Seven Observations about Public Engagement

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In my role as an associate professor at the School of Government, I often find myself leading discussions with various groups on the topic of public engagement. Just within the last couple of months I have spoken with numerous current and future government officials about public engagement practice, including:

- a local elected official here in Chapel Hill,

- several local government staff members from various communities here in North Carolina,
- dozens of MPA students, many of which are current public service practitioners, and
- a group of government officers from India.

I also read a lot about and conduct research on various aspects of public engagement. With that in mind, there are some overarching observations or principles that I keep coming back to that I'd like to share here on the blog.

1. **Engaging the public** in the governance process, particularly around issues of direct concern to them, **is simply an expectation today**. Asking "whether" folks need to be engaged (if the issue at hand is consequential to the public or some subset of the public) may have been the relevant question before, but it is less and less relevant anymore. It is not "whether" -- engagement is expected today. The most relevant question seems to be "how?"

2. There is a lot of innovation happening in the citizen engagement arena, at all levels of government, yet the tendency in most public organizations is **to do what has always been done.** This isn't because public officials are lazy or don't care about engagement. It is just that organizational inertia is real, especially in public organizations. So in considering the "how," public service leaders need to **understand the power of organizational inertia** and think carefully about which kinds of innovations might yield enough value to be worth it.

3. With #2 (above) in mind, one strategy for making change happen is to [experiment](#) and [try new/different approaches](#) in the engagement arena, e.g. starting with small with pilot projects or other kinds of small experiments. This lessens the risk inherent in doing something different.

4. Meaningful public engagement starts with **commitment from the top**, meaning elected officials, or in the case of the federal government, the political appointees that lead agencies. Without that support it can be extremely difficult to move the needle. And by support I do mean more than lip service. There aren't many elected officials that would publicly say they are against community or public engagement. Real support means putting time and resources into engagement, having patience for process, and being able to genuinely listen and be open to feedback.

5. Regardless of "the how,**" it is a reasonable expectation of those involved to be shown how their involvement matters.** In other words, people that take the time to come to a meeting, fill out a survey, or serve on a committee, (rightfully) want to know what difference their time has made. Even when decisions don't go their way, just being acknowledged and having some confidence that decision makers considered your input is much better than feeling like efforts just went into a "black box," or worse, that it was all for show, that the decision was already made. No matter the engagement strategy, those that are doing the engaging should "begin with the end in mind" and know how they will utilize the involvement and [have a plan](#) **for how they will communicate back to participants** what that involvement meant to the process.

6. It is easy to get caught up focusing on the immediate, instrumental value (or liability) of

public engagement, such as whether a better decision will be made, or public "buy-in" garnered. But the downstream impact of **cultivating public trust** should also factor into it. Genuine engagement may or may not yield immediate benefits to the public organization doing the engaging, but it may, over time, contribute to [public trust](#) in a way that has more value (again, in the long run) than any immediate payoff.

7. It is also easy to get caught up in thinking of engagement just in terms of decision-making. Certainly engaging the public around *consequential decisions* -- decisions that will impact them or even future generations -- is very important. But perhaps just as important is the kind of engagement that *isn't* around decision making, but rather is around the delivery of public services. Anytime the **public partners with government to coproduce** something of public value—whether that be conducting a recreation program, leveraging public data to add value (which is what [civic hacking](#) is about), or, say, [promoting local food systems](#)—relationships are being built and (possibly) public trust is being enhanced. [Engaging the public](#) outside of decision-making processes may be an effective strategy for creating the conditions where the public can effectively be engaged when important issue arise and decisions need to be made.

These are a few broad principles or themes that stand out to me and seem to cut across the different conversations I'm having, the research I've been reviewing and conducting myself, as well as my own experience. I'd love to get readers reactions to these observations as well as suggestions for what else you'd add to this list. Please add your thoughts and experiences in the comment section below.