



Engaging  
with the  
Public

**How do we engage the public successfully?**  
**Tip: Align the public participation strategy with the goal**

*One of a series of best practices tip sheets*

Public participation involves the public in solving problems or making decisions that affect them. There are a variety of important reasons to engage the public. When you determine your goal for involving the public, and then intentionally use tools and processes that support that goal, you will build trust and support for decisions. This tip sheet answers the questions:

*What are some goals for engaging the public?  
What tools and resources best align with goals?*

### Three steps to successful engagement

To have an effective and productive public participation experience for all involved, the convener (or facilitator) must design the experience with intention. Be sure to:

1. Identify and be clear about the reason, or goal for engaging with the public.
2. Share the identified purpose with participants.
3. Select an appropriate tool and/or process aligned to the purpose.

***Be clear on the goal for engaging the public:*** You recognize it will be beneficial to engage the public in a decision or action. However, you also recall times when you have been part of a public process, either as convener or participant that was *not* a pleasant or effective experience. To avoid using an ineffective process, identify and clearly articulate your purpose for engaging the public. In work by Sherry Arnstein in 1969, and later by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), levels of public engagement were identified. They are to:

- **Inform** the public with objective and balanced information. This is a one-way flow of information.
- **Consult** with the public by informing them and then requesting input.
- **Involve** the public in the decision by accepting input and reflecting this input in the decision.

© 2009 Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.  
The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity educator and employer.  
This material is available in alternative formats upon request. Direct requests to Jennifer Harkonen-Wagner, Center for Community Vitality,  
[denom001@umn.edu](mailto:denom001@umn.edu), (612) 624-2811

- **Collaborate** by partnering with the public and sharing the decision-making with them.
- **Empower** the public by putting the final decision in their hands.

Note that each level of engagement deepens the involvement of the public.

***Align the tool or process with the identified goal:*** The process that is used implies a “promise” about the level of engagement being sought. For example, if a decision has already been made, and a public meeting is convened to inform the public, that meeting should not be publicized or constructed to gather input from the public. If the information that is gathered will not change the decision, the implicit promise is broken. When the goal and the process are not aligned, negative feelings can result.

Following are some suggested tools that match the five levels of engagement:

***To inform the public...*** distribute fact sheets or call meetings clearly identified as informational.

***To consult with the public...*** create public comment opportunities; convene focus groups; design public meetings that aim for dialogue rather than debate so that mutual learning can occur.

***To involve the public...*** conduct workshops; place interested or affected members on decision-making boards or groups; conduct polls.

***To collaborate with the public...*** create collaborative committees empowered with some decision-making authority; employ consensus building or participatory decision-making strategies.

***To empower the public...*** create citizen juries; delegate decision-making to commissions, teams or committees.

Engaging the public can be an evolving process. It is possible to start at one level of engagement and then move to another as you learn from the input gathered. Skilled facilitation is necessary to create successful processes for engaging the public.

## **Summary**

Matching the right tool and process to your goal for public participation can provide for an experience and outcome that creates trust, buy-in and support for decisions.

**How do we engage the public successfully?**

**Tip: Align the public participation strategy with the goal**

**Page 2**

© Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.

## References

Bryson, J.M., & Carroll, A.R. (2007). *Public participation fieldbook*. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.

Arnstein, S. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.

International Association for Public Participation. (2007). *Spectrum of public participation*. Retrieved from [www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/spectrum.pdf](http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/spectrum.pdf)

Chrislip, D.E., & Larson, C.E. (1994). *Collaborative leadership: How citizens and civic leaders can make a difference*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

*Tip sheet prepared by Barbara Radke, Assistant Extension Professor and Educator, Leadership and Civic Engagement*

## For more information

*Leadership and Civic Engagement educators across the state of Minnesota provide educational programs and consultations that help communities solve problems and make decisions. You may contact a Leadership and Civic Engagement Educator near you by visiting <http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/educators-lce/>, or contact Mary Ann G. Hennen, Leadership and Civic Engagement Program Leader, at (612) 624-4226 or [henne011@umn.edu](mailto:henne011@umn.edu).*

### Related Extension materials

- Public Participation Fieldbook  
<http://shop.extension.umn.edu/PublicationDetail.aspx?ID=1921>
- Facilitation Resources  
<http://shop.extension.umn.edu/PublicationDetail.aspx?ID=1338>
- Committees that Work: Common Traps; Creative Solutions  
<http://shop.extension.umn.edu/PublicationDetail.aspx?ID=1982>

### Related Extension programs

- Learn more about Leadership and Civic Engagement programs on <http://www.extension.umn.edu/Community/>

### Contact an educator

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/educators-lce/>

How do we engage the public successfully?

Tip: Align the public participation strategy with the goal

Page 3

© Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.