Can I Cut In?

Taking steps to attain meaningful engagement

BY LESLEY CUSICK

There are more than a few Executive Orders, Presidential Memoranda, policy statements and regulatory guidance documents that specifically call for "meaningful engagement." The consistent messaging is there, but the concept is challenged — "meaningful" is fully subjective. What is meaningful engagement and how are we supposed to achieve it when it is subjective and undefined? The more commonly used term is "participation." Participation is objective — it is a behavior that can be measured, counted, analyzed and graphed. For departments and agencies that thrive on metrics to assess certain performance criteria, participation is the metric of choice. Examples of participation include voting, attending a public meeting and responding to a survey. Engagement is quite different than participation. Engagement is physical, cognitive and emotive. Engagement involves an investment of yourself, bringing in emotion or passion and a willingness to listen/converse, and sometimes debate, about an issue. Participation implies activity but consider that it can be quite passive, for example (think "just showing up"). Participation can make you tired; engagement can exhaust you.

An argument can be made that participation is not engagement. Rather, it is a metric with purposeful but limited uses. While it is possible to count the number of people attending a public meeting on a project, it is not possible to define presence as participation (let alone *meaningful* participation), only attendance. A number is not a meaning; it is a value that represents a behavior: choosing to show up.

So that information could be gathered on the topic, an anonymous online survey consisting of 20 questions was conducted over a 30-day period in Fall 2023. There were 94 respondents. The purpose of the survey was to hear from the respondents on their thoughts about participation and meaningful participation in general, what constituted value in having their voices heard as part of a public process, to identify preferences for meeting/gathering locations and types of gatherings, accommodations that could better enable participation, preferences on anonymity in providing comments or other input to decision-making, and how "meaningful" is determined by the participants.

The open-ended survey questions were the most telling and most important to us as we strive for meaningful engagement. So that the emphasis is on the responses and not the author's interpretation of them, the quotes from the respondents are provided verbatim. Emphasis has been added where appropriate.

1. What is or may be a barrier to your participation?

"Time." "Time and travel." "Location of the venue. I need to feel comfortable." *"In order to care about something enough to do something about it, I would need to know about it."* "When it becomes obvious that participation is just checking the box." "My autism. It makes it hard for me to communicate one-on-one with people." "Psychological safety. The worry that I would face repercussions for speaking out for or against a project." *"Attempting to engage with people who are so dogmatic in their thinking and beliefs that it is almost impossible to interact with them."* "Obvious, deliberate or deceptive statements made by the company or agency." "Insufficient time for Q&A, poor communication of the meeting and project, its process and timeline, no follow-up from the meeting, barriers that don't allow for creativity, and information 'spin' rather than meaningful data." "Feeling left out of the conversation."

2. Do you feel that you have adequate resources to access information on federal activities in your area?

There were twice as many "yes" responses as "no" responses, with some explanations that included the following: "No. I know because I make a concerted effort, but access/ information about activities is not always out there for the public." *"No. I never hear about federal activities (like a lot of Gen Z, I don't watch TV or listen to the radio so if it's not on social media I likely won't see it)."* "Yes. Federal activities are well-advertised in local media." "Plenty of advance notice is important because I often hear of meetings after-the-fact." "Yes, but more education is needed on the complexities of the regulatory process to stakeholders before decisions are made." *"An advertisement in a local paper and a public service announcement to a TV station is not adequate."*

We have all been there — the public meeting about an important project with the well-prepared project team making their presentations in turn. To the presenters, it can feel like a well-orchestrated dance, smooth and practiced, but what about the meeting attendees? Could it look like a dance that they wanted to join, but no one would let them cut in? What about their questions and issues? Is there room for them to meaningfully participate or have the presenters made it so bulletproof that people are intimidated to speak up? Meaningful participation can be all about dancing awkwardly at first and stepping on toes now and again. Are the public meetings and their methods, or other types of outreach, elbowing people out of the process and off the dance floor? We need answers if we are to do a better job of reaching people.

3. Would you be better able to participate in meetings if accommodations were made available such as childcare, transportation, livestreaming, food, interpretive services or other accommodation? Please describe the types of things that would enable you to participate more fully or frequently.

"Yes, all of the above." "No, not for me personally, but I think some of those accommodations would be much more significant for individuals with families, children, accessibility issues, etc." "Yes — livestreaming, childcare and accessibility are especially important for me. *Everyone should have an equal opportunity to participate. The timing of events and meetings are also important to include underrepresented groups.*" "Honestly, if the sessions were offered in a hybrid format where I could participate online that would be very helpful. Also, interpreters should not be optional at community forums — they should be required (both language and ASL (American Sign Language))" *"Livestreaming and recording." "Livestreaming and interactive Q&A."* "I don't enjoy meetings like those; I prefer to hear about things through written information or surveys." *"No. For me to do those things more frequently I'd have to know they are happening."*

4. In what way or ways can your involvement in decision-making be more meaningful?

"Simply having my voice heard is enough. While I may not be able to sway the decision, having my word out is sufficient for me." *"Being heard, independent of whether I'm agreed with or not."* "It being collaborative, well-acknowledged, and well-informed can make it more meaningful. "Perhaps early involvement at scoping or draft decision stages." "Having involvement acknowledged and appreciated. ""*My involvement is meaningful if it inspires change.*" "It can be meaningful in many ways. I think just listening to others is meaningful and can lead to constructive conversation that leads to decisions that are a win-win for everyone." "Offering a different view to optimize the project's outcome." "I am the general public. Middle-aged, educated, working and tax paying citizen. My involvement could shape outcomes for many years to come." *"Not to sound like a snowflake millennial, but my participation being justified with my input being, at the very least, acknowledged — you can tell me that my idea is terrible, and I'll appreciate that much more than just being ignored."*

5. After this survey, do you view meaningful involvement differently?

More than 50% of the respondents replied, "no," while 40% replied "yes," with the remainder responding "maybe" or "possibly." Many respondents offered additional thoughts: *"Not really — a survey collects data — it does not mean the data is ever read, much less acted upon."* "I don't think so, but it was a thought-provoking survey." "I don't really view it differently, just reminded me I am not very involved." "Yes. I know more about what it means, and I believe it to actually be important." *"I feel like meaningful involvement is more valued than I realized."* "There seems to be a motivation to get better public inputs." "Not really. Meaningful involvement is dependent on the person as it has emotion related to it. How I see meaningful involvement will be different than someone else."

Getting the Word Out is Crucial

"Meeting people where they are" was an unspoken response that was received, and it is a challenge that is proving to be increasingly difficult despite the plethora of websites, social media, and championed connectivity. Traditional methods no longer work. Newspaper readership continues to decline, and many do not listen to the radio. In rural areas, word of mouth continues to be the most effective way information is shared, but at least one individual still needs to know something before the knowledge can be shared. As community members learn about projects and opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, the question becomes whether social media is enough. In some areas social media is unavailable and can be inequitably accessible, leaving people out of the process.

Attitudes May Need Adjusting

The often-expressed phrase (desire?) that "no one will show up" needs to be dropped from vocabularies and replaced with "what do we need to do to get the public involved?" It is short-sighted to believe that decisions can be made in a vacuum without a future consequence, especially where infrastructure, energy, environmental cleanup, waste disposal and mining projects are involved. There is a significant responsibility in shepherding a community through an information gathering and understanding process for projects, especially controversial or sensitive ones. Inherent fears and dislikes cannot be swept under the rug; they will linger until they are shared. To share, people need to feel safe. A communicator must embrace the need to create that safe environment built on patience, humility, understanding, and trust. Strive to find out the different types of settings, and schedules, where you can meet with your public.

> **If the steps taken to perform meaningful engagement make people feel like an ingredient rather than a result of the recipe, it's no different than checking a box.**

Additional Recommendations

The survey responses are full of recommendations if we choose to see them as that and not criticisms. In addition to those, here are some others:

- Have smaller meetings, but more of them in addition to the main meeting.
- Consider having at least one meeting in a more relaxed location.
- Don't have bulletproof presentations or documents — leave room for change.
- Allow more than ample time for community engagement and do your best to never show a schedule (that's *your* schedule, not the community's).
- Send out mailings inviting people to the meeting and don't have them look like junk mail.
- Consider going door-to-door to invite people to your meetings. If no one is home, leave an eye-catching hang-tag.

Remember that meaningful engagement does not depend on your interpretation of meaning but on the community's interpretation. In this regard, meaningful engagement is a precursor to getting your projects built.

Guest or intruder? How you are seen by the community depends on you and your behavior. ✪

To read the full research paper, go to researchgate.net and type in "Lesley Cusick."

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