've worked with Mayor and Council, youth, organizations, individuals. The comments here – "to get more jobs" "to get rid of gangs" come from a grade 7 class in the school. We trained these students to conduct interviews, to identify who they wanted to hear a story from, what to ask them. Then we trained them to be videographers, gave them their assignment and sent them out into the community to gather input and wisdom. The videos are astonishing, insightful and moving. This is what meaningful engagement looks like – where you leave something behind, where participants are richer and more able after the conversation, where THEIR community is stronger because of the conversation.

Let me tell you a recent story about a project in the City of Hamilton. We were hired to engage participants in a meaningful conversation about City services, level of service and willingness to pay. We worked in partnership with the City of Hamilton to design the process and we launched the project on January 7th.

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However...in the first 12 hours everything changed. We asked a question on twitter that raised questions of credibility – who were we, where were we from, how much were we being paid. The emotion and outrage – online – that escalated as a result created a media sensation, and trended nationally. Then a virus was inserted on the project website, and campaigns were launched against online tools, and we shut down the facebook page because citizens who weren't angry were being intimidated and bullied, and then shut down the website because of the virus. We stayed silent for 5 days, along with the City of Hamilton, and respected their desire to not step into the conversation. And as the silence increased the outrage grew. There were calls to fire us, to hire local, to hire some of the people leading the online campaign. Other citizens apologized for what was happening and advocated for the conversation. Council met. In there we said sorry, loudly and publicly and added our voice to the mix.

You can find out more about the “whole” story on the Dialogue Partners website blogs at <http://www.dialoguepartners.ca/> or on the Dialogue Partners Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Dialogue-Partners/121248259265?fref=ts>

The biggest question for us was what was generating the emotion? What was motivating it? Why was it happening?

Emotion is always present in any engagement situation, and it might manifest as anger. But it can show up as fear, frustration, anxiety, jealousy, grief – any intense emotional reaction. You should be prepared for it. But you should also know what is causing it.

So...think of the Hamilton situation. Think of your own outrage situations in the public realm. What triggered the emotional reaction? *[Group exercise and discussion]*.

Group discussion of the factors that trigger intense emotional reaction (see slide).

Think about your own experiences. What would you change or do differently in your public engagement processes? What have you learned? *[Group exercise and discussion]*.

Here are few lessons we have learned – out of many that we have learned over the years.

- Council & Administration need courage for what is ahead
- Ground rules for engagement
- Silence is not golden

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- Loudest voices do not represent all
- 140 characters is not a meaningful conversation
- If their approach is more “fun” than yours, people will gravitate to it
- Facilitators / hosts without a stake in the conversation
- Inclusive process is critical
- Never underestimate the impact/threat an inclusive process will pose on those who hold power and influence
- Right and responsibility for civil discourse

Public engagement is risky business – but the benefits include vibrant communities, engaged citizens, sustainable decisions. You need to be prepared for the ride, and to know it won't go in a straight line and it might be messy. You also need to know that when you get to the end – if you have stayed with it – you will be better as a result.

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Stephani Roy McCallum is the Managing Director of Dialogue Partners Inc. Stephani specializes in bringing people together in situations of high emotion, conflict and controversy and has an international track record for success in supporting people and organizations to move forward on challenging issues. She has worked on complex issues ranging from indigenous rights, participatory budgeting, education, land use, health care, transportation, natural disasters, nuclear waste and environmental issues, and is the recipient of a number of national and international awards for her ground-breaking work. She has worked across Canada at the national, provincial and local level, and in the U.S.A., Australia and Europe.

Stephani has a background in Alternative Dispute Resolution, Outrage Management, Community Development, Native Studies and Authentic Leadership. She is a Certified Professional Facilitator with the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) and was the 2008 global President of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). She is a licensed trainer for IAP2 of the Certificate in Public Participation, an Assessor and Coach of new candidate trainers for IAP2, as well as lead developer and

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trainer of IAP2's Emotion, Outrage & Public Participation program. In addition, Stephani regularly teaches, speaks and writes on advanced issues and innovations in the engagement field.

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